Embracing the Challenging Behaviors of Toddlers

June 27th, 2018
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What we will discuss today:

- Describe challenging behaviors demonstrated by toddlers
- Explore reasons behind challenging behavior for toddlers
- Discuss specific strategies for supporting toddlers when they are experiencing challenges
Are challenging behaviors on the rise?

What is challenging behavior?

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning’s definition of challenging behavior for children from birth to 5 years old is:

- Any **repeated pattern of behavior** that **interferes with learning** or **engagement in prosocial interactions** with peers and adults, and
- **Behaviors** that are **not responsive** to the use of **developmentally appropriate guidance** procedures.
In thinking about challenging behaviors, what behaviors do you find the most challenging among toddlers?

How do the behaviors you listed fall on this continuum?

**Acting Out**
- Frequent or intense tantrums
- Pushing
- Hitting
- Biting
- Persistent refusal to participate
- Harm to self and others
- Inconsolable crying

- Happens frequently
- Impacts the quality of care
- Affects the child’s relationships with peers

**Withdrawing**
- Looking sad
- Not showing a preference for a caregiver
- Rarely talking
- Not making eye contact
- Overly avoidant or compliant with caregiver
- Inconsolable crying

Frequent or intense tantrums
What causes challenging behaviors?

ICK! ICK refers to the negativity or risk factors in an individual’s life.

Devereux Center for Resilient Children * www.MoreFLIPIT.org

What does behavior tell us?

• Communication, wanting connection
• Feelings underlie the behavior:
  • Brain needs to feel CALM and SAFE
In thinking about the challenging behaviors you listed, what are the reasons for these challenging behaviors?

Common Reasons for Challenging Behaviors

Toddlers are very conscious and aware, but their behavior *isn’t.*

Functions
1. Obtain something – Attention of adult or peer – Activity, toy, food, materials
2. Escape something
3. Self stimulation
4. More ICK, overstimulated
In thinking about the challenging behaviors you listed, how do you respond to these challenging behaviors?

Got Stress? Flight, fight, freeze, faint
What is foundational for children to feel calm, secure, and safe?

“Time and time again children are heavily reprimanded for committing the offence of crying or being angry. Let’s get this straight: emotions are not bad behavior. Emotions don’t hurt anyone. Suppressing children’s emotions does, on the other, cause them harm: over time, if done repeatedly, it unbalances their brain chemistry, it stresses their immune and digestive systems, and it undermines their ability to relate to others” – Robin G. Heart to Heart Parenting
What makes us resilient to these stressors?

• Healthy relationships
• Healthy self-regulation
• Healthy initiative

Indicators found on the Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA-P2)

Strategies

Prevention is the Best Intervention
Relationships as a Basis of Prevention

• Foundation is having a relationship-based approach in child care settings (Fox & Hemmeter, 2014)
  - Nurturing and supportive relationships
  - High quality supportive environments
  - Culturally responsive practices

• Social and emotional well-being is key to learning in all other areas of development

Interventions focused on fostering sensitive and responsive teacher-child interactions for children who demonstrated challenging behaviors in child care associated improved activity in children’s stress response system (declines in cortisol) (Hatfield & Wiltford, 2016)
Strategies

- Self-Regulate to Co-Regulate
- Become Self-Aware
- Be Empathetic
- Develop children’s awareness of feelings and problem solving
- Using “Conscious Communication”

- Healthy relationships
- Healthy self-regulation
- Healthy initiative

Strategy: Self-Regulate to Co-Regulate

- How are you self-regulating?
- Are you demonstrating behaviors that are calm and safe to the toddler?
- Are you helping the child develop resilience to stressful moments?
**Strategy: Importance of co-regulation**

- Is an interactive process of regulatory support in the context of caring relationships
- Occurs across the lifespan

(Murray et al., 2015)

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Return to the Breadth
4 – 7 - 8

Rest your tongue behind our front teeth
Close your mouth
Breathe in through your nose
Count to 4

Keep your mouth closed
Hold your breath
Count to 7

Open your mouth
Breathe out in a WHOOSH
Count to 8

Self-Talk
**Sometimes Talking Out Loud**

“I’m having some really big feelings right now. It’s not because of you. We’re going to get through this together. I’m going to take a couple of minutes to take care of myself. And then, I’ve got a really big hug for you if you want it.”

https://www.happilyfamily.com/how-to-prevent-mommy-meltdowns/

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**Strategy: Become Self-Aware and Gain Perspective**

- Is my temperament similar or different from the child?
- What is the child’s behavior bringing up for me?
- What emotions am I feeling when this behavior happens?
- Am I feeling this way because of my own “stuff”?  
- Is there something about my family or culture that makes me feel less tolerant?
- Do I always feel this way each day when this behavior occurs?
- Do I have reasonable expectations?
Strategy in the Moment: Stay Calm and Communicate Comfort

Communicate Comfort – Get at eye level, then have a
  Calm body
  Calm face
  Calm voice

Communicate Feelings – Even when you don’t like the behavior acknowledge the feelings.

Strategy in the Moment: Stay Calm and Communicate Comfort

CONNECTION is KEY,
What is driving the child’s behavior?
• What can I do in this very moment to improve my relationship with this child?

Remain calm (not urgent or emotional), “You didn’t like that you can’t throw toys at Elise. You feel like throwing things. I’m here to stop you.”

http://www.janetlansbury.com/2016/03/how-to-calm-an-angry-child/
Remember: Child Needs Time to Respond

• Provide enough time for children to respond

• Give the child **5 to 10 seconds** to respond before you give an additional prompt or request.

• If the child is asked to respond verbally, he may need time to find the right words.

Strategy in the Moment: Conscious Communication

**AVOID**

• Avoid demands
• Avoid guilt
• Avoid judgement
• Avoid blame
• Avoid dismissing

**DO**

• Notice without judgement
• Acknowledge feelings
• Validate Needs
• Support, offer solutions, provide quality feedback

www.teach-through-love.com
Let’s Practice

Strategy in the Moment: CARES Approach

Come In → Assist Child → Reassure Child → Emotional Validation → Soothe (voice/touch)

Emma Girard, Psy.D, 2018
Let’s Practice

Strategy: Using Symbols/Visual Tools

• Support transitions
• Provide consistency and predictability
• Establish clear expectations
• Help children in communicating
Strategy: Acknowledge aspects of the child you appreciate and like

“If you concentrate on finding whatever is good in every situation, you will discover that your life will suddenly be filled with gratitude, a feeling that nurtures the soul.” – Rabbi Harold Kushner

Strategy: Picture Books

Feelings
- My Many Colored Days
  - Dr. Seuss
- Lots of Feelings
  - Shelly Rotner
- Grumpy Bird
  - Jeremy Tankard

Anger
- Words Are Not for Hurting
  - Elizabeth Verdickem
- When I Feel Angry
  - Cornelia Maude Spelman
- Llama Mad at Mama
  - Anna Dewdney

Self Control
- Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus
  - Mo Willems
- Quiet Loud
  - Linda Pataciclei
- No Yes
  - Linda Pataciclei

Source: https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/7-books-about-feelings-for-babies-and-toddlers
What are some key take aways?

• Toddlers are not being challenging, they are HAVING or experiencing challenges
• Behavior is communicating a need to feel calm and safe – reflect on the feelings behind the behavior
• Our role as a is to build secure trusting relationships
• Find ways to self-regulate to co-regulate  
  *Connect and respond, don’t react*
• Use words the connect you with the child and teaches them strategies for self-regulation

What will you do differently to support toddlers with challenging behaviors?
Helpful Resources

Books and Articles


On the Web

- [www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org) Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior
- [www.csefel.uiuc.edu](http://www.csefel.uiuc.edu) Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning
- [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org) Zero to Three
- [www.ptic.org](http://www.ptic.org) The Program for Infant Toddler Caregiver
Selected References


Tuning In: Parents of Young Children Tell Us What They Think, Know and Need is a comprehensive research undertaking by ZERO TO THREE and the Bezos Family Foundation, 2016.