

Research on the Go Podcast: Reframing How We Think About Behaviors That Challenge Us

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Dawson Nichols: Hello, and welcome to "Research on the Go," a podcast where we explore some of the latest research in field of child development, its implications, and its practical applications. My name is Dawson Nichols, and I am here with Beth Zack.

Beth Zack: Hi, Dawson. We're here from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, and we're based at the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Dawson: In this podcast, we want to not only talk about the research itself but also to provide a space where we can talk a little more deeply about ways to incorporate that research into your work supporting grantees.

Beth: And today, we'll be talking about infants and toddler behaviors that can challenge us as adults.

Dawson: This is such an important topic, not only for helping grantees support infants and toddlers but for grantees' staff self-care, as well. So, I want to make sure everyone is on the same page from the start here. So, Beth, what exactly do we mean by "behaviors that challenge adults."

Beth: Right. So, what we really want to focus on today is those infant or toddler behaviors that adults may typically find challenging. So, what we're talking about here is the behaviors that are developmentally appropriate. Think crying, biting, whining. And we're not going to be focusing on those ones that go beyond typical development, because, unfortunately, we just don't have enough time.

Dawson: Right, right. OK, but I think I heard you mention behaviors you may find challenging.

Beth: Right.

Dawson: Does this mean a behavior that you find challenging may not bother me or a family member or a Head Start staff or other people at all?

Beth: That's right. We really want to emphasize that, the "you" may find challenging.

Dawson: OK.

Beth: Because the way we experience behavior, it's – it's personal, and you know, as adults, we're – we're viewing behavior through our own past experiences.

Dawson: OK, I see what you're saying, because even things like family, culture, or, again, as you said, personal experiences, but also our values. All of that influences it.

Beth: Right, so, all that stuff. And – And it's not just these bigger things. It's also those in-the-moment feelings that influence us, too. So, think about a day where you – where you wake up and you're just like, "Oh, I didn't sleep well."

Dawson: Oh, yeah.

Beth: Or you're really stressed about an upcoming project or something. Or maybe you're feeling sick. And think about how that impacts your day. Beyond that, it can really impact our level of patience and how we'll respond.

Dawson: Absolutely, and I know that my patience really decreases when I'm tired or stressed out.

Beth: Yep, me too. And for me, it's my – my – I can usually handle when my – my daughter whines, but when I'm – when I'm extra tired, it just feels like it's louder and longer.

Dawson: Yeah.

Beth: And I'm, like, deep rest, right?

Dawson: [Chuckles]

Beth: And we all express behaviors in different ways.

Dawson: Yeah, and all children use their behavior to express their feelings. It's how they express their wants and their needs.

Beth: Right, and – and sometimes those behaviors, well, they're challenging to us.

Dawson: For us, yes.

Beth: Yes, yes.

Dawson: [Chuckles] I mean, babies, toddlers – I mean, we love them, and they can be so sweet and cuddly ...

Beth: Oh, yes.

Dawson: ... until they start screaming and whining ...

Beth: Oh, no.

Dawson: ... hitting and biting, whatever it is that you find challenging. So, why do infants and toddlers exhibit behaviors like this?

Beth: Oh, right, it's such a good question. So, those behaviors are – they can feel so tough, but – and I can't emphasize this enough – it's so important to remember that these behaviors, they have meaning for children. So, behavior has meaning. I just want you to keep that little phrase in – in your head today.

Dawson: Yeah.

Beth: So, whenever they do anything, whether that's crying, so something you're finding challenging, or even something like pointing ...

Dawson: Yep.

Beth: ... they're really – they're trying to tell us something.

Dawson: So, it's not just that they're trying to drive us crazy ...

Beth: No.

Dawson: ... or push our buttons.

Beth: [Chuckles]

Dawson: [Chuckles]

Beth: But it sure feels like it, right? But they're – they are not actually trying to push our buttons. And instead of – instead of thinking of it that way, I – I want you to think of a child who, well, they need more support. They – they don't actually have the skills to – to express their emotions and needs and wants in – in another way, or the same way that we would want them to, as adults.

Dawson: I love that insight, because, again, they don't have the language yet to express themselves.

Beth: Yes.

Dawson: Even some adults don't yet, but – but they use their behavior to communicate.

Beth: Yes.

Dawson: I think that's so important for people to understand. So – So, how do we help grantee staff reframe their own mind-sets from behavior that is challenging to behavior that has meaning and is a form of communication?

Beth: Alright, this – well, this – this takes time. This is not an easy switch, but one of the first steps is to really just help the staff think about the meaning behind the behavior. So, think back to what happened before the behavior.

Dawson: Mm-hmm.

Beth: Before the child maybe acted out by hitting someone. Was – did someone take their toy? Were they feeling sad because they're – didn't want their parent to leave that day? So, what happened before the behavior? And is that behavior typically happening at the same time or during the same activity?

Dawson: Right. I like how you're framing it, there, too, because it's like you're a private eye. "OK, here's a behavior."

Beth: [Laughs] Oh, yeah.

Dawson: "Let's trace it back to its origin. Why? What is this trying to communicate to me?"

Beth: Right. Sometimes they – we talk about it as being a behavior detective.

Dawson: Yeah, good. So, even in the larger picture, beyond what's just been happening during that day, there can be things like whether a child is dealing with other environmental or family stresses, things that are beyond their control.

Beth: Oh, exactly. So, really remembering to see a child through a positive lens. So, thinking about that they might be dealing with all these other things, as we want people to see that in us, as well, right? Like, if we're having a bad day ...

Dawson: Right.

Beth: ... we're just – we're having a – we're having a bad day. So, seeing us through this positive lens can really change how we experience a challenging behavior.

Dawson: Can you give an example?

Beth: Oh, right, of course. So, you know, a child, well, they could be acting out because maybe their family recently moved or there was a divorce. So, those are some – they're just some things that are a little bit bigger. Or it could be smaller, like a change to their routine. Maybe a different parent has to drop them off, instead of – instead of grandma. Or – or maybe a grandparent was visiting, and you know, they were there for a while, and – and now they have to return home. And that – that type of shift in their routine can be – can really be enough for a child to exhibit some of these behaviors we find challenging.

Dawson: Sure. But I think it's – it is important to remember, too, that sometimes there just aren't any stressors, there aren't these huge things happening in their lives. This is just a – this behavior is just a part of typical development for children.

Beth: Right, yeah, it's – there might not be any of these stressors at all. There are many developmental reasons why a child might exhibit a behavior we find challenging.

Dawson: Good. Yeah, so, let's talk about some of these developmental reasons. What are some of the big ones?

Beth: Well, I really want to focus on two. So, social and emotional development and self-regulation.

Dawson: OK, good, we got two. Let's start with social and emotional development. How does that relate to behavior that we might find challenging?

Beth: Right. So, think about a young baby or a young child. They are – they're new to this world, and they don't have the experience in relationships like we do, so they're still learning about those relationships and – and how and when adults will respond to their needs. Like, "If I cry because I need something, is an adult going to show up? I don't know."

Dawson: So, they cry because they want to be held or they're hungry.

Beth: Right, and they – they don't have another way to communicate those needs. They can't be like, "Hey, Mom, bring me my bottle!"

Dawson: [Laughs]

Beth: Like, they just – they – they don't have that ability. And so, they need to communicate these needs in other ways. But they will learn, over time, that the adult will respond in a nurturing way.

Dawson: Right.

Beth: And then, with that, the behaviors like – like crying, they – they may lessen.

Dawson: Yeah, it's all about communication and relationships. It always goes back to relationships, doesn't it?

Beth: It always comes back to relationships. And building those positive relationships, you know, that's what helps infants and toddlers and – and all of us feel safe and cared for.

Dawson: Right. And there are other benefits, too, correct?

Beth: Oh, right. There's actually a – a pretty long list of benefits of being in these strong relationships. I mean, they're related to things like lower levels of aggression and better social skills, improved interactions with their peers. And strong relationships are related to higher frustration tolerance in young children, as well.

Dawson: Yeah, that's ... And you can see the connection between that and reducing challenging behavior.

Beth: Right, and we can really put programs and staff in a – in a better position to develop these strong relationships. And – and some ways to do that are, we can promote continuity of care and also small groups within infant and toddler settings.

Dawson: So, those are both great practices, but I think we should remember that individuals still do need to put in the time and effort ...

Beth: Right.

Dawson: ... to develop strong relationships – individual relationships with the children in their care.

Beth: Right, absolutely. It's the individual who's really building that bond with each child. And – and we actually know from research that the quality of interactions between an infant and caregiver, well, that's related to children's self-regulation skills, which was my second main developmental reason today.

Dawson: Yeah, and that's a term that I'm a little fuzzy about. What is self-regulation?

Beth: Right, yep, you've probably heard "self-regulation" before but maybe didn't quite understand it. And what it really is, it's the ability to control our emotions, our thoughts, behaviors, our actions, and even our attention.

Dawson: OK, so, I get that with adults, but what does that look like with a toddler? [Chuckles]

Beth: Well, toddlers are actually still in the very early stages of developing self-regulation. That's – that's why they might bite or hit when a peer won't share a toy. They – they really do not have good self-regulation skills yet.

Dawson: Right. So, when can young children regulate their behaviors?

Beth: Well, you know, young children under the age of 5 – and this age might be surprising to some people, but under the age of 5, children really can't control their impulses yet, and we shouldn't expect them to. That's the hard part, because sometimes they do show that they're controlling their impulses. So, we're like, "Oh, hey, they can do this." But the thing is, they're really not great at it yet.

Dawson: Yeah, and they need practice. And like anyone practicing any skill, there's going to be times when they do it well and times when they can't do it as well. You know? OK, so, at 5, though, they can control their emotions and impulses?

Beth: Well, they're – they're better at it, at 5.

Dawson: [Chuckles]

Beth: This is something that continues to develop throughout adolescence and – and maybe even beyond.

Dawson: [Chuckles] And impulses, too. I have two teens right now, and I can say that it's true.

Beth: [Laughs]

Dawson: So, why is it so hard for young children?

Beth: Well, there's a region in the brain. It's called the prefrontal cortex, and that plays a hugely important role in self-regulation. Children are building connections and networks in this part of the brain throughout their entire childhood.

Dawson: OK, so, they're building this part of their brain. How does that tie back to building relationships?

Beth: Well, what's building these strong connections in their prefrontal cortex, to help them self-regulate, this is all happening in the context of their relationships with responsive caregivers. So, if you don't have those responsive caregivers, they might not have as strong connections in this area.

Dawson: So, they're like a coach. The responsive caregiver helps the child regulate?

Beth: Exactly, and this is especially true for infants. So, you know, as we talked about, an infant is really relying on adults to do lots of things for them, right? Because they don't have other ways to communicate, and when adults are doing these things, they're helping them regulate.

Dawson: Right. So, specifically, though, how do the adults provide that help?

Beth: Oh, right. So, the adult is actually the form of external regulation. They might rock a baby to sleep or wrap them in a nice tight swaddle to have them feel like they're back in the womb, or maybe it's a pacifier or a lovey to help soothe and calm them.

Dawson: Right, right. And I used to sing to my kids, I remember. They – they didn't know what a good voice sounded like.

Beth: [Chuckles]

Dawson: So, I was able to soothe them that way. [Chuckles]

Beth: And – And singing works, no matter how great of a voice you have.

Dawson: [Chuckles]

Beth: I – I promise you that.

Dawson: [Chuckles]

Beth: It works for my daughter, and I – singing is not one of my top skills.

Dawson: [Chuckles]

Beth: So, singing is such an important one, too, because it helps – it helps calm them. And it can also be something predictable if they – if they know you're always going to sing to them, maybe while you rock them.

Dawson: Right.

Beth: So, it's just another way that we're teaching children, "Hey, we're – we're here for you," and we're helping them figure out ways to self-regulate on their own later.

Dawson: Yeah, it makes sense why that relationship is so important, so they can rely on you, and they know, if they're having trouble with that, they can use you as a help. So, it improves over time for infants and toddlers?

Beth: Yes, absolutely. So, an infant, they might learn to hug a stuffed animal or – or put their pacifier back in on their own for comfort, instead of always having to look for an adult or cry out if, say, their – their pacifier falls out.

Dawson: Right, and toddlers are beginning to understand this concept of taking turns, instead of grabbing a toy or using – using language and words to ask a peer to stop, instead of biting them to get them to stop.

Beth: [Chuckles] Right.

Dawson: That's the kind of progress we're talking about.

Beth: Right. And so, the important piece of that, right there, that you mentioned is language development. It's really another tool for toddlers and preschoolers to communicate. Just the development of language, of these more verbal language skills, can help reduce behaviors that we find challenging.

Dawson: Great. This is making me think of development, and I'm wondering how we can use our understanding of development to help grantees reframe how they think about challenging behavior.

Beth: Right. So, I – I want to – I want to bring this back to what I mentioned in the beginning, and that's, "Behavior has meaning." And so, now let's think about infants and toddlers. They can't self-regulate, so when we talk to grantees about this and, like, help them understand that they really have this limited self-regulation ability, it can really lessen everyone's frustration. And then it also give us tools ...

Dawson: Yeah.

Beth: ...for thinking of other ways to help them communicate their – their intentions and emotions in – in other developmentally appropriate ways.

Dawson: Yeah, yeah. I think it's so important to go back to that, you know, looking at behavior as a kind of communication. Yeah, that's so helpful. So, can you share another example?

Beth: Yeah. There's actually a – there's this story that sticks out in my mind of talking with – it's talking with a teacher, and I remember, she felt – she felt so annoyed because the toddlers in her care, they could remember not to touch items when she was around, so she didn't have to say anything, and so, that was great. But then she said, the second she left they would – they would touch all the items they weren't supposed to, and she just saw their behavior as being so sneaky and naughty, and this was just driving her crazy.

Dawson: [Chuckles] So, and you helped her reframe this? How did you do that?

Beth: Well, I reframed it so she could see that there actually was a reminder, and the reminder was her. She didn't have to say anything because just being there was the toddlers' reminder.

Dawson: Nice. So – so, when she left, the child wasn't trying to be naughty or sneaky. They just were losing focus because she wasn't there as a reminder to them.

Beth: Exactly. So – so, really reminding grantee staff to consider children's development and – and temper their expectations in response. This can be a helpful strategy ...

Dawson: Mm-hmm.

Beth: ... for reframing their behavior. And then, for this particular situation and teacher, I – I also encouraged her to create a "yes" environment ...

Dawson: Mm-hmm.

Beth: ... where children are free to explore and play, where the teacher doesn't have to say "no" to them all the time or be annoyed when they're touching things they aren't supposed to.

Dawson: Yeah, yeah. That's great. I love that. So, rather than "Don't do something," here's something to do. So, it's not "Don't hit," but "Be gentle," and – and then modeling what that looks like.

Beth: Right.

Dawson: So, are there other tools that adults can use to help children?

Beth: There are. The one other thing that I really like to help grantees focus on is teaching children new skills rather than trying to get them to stop using challenging behavior. So, what we really need to do is we need to teach children what to do rather than what not to do.

Dawson: That's a great idea, yeah.

Beth: You could even put some of these common reframing statements like these, for grantees to – to post in their learning environment. So, a nice little cue for them, that's easy to see throughout the day, where it can be like, "Oh, wait, pause. OK, I – I – let me say that in a different way."

Dawson: I like that.

Beth: And other things you can post are predictable schedules. Often, visual schedules can be really helpful, and also having those predictable routines. They really help children feel more comfortable and secure.

Dawson: Yeah, that predictability, I think is so important for them.

Beth: Right, right. And – and this is actually especially important for children who are dual-language learners or children with identified disabilities or suspected delays. So, say, for a child who is a dual-language learner, not being as familiar with the language for what the schedule is, having a visual, that can help. But also, just that pattern of going through the same routine every day and knowing, "Hey, we're going to wash hands, and then we can have snacks," that can be – that can be really helpful, as well.

Dawson: Yeah, that's a good reminder, definitely. So, are there other things that grantee staff can keep in mind when they are encountering this kind of behavior that they find challenging?

Beth: I'm so glad you asked because there's this strategy that I – I want you to encourage them to use, and it's called the "Pause, Ask, Respond" strategy.

Dawson: Pause, Ask, Respond. I like it. Tell – Tell more.

Beth: OK. So, first, a child is exhibiting a challenging behavior, right? And I want you to pause. This is before you respond, and what you're doing is you're figuring out why the child is exhibiting the behavior.

Dawson: Right, think about what happened just before the behaviors, think about the child's situation, the context. Good, yep, pause.

Beth: Yep, pause, think about those things, and before you jump into action. And then the "ask" piece. So, this isn't asking the child anything. This is asking yourself.

Dawson: Nice.

Beth: So, you're asking yourself, "What is this child trying to communicate with this behavior?"

Dawson: Right, right. And then respond?

Beth: Yep, then you respond. So, when you think you understand the meaning of the behavior – and you know, sometimes you might not get this right, but this takes practice – so, when you think you understand that meaning, you can respond in ways that meet the wants or needs the child is trying to communicate. So, you're becoming more tuned in to what's going on with the child, and then you're responding in an appropriate way.

Dawson: And when you do this, you're showing the child that you are listening, you're trying to understand the communication that they are expressing through their behavior.

Beth: Right. Showing that acknowledgement, especially when a child's having big feelings ...

Dawson: [Chuckles]

Beth: ... is really helpful for them in their emotional understanding and knowing that, yeah, you're – I'm – you're there for them. This is not going to go perfectly. I – I know these steps are easier said than done.

Dawson: Time and patience, time, and patience.

Beth: Yes. But with that time and patience, it – it really will help change the way you respond to and teach young children.

Dawson: Great. So, I'm seeing that we're coming up on time. Any closing ideas you'd like to share?

Beth: Oh, well, let's see. I really want to emphasize that in your work supporting programs, help grantee staff see that understanding the meaning behind a behavior can give them better tools to be responsive in the moment.

Dawson: Yeah, good, and it'll help grantees better support children when the behavior occurs again, too.

Beth: That's – that's right. And as children grow and they develop in the context of strong relationships, they'll learn to express their feelings, their wants, and needs in developmentally appropriate ways. It just takes time.

Dawson: Excellent. Well, thank you. That's great. I think that's all we have time for. We hope that you enjoyed this podcast on reframing how we think about children's behavior, especially behavior that we find challenging. For more information, you can visit the ECLKC and search for "Behavior Has Meaning." Thank you for listening.

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