

INFANT AND TODDLER BEHAVIORS THAT CAN CHALLENGE ADULTS

All behavior has meaning, even if we find some behaviors challenging at times. Behavior is a form of communication. Infants and toddlers use behavior to express their feelings, wants, and needs. But how adults interpret and react to behavior is personal. Past experiences, family, cultures, and beliefs all influence how adults interpret behavior. Taking time to pause and reflect, instead of reacting to behavior, particularly those behaviors that adults find challenging, helps children to feel valued and important. It also teaches children to communicate in a developmentally appropriate way.

THE TAKE HOME:

1. All behavior has meaning and is a form of communication.
2. There are developmental reasons why children exhibit behavior that can challenge us.
3. Pause and reflect when children act in a way that challenges you instead of reacting.



WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY?

- Behaviors adults find challenging are often part of children’s typical development. **There are many developmental reasons why children exhibit behaviors that challenge adults.** For example, they are still learning how and when adults will respond to their needs. This is part of their social and emotional development. Infants and toddlers do not have the language skills to communicate in other ways. They grab a toy out of a peer’s hands or cry when they are hungry because they don’t have the words like “That’s mine!” or “I’m hungry!” to communicate their feelings.
- Self-regulation is hard for young children. **Young children are unable to control their emotions and behaviors on their own.** Their brains do not have the connections in place to self-regulate. Adults should not expect children under age five to be able to control their impulses on their own yet. The brain continues to build those connections through adolescence.
- Infants and toddlers need adults to help them regulate their emotions and behaviors. When a tired infant cries, they need to be rocked or sung to in order to settle. Creating a nap or bedtime routine provides consistency each day. **Consistent, calm responses teach children what to expect and that adults are there for them.** With help and practice, children develop skills to regulate on their own. Strong self-regulation skills relate to more positive behavior and better school readiness.
- Children need emotional literacy to understand and express emotions in a healthy way. But they are not born with these skills. **Children learn about emotions in the context of relationships.** Adults teach infants and toddlers about emotions by helping them feel safe, secure, and nurtured. Labeling and talking about emotions supports emotional literacy. Early talk about emotions also relates to better emotion understanding later.



WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

- Every communicative behavior can be described by the form and function of the communication. Form refers to what the behavior is. For example, it might be crying, pointing, or throwing a tantrum. Function refers to the meaning or purpose of the behavior. It describes the message the child is trying to communicate.
- Challenging behavior looks and feels different for everyone. It’s personal. Culture, family, and unique experiences shape not only the meaning of behavior but how adults react to it.

- All adults feel challenged by a child’s behavior at some point. It’s how they respond that matters. It is important to practice self-care and find strategies to reduce stress and feel supported. It’s not always easy, but it is important to act calm and be intentional with children. Nurturing and responsive relationships let them know adults are there for them. High-quality learning spaces are safe, consistent and predictable.
- Reading children’s cues and responding to their behavior is something adults already do. It is not an additional curriculum piece to add to planning and practices. Adults learn about children’s temperaments (or how they approach the world). They pay attention to when children get tired, hungry or fussy.
- The *Pause, Ask, Respond* strategy is helpful when responding to a behavior that is challenging. *Pause* to figure out the meaning of a behavior. *Ask* what the child might be trying to communicate. *Respond* to meet the wants or needs that a child is trying to express. This response helps the child feel listened to and understood.



TRY THIS!

- Practice mindfulness. Be present in the moment. What is the child doing? Saying? Feeling? Help families pay attention to a child’s cues, emotions and actions. These give us cues to the meaning behind a child’s behavior and can help us be more responsive in the future.
- Make time for self-care. Think about your own emotions and responses. When you feel calm and in control, it can help children feel the same. Practice deep breathing. If you’re overwhelmed, step away for a few minutes or go for a walk if you are able. Ask for support when you need it.
- Identify and talk about emotions. Help children put emotions into words. “You feel mad because playtime is over.” Learn key emotion words in the child’s home language. Read books about emotions, being a friend, and helping others.
- Teach expectations. Teach children what to do rather than what not to do by modeling the behavior you want to see. Rather than say, “don’t hit” use “be gentle” and model with a patting motion. Talk with families to understand what behaviors are acceptable in their culture and how to best support their child.
- Create a quiet spot to calm down. This is a safe place for children to go to work on regulating their emotions and behavior.
- Help families build and adapt routines to create a predictable day. Children do better when they know what to expect.

LEARN MORE

BEHAVIOR HAS MEANING 15-MINUTE IN-SERVICE SUITE:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/behavior-has-meaning>

ELOF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE GUIDES:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/effective-practice-guides>

ELOF2GO MOBILE APP: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/elof2go-mobile-app>

HEALTH SERVICES NEWSLETTER ON STAFF WELLNESS-MANAGING STRESS: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/health-services-newsletter-201408.pdf>

LOOKING BEYOND BEHAVIOR TO DISCOVER MEANING:

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/mental-health/article/looking-beyond-behavior-discover-meaning>

CONNECTING AT HOME

INFANT AND TODDLER BEHAVIORS THAT CAN CHALLENGE ADULTS

Behavior is a form of communication. Infants and toddlers use their behavior to express their feelings, wants, and needs. Sometimes those behaviors challenge us. We can help children learn and grow by making them feel safe and supported. Learning happens best in well designed spaces with predictable routines. Here are some strategies you can try to reduce behaviors that may challenge you.

OFFER CHOICES

Young children want to feel like they have a say in everything from what they eat to what they wear. Let them feel independent by offering them two (adult-approved!) choices. It lets them feel in control and boosts their confidence when you let them make decisions.

START A ROUTINE

Consistent routines teach children what to expect. They make it easier for children to practice regulating their behaviors. If bedtime is a struggle with older toddlers, you might draw a chart with pictures of the different steps. For example, bath, brush teeth, books then bed. Stopping play to get ready for bed can be hard. Providing a 5-minute warning before the next activity can help with transitions. Playing the same song as you get ready to transition can be a helpful cue for young children.

CREATE A "YES!" SPACE

Find a place in your home where children can freely explore without you worrying about their safety or always needing your help. This is a "Yes!" space. The goal is to keep you from having to say "no" in response to your child's ideas and choices. Only keep materials in the space that are safe for children to use and play with on their own. Make materials easily accessible by using low shelves, baskets or hooks. It encourages independence!

MAKE TIME FOR MOVEMENT

Keeping children active and engaged can help reduce the frequency of challenging behavior. Have a dance party, pretend to move like different animals, act out a story in a book, or go for a walk. Make tunnels out of cushions and pillow to crawl through. Anything to get up and move!

