

Challenging Behaviors

Many young children struggle with challenging behaviors like frequent tantrums, aggression (hitting, kicking, throwing things), yelling, being stubborn, controlling or inflexible behaviors, difficulty transitioning from one activity to the next, or difficulty following directions. Sometimes these behaviors seem to come "out of the blue." Other times, we might notice certain situations when challenging behaviors usually happen (for example, when a child isn't allowed to do something they want to do). When problematic behaviors come and go and don't get in the way of everyday life, these behaviors are usually part of normal child development. But for some children, challenging behavior becomes so frequent and intense that it causes significant stress to both the child and their family.

Behaviors like aggression and not listening can be some of the most frustrating behaviors for caregivers. Caregivers may feel like none of their parenting strategies are working. For some caregivers, their child's behavior may bring up strong feelings, especially when the behavior reminds them of other people in their lives who have hurt them in the past. Challenging behaviors often feel like a mystery to families. There are many different reasons why children might show these behaviors, and it can be tricky to figure out what a specific child's behavior means. Below are some tools to figure out what might be contributing to your child's challenging behavior and what you can do about it.

Why do young children have challenging behaviors?

Young children show challenging behaviors for many reasons. When young children have big feelings, they often cannot tell us in words what they are feeling or why they are feeling it. Instead, they may kick, hit, yell, cry, throw things, or act silly or out of control. There can be many different feelings "behind" a challenging behavior—young children might show frustration, anger, sadness, worry, fear, shame, or overwhelmed feelings through these behaviors.

In fact, young children are not biologically capable of regulating their emotions on their own. Young children regulate their emotions through "co-regulation." This means that they depend on grown-ups who are near them to help them to calm down when they are upset. When an upset child is near a trusted adult who can help them, their stress hormones are calmed down by being near that calming adult. When no trusted adults are around—or when adults are upset, too—young children can continue to be upset and have a harder time calming down.

When young children frequently have challenging behaviors, it can help us to "be like a detective" to figure out what might lead to this behavior. Knowing what might be causing a behavior gives us clues about what we could do to help.



There are many reasons why a child might have challenging behaviors. Most times there are multiple reasons why a child is upset. Here are some examples:

Language skills: Young children are newer to using language and may not have the words to tell us why they are upset. Instead, they might show us through their behavior. When children have big feelings, they may not be able to use their language skills. Even a child who can talk fluently when they are calm may be unable to use their words or understand what you say to them when they are upset.

Frustration: Young children are learning new things every day. Learning can be hard! It is normal for children to become frustrated or upset when they are not able to do something they want to do. Sometimes things that feel like "no big deal" to grown-ups can feel really hard for young children. Their feelings are real, and they need our help to learn how to manage their feelings and keep trying even when it gets hard.

Trauma reminders: When young children have experienced stressful, traumatic, or scary events, the events and the feeling of fear can leave an impact on them, even when they were very young when the events happened. Many things might remind a child of a scary experience—raised voices could remind them of scary household conflict, a loud noise could remind them of a car crash, or everyday separations (like a parent running an errand or leaving them at daycare) could remind them of a bigger separation or loss of a caregiver. When these reminders happen, children might feel like they are right back in that scary situation. Children may respond to these feelings by showing general upset, anger, fear, or sadness, or by withdrawing or appearing to freeze.

Sensory overwhelm: Some children are extra sensitive to sensory stimuli. They may be upset by loud sounds, bright lights, certain textures (clothing, food, etc.), smells, or an environment that feels too "busy." Other children may need sensory input (e.g., big movements) to regulate their bodies and minds. Noticing patterns in what sensory stimuli are helpful to your child and which are upsetting or hard for your child can give clues about when your child might have a hard time and how to adjust their environment to help them be regulated.

Anxiety: It is common for young children to experience anxiety or worry. Children may be anxious about separation from caregivers, social situations, or worry about many things (for example, asking reassurance questions, needing to know the "plan" ahead of time, etc.). Many young children show anxiety in unexpected ways. Some children show anxiety through bossy or controlling behavior, aggression, or stubborn or inflexible behavior. For more information on anxiety in young children, see <http://bit.ly/IECCAnxiety>.

Testing boundaries: A natural part of child development is a child's desire to do things independently. Children may try out different behaviors to see what happens, sometimes to learn where boundaries are for their behavior. When boundaries are unclear (for example, when boundaries are only sometimes enforced or are different depending on the situation), children may test boundaries more. Making boundaries and rules clear and predictable, teaching boundaries with warmth and kindness, and offering children acceptable choices to choose between can support children in reducing problem behaviors and developing age-appropriate independence.

High energy: Some children have exceptionally high energy levels and have difficulty sitting still. Children may act before they think about the consequences of their actions. For some children, this is related to differences in how their brain works; even when children try their best to "be good," they may be impulsive and have a hard time controlling their bodies. Children with high energy or difficulty paying attention do better when they have plenty of opportunities to get their energy out and when their caregivers give them structure in their environment. (See "Predictable Routines and Transitions" below)

Multiple stressors: As adults, we know that we are more able to be kind, regulated, and in control of our behavior and emotions at times when we feel calm and are taking care of our own needs. When we have more stress, we might be more easily upset and have a hard time handling things that would be manageable on less stressful days. Young children experience stress in the same way. Suppose a young child has experienced recent life changes (like a new daycare classroom), had poor sleep, had recent stressful experiences (like household conflict), or isn't feeling well. In that case, they might have more difficulty controlling their behavior and emotions. We can think of this with the metaphor of a cup– if our cup is full of multiple stressors piling up, one more small stress (like being asked to clean up) might be enough to cause our cup to overflow and our behavior to be out of control. Paying attention to the stressors that caused a child's cup to be so full (instead of focusing only on the last stressor that caused the cup to overflow) can help them to manage day-to-day stressors better.



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Here are some strategies you can use with your child when they have challenging behaviors:

Think like a detective. Sometimes it can be hard to see things from your child's point of view, and your child's behavior may seem confusing. Yet, children often have a good reason for their behavior. For example, a child may refuse to flush the toilet because they feel scared of the loud noise the flushing makes. Understanding *why* your child has a particular behavior can help you to better manage that behavior. To start the conversation, you could calmly ask, "What were you thinking when..." or "How did you feel when...". Many children have difficulty answering "why" questions because of their limited language abilities so use your observational skills to notice what might be happening for your child. What happened right before the challenging behavior? And right after? You can also have your child be a detective and help solve the behavior problem together with you. For example, you might ask, "What can you do differently next time?" or "How can I help you when you have big feelings like that?" These conversations may need to take place once a child has calmed down, as (like grown-ups) children can think more easily once they have calmed down.

Be a self-regulation role model. It can be difficult to keep your cool when your child has big feelings, is aggressive, or is not listening to you. When caregivers are upset, it can make children feel scared or more upset; this may make it more difficult for children to stay regulated or to do what you ask them to do. Children learn to behave by watching the behaviors of others around them. It is important to stay calm when addressing your child's challenging behavior. If you are starting to feel upset while interacting with your child, take a deep breath, label how you are feeling, take a few minutes to yourself as needed, and calmly reapproach and observe the situation. You can tell your child about your strategies to calm yourself down so they can learn from your example. Find ways to support your mental and physical health to feel calm, supported, and fulfilled long-term. If you aren't able to keep your cool, talk about it with your child once you both feel calmer, and problem solve how you can do better next time. Here is a link to helpful strategies for managing tantrum behavior:

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/tantrums/>.

Support your child's emotional intelligence. Help your child to recognize their feelings and understand what causes different feelings. Try labeling your feelings and your child's feelings with emotion words like happy, mad, sad, hurt, afraid, ashamed, etc. Validate your child's feelings, even if they don't make sense to you. "Your brother touched your toy, and you felt mad." Children experience things in their own way and have their own perceptions. If you aren't sure how your child is feeling, you can wonder about it with them. "I wonder if you are sad right now?". Children need to know that all feelings are okay. In fact, when we try to push away feelings, they usually come back and hang around longer than necessary. On the other hand, not all behaviors are okay. Some behaviors need limits. "I see how angry you are, but it's not okay to hit your sister. Let's try squeezing this pillow instead."

Parenting strategies for children with challenging behaviors:

Daily special time together. Prevention can be the best "medicine" for reducing challenging behaviors. One way to prevent challenging behavior is to fill your child's "attention bucket" with positive attention. Try spending time with your child doing what they would like to do. During this daily "special time," try not to ask any questions or give instructions. Instead, follow your child's lead and express interest and delight in their actions. One way to do this is to use your words to describe what your child is doing in their play. For example, you could say, "you're drawing with the green crayon," or "you're stacking the blocks, and it's getting so high!" Just 10 or 15 minutes a day of special time can have significant benefits, even for kids who are struggling. When children know they can count on getting this quality time with you daily, it is easier for them to get through the rest of their day with fewer challenging behaviors.

Positives before negatives. Kids with challenging behavior often receive more negative feedback and consequences than other kids. Over time, lots of negative feedback can cause them to develop low self-esteem, leading to more challenging behaviors down the road. Research shows that the most effective way to change behavior is by rewarding the behavior we want to see more of. Punishment is usually not very effective because it tells children what *not* to do without telling them what to do. Discipline can also give children attention, which unintentionally reinforces behaviors. In other words, punishment might make the challenging behavior happen more! So, consider what positive behavior you want to see more of, and give attention to those positive behaviors. If there is a behavior you want to eliminate, try to think of the "positive opposite," which is a behavior you'd like to see them do instead, and reward that behavior. For example, instead of telling your child, "Don't throw your toys," notice when your child is handling toys more appropriately, and comment, "I love how gentle your hands are with those blocks." Try to give much more positive feedback than negative. Aim to catch your child being good 5 to 8 times for every one time you say something critical or set a limit. If you find it hard to find good behaviors to praise, you can also praise neutral behaviors. When children get more praise, they tend to feel good about themselves; we all behave better when we feel confident and know that the people we care about think highly of us.

Predictable routines and transitions. Familiar activities can provide comfort for children during challenging times. Like adults, children feel more confident and secure when their daily activities are predictable and familiar. This predictability can help them feel more in control of their environment, know what is happening next, and know what is expected of them. Visual schedules are one helpful tool that uses a series of pictures to show children the steps of a routine or process or to prepare them for upcoming changes. For example, you might have a visual schedule of the bedtime routine, the transition from one parent's home to another, or the transition to a new school or classroom. More information about visual schedules can be found here:

<https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/activities/using-visual-schedules/>.

When transitioning between activities, it can also be helpful to give a transition warning to help your child prepare for the change, especially if a fun activity is coming to an end. "Remember, in 5 minutes, we are putting our toys away... Okay, in 1 minute, we are putting our toys away. Okay, now it's time for you to clean up." A timer can be a helpful visual cue for children during these moments.