

Understanding Your Child's Behavior

All parents struggle with some of the things their children do. While there is no magic formula that will work in all situations, it is helpful to understand the kinds of issues that impact a child's behavior. If you understand these issues and know what to expect at different developmental stages, your reactions will be wiser and it will be easier to create an environment that supports and nurtures your child.

When your child's behavior is troubling, ask yourself:

1. Is this a growth or developmental stage?

Each new phase of growth or development brings challenges for the child and the child's caregivers. For example, growing independence in the child's second year is often accompanied by challenging behavior (such as the "No!" phase). Feeding and sleeping problems may occur during developmental transitions, and it helps if caregivers are extra patient and loving in their responses. It's best to give the child choices, use humor, and be firm but supportive.

2. Is this an individual or temperament difference?

Not all children of a certain age act the same way. Some progress developmentally at different rates, and all have their own temperaments that may account for differences in behavior. Being aware of a child's tendency to be shy, moody, adaptable, or inflexible will help you better understand the child's behavior in a specific situation and impact the way you approach the behavior.

3. Is the environment causing the behavior?

Sometimes the setting provokes a behavior that may seem inappropriate. An overcrowded living or childcare arrangement coupled with a lack of toys can increase aggression or spark jealousy. Look around your home to evaluate it in light of your child's behaviors and see the environment from a child's viewpoint.

4. Does the child know what is expected?

If a child is in a new or unfamiliar territory or is facing a new task or problem, he or she may not know what behavior is appropriate and expected. Perhaps this is the first time a two-year-old without siblings has been asked to share a toy. Developmentally he does not truly understand the concept of sharing, so it is up to the parent to explain calmly how other children will react. Patience and repeating the message over and over again are necessary as children rarely learn or master a new response on the first try.

5. Is the child expressing unmet emotional needs?

Emotional needs that are unmet are the most difficult cause of behavior to interpret. If a particular child needs extra love and attention, rather than withhold that from her, it will be helpful to find ways to validate and acknowledge the child more frequently.

Adapted from *Understanding Behavior: A Key to Discipline*, National Association for the Education of Young Children and Judy Reinsberg, July 1999.

