

Same Behavior, Different Root

A Monday Morning Sorting Tool

Use this when a child's behavior is loud, confusing, repetitive, or hard to shift. The goal is not to label the child in the moment. The goal is to pause long enough to ask:

What might this behavior be protecting, communicating, or showing me?

START HERE — Match the Behavior to the Support

Safety / threat system

Meltdown, refusal, shutdown, aggression, missed follow-through

Try: Make the next step smaller. Lower your voice. Increase predictability.

Regulation / executive functioning

"Won't listen," argues, interrupts, or can't shift

Try: Use fewer words, visual cues, movement, and one clear next step.

Communication / flexibility / sensory-social interpretation

Avoids, repeats, controls, or misses social meaning

Try: Offer 2 choices. Prompt/tell/visual changes/routine. Use concrete language. Support transitions.

Body / sensory system

Escalates with noise, touch, light, crowds, waiting, or movement demands

Try: Change the environment before demanding more coping.

Family / caregiver stress system

Adults feel stuck, ashamed, blamed, or out of bandwidth

Try: Reduce shame. Build trust. Choose one doable next step. Consider if anything above is also

TRY THIS BEFORE YOU ESCALATE — Use One Child, One Behavior, One Smaller Support

Look for the pattern before choosing the intervention. Write just enough to help you choose a safer next step.

1. The behavior I keep seeing:

2. How exactly is this happening? When, where, with whom, before what, after what — and what happens right after?

3. The system that might be overloaded:

4. What I usually try first:

5. One smaller support I can try instead:

6. How I will know it helped even 5%:

Before I ask, "How do I stop this behavior?" I can ask, "What might this behavior be protecting, communicating, or showing me?"

References: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2026). *About adverse childhood experiences*. Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center. (2024). *Understanding and managing children's behaviors*. National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.). *Guidance and challenging behaviors*. National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations. (n.d.). *Practical strategies*.

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