

Behavior and the Brain: Managing Challenging Behaviors

Did You Know?

All behavior has meaning. Children's actions are important communications and are efforts to cope with the challenges they face. Young children aren't misbehaving on purpose.

- **Understanding the reasons behind their behavior makes it easier for both you and your child to cope.** Is the tantrum due to fear of a new situation or because the child is overwhelmed by too much stimulation around him? The reason for a behavior provides critical information about what kind of support your child needs and how to best respond.
- **Children have very little self-control before 3 years old.** Young children are largely driven by emotion, not logic. The parts of the brain that enable children to think about their feelings and plan how to respond to them are just starting to develop, so even preschoolers' ability for self-control is limited.
- **Different kids respond to the world in different ways.** Every child has a unique temperament—his or her own way of experiencing and approaching the world. Some children rush into new experiences without looking back, and others need time and support to feel comfortable in unfamiliar situations. This is not the result of something you did or something your child did. It's brain based.
- **Changes in a child's world can cause changes in behavior.** A move, the loss of a person or beloved pet, the birth of a new sibling, or a change in child care arrangements can all affect a child's behavior.

Managing Challenging Behaviors

Stay or get calm. Your mood is contagious. If you get angry, your child is more likely to get agitated and worked up. The calmer you are, the more likely it is that your child will calm more quickly, and the more likely you are to be able to carefully observe what is happening and consider how best to respond.

Have a plan. Think about how you will respond to situations that come up often; for example, not wanting to leave the playground or get ready for bed. Below are some strategies to include in your plan:

- **Let your child know you understand her feelings.** Remember, it's not the feelings that are the problem, it is what kids do with their feelings. Helping children become aware of their feelings helps them to ultimately learn to control them. Give them the words that show you understand: "You are so mad that I turned the TV off. You love your show, and you don't like when it ends. I totally understand that feeling. It's ok to be mad."
- **Set the limit calmly and clearly, with as few words as possible.** Say: "But it's not okay to hit me. That's against our family rule that we don't hurt people with words or actions." (It helps to make everything about rules, which are concrete and not personal. They apply to everyone. Always be sure to state the value behind the rule.) It's also important to be matter-of-fact. When you avoid shaming your child or showing annoyance or anger, your child is much more likely to take in what you are saying.
- **Offer acceptable choices, whenever possible.** Say, "You can hit this pillow or stomp your feet to get the mad out. Which would you like?" This teaches children acceptable ways to express their feelings and gives them some sense of control.
- **Allow space for your child to get himself back together.** Have a safe space in your home where kids can go to calm down. This strategy is meant to provide comfort, not punishment. Once a limit is set—the focus is on helping your child get calm.
- **Wait to talk about what happened until after the child is calm.** Children can't process and learn when they are overwhelmed. They need to be calm before they are able to think, reason, and problem solve.