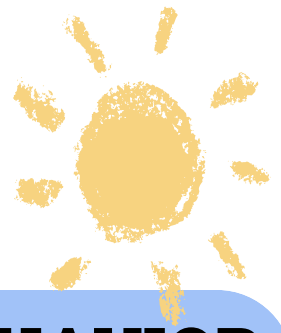


A Way of Being with Children

Practical Tools for Connection, Safety, and HOPE in Early Childhood



RESPONDING TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

Using Dysregulation as an Opportunity to Connect and Teach

Challenging behavior can be confusing, frustrating, or even exhausting especially when it happens repeatedly. Yet every tantrum, refusal, or outburst is a form of communication. Children often show us what they are thinking or need through behavior long before they can explain it with words. Behavior may signal fatigue or hunger; overstimulation or stress; big emotions that feel overwhelming; or a need for connection, comfort, or control. When adults shift their mindset from “What’s wrong with this child?” to “What’s happened to or happening for this child?”, they open the door to understanding, teaching, and growth. Responding with curiosity and calm helps children feel safe, and safety is the foundation for emotional regulation, behavioral control and learning new skills.

Why Adult Responses Matter

Children learn how to handle emotions and challenges by watching the adults around them. Long before they can explain their feelings or regulate their reactions, they are watching how the adults in their lives respond to stress, frustration, and mistakes. Every adult response becomes a quiet lesson about how the world works and what they can expect from others. When adults respond to challenging behavior with calm, consistency, and empathy, children begin to understand that:

- All feelings are normal and acceptable
- Feelings are manageable
- Mistakes are part of learning
- Support is available even during hard moments

This approach doesn’t mean ignoring limits. It means teaching boundaries in ways that preserve connection and build resilience.



Skills & Practices for Responding

1. Pause Before You React

- Take a breath and ground yourself; your calm presence matters more than immediate correction.
- Remember: Children borrow your regulation.

2. Look for the Need Beneath the Behavior

- Ask yourself: “What might my child be needing right now?”
- Is the child tired, hungry, overwhelmed, or seeking connection? Meeting the underlying need often reduces the behavior.

3. Use Clear, Simple Language

- Keep instructions short and calm.
- Say what to do, not just what not to do.
- Example: “Feet on the floor,” instead of “Stop climbing.”

4. Set Limits With Empathy

- Acknowledge feelings while holding boundaries. “I see you’re upset. It’s okay to feel mad. It’s not okay to hit.”
- This teaches both emotional awareness and self-control.

5. Stay Connected During Correction

- Avoid shaming, threats, or isolation.
- Connection helps children stay regulated and open to learning.

A Way of Being Reminder

Challenging behavior is not a child trying to be bad, disrespectful or defiant on purpose - it is a sign that something is hard for them in that moment. Children act out when emotions feel overwhelming or when they don't yet have the language or skills to express themselves in better, more effective ways. If we remember this, we can view misbehavior as a signal or message rather than as a failure or as intentional misbehavior. A child's behavior is a form of communication to an adult – a way to ask for help and support when the words aren't available to them. When adults respond with patience, curiosity, and consistency, challenging behavior becomes an opportunity to teach skills, strengthen connection, and build lifelong resilience.

Tips for Teaching Through Behavior

Offer Choices When Possible

Simple choices give children a sense of control and reduce power struggles.

- “Do you want the red cup or the blue cup?”
- “Would you like to clean up now or in two minutes?”

Reinforce Positive Behavior Immediately

Notice and name what's going well. Positive reinforcement helps desired behaviors grow.

- “You waited your turn.”
- “You used your words.”

Teach Skills Outside of Stressful Moments

Children learn best when they are calm and in a setting that offers acceptance and support. They are then able to remember and use these skills when things get challenging.

- Practice problem-solving
- Role-play tricky situations
- Talk about feelings during quiet times

Focus on Progress, Not Perfection

- Learning new behaviors takes time. Celebrate small steps and effort along the way.

Repair and Reconnect

If a moment didn't go well, come back together later.

- “That was a hard moment for both of us.”
- “I am sorry that I raised my voice”.
- “Let's try again.”

Stay Consistent with Expectations

Predictable responses help children feel safe and understand what's expected.

- Follow through on limits calmly and consistently
- Use the same language and routines whenever possible

Model the Behavior You Want to See

Children learn by watching adults. Your actions teach more than your words.

- Use calm words during frustration
- Demonstrate problem-solving and self-regulation



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