

## **THE CHILD HEALTH CONNECTION, INC.**

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### **INFANT/TODDLER MEANING OF BEHAVIORS- INDIVIDUALIZED INTERVENTION**

This month we are focusing on infant and toddlers who demonstrate challenging behaviors that do not improve over time on their own. Some of these children who exhibit challenging behaviors are at risk of being expelled from the child care center. We hope to offset the stressful situation that the child, parent and staff incurs as a result of these type of behaviors. Persistent challenging behaviors left alone will create more problems, take longer to resolve and will have a negative impact on the learning ability of the child as he grows older.

#### What is Challenging Behavior?

Challenging behavior can mean many things to different people. Basically, it is any repeated pattern of behavior that interferes with the learning or engagement in social interactions with other children or adults. Some of the most common and typical challenges that are seen in the early years are aggression, defiance, inconsolable crying, and sleep challenges.

Children communicate to us when they are hungry, tired, unhappy, uncomfortable, in pain or sleepy. Sometimes this communication can have a negative effect on their emotional and social needs. Examples of how this all relates:

- An extremely fussy baby who might receive less positive attention could become delayed in social development (slow to respond to his name, slow to smile).
- A toddler who frequently bites other children when stressed could cause the other children to then avoid the child. This decreases opportunities to learn and play with others and could delay language skills.
- A quiet baby who is hard to engage may be left alone too much.

#### The Reason for the Challenging Behaviors

There are many reasons why a child behaves the way he does:

- An undiagnosed health problem (a toddler not feeling well nor hearing well due to a repeated ear infection)
- Developmental milestones (infant learning to walk)
- Developmental sensory issues (being overwhelmed by noise, loud music)
- Changes of daily routines between child care center and home
- Social emotional environment--separation from parent for first time, family circumstances such as divorce, new home, domestic violence, depressed parents.

Many changes over a short period of time can make it difficult for a young child to maintain a balance in their life. This may cause regression of some learned behavior. For example, an infant who had been sleeping through the night wakes up now, or a child who had been fully potty trained begins to have toileting accidents.

There are two extremes of emotional expression: acting out behaviors and social withdrawing:

Acting Out Behaviors:

- fussing
- inconsolable crying
- frequent or intense tantrums
- pushing
- hitting
- biting
- frequently throwing things, knocking things over, or destroying property
- persistent refusal to participate in activities
- harm to self or others

Social Withdrawing Behaviors:

- pulling away while being held
- an infant that rarely coos, babbles or talks
- looking sad
- not showing preference to caregiver
- not making eye contact
- whining
- being overly compliant or overly avoiding caregiver

It is easier to react to a behavior, especially acting out behavior, than to reflect on the meaning of the behavior. The child's emotions can stir up emotion in the teacher. Of course, a quick reaction is necessary when a child is about to harm himself or others.

How To Respond to the Challenging Behavior

Remember that no two children are exactly alike. Every child is born with his own temperament which influences their behavior. Since every child is unique, it is impossible to offer one strategy that will work for everyone. Some helpful ideas are:

- Use words to acknowledge the child by naming the feelings such as "you seem so sad" or "you seem so upset."

## Meaning Of Behaviors - Individualized Intervention - 3

- Offer comfort. Perhaps change the holding position of the infant and say “it will be okay.”
- Be attuned to the child’s personality and knowing what will upset the child (loud noises, crying, a teacher leaving the room).
- Help the child learn another way to communicate. For example, “if you want more milk, you can point to the cup, you don’t need to throw it.”
- Make sure the strategies are age appropriate for their developmental stage.

Parents of the child are essential to helping teachers know their child and how to respond to their needs. Sometimes a teacher may have to discuss the observed challenging behaviors with parents. This is not always an easy thing to do. That is why it is so important to have an open communication and good relationship with the parents. Please see the attached handout detailing the Do’s and Don’ts of Talking to Families about Problem Behavior. Together, parents and teachers can help the child reach their full potential.

### Resources

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, Vanderbilt University.  
*Individualized Intervention with Infants and Toddlers: Determining the Meaning of Behavior and Developing Appropriate Responses.*

*Challenging Behavior Tips and Tools.* [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

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Module 3	Handout 3.7: Do's and Don'ts
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**Talking With Families about Problem Behavior:  
Do's and Don'ts**

<b>Do</b>	<b>Don't</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Begin the discussion by expressing concern about the child</li> <li>2. Let the parent know that your goal is to help the child.</li> <li>3. Ask the parent if he or she has experienced similar situations and are concerned.</li> <li>4. Tell the parent that you want to work with the family to help the child develop appropriate behavior and social skills.</li> <li>5. Tell the parent about what is happening in the classroom but only after the parent understands that you are concerned about the child, not blaming the family.</li> <li>6. Offer to work with the parent in the development of a behavior support plan that can be used at home and in the classroom.</li> <li>7. Emphasize that your focus will be to help the child develop the skills needed to be successful in the classroom. The child needs instruction and support.</li> <li>8. Stress that if you can work together, you are more likely to be successful in helping the child learn new skills.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Begin the discussion by indicating that the child's behavior is not tolerable.</li> <li>2. Indicate that the child must be punished or "dealt with" by the parent</li> <li>3. Ask the parent if something has happened at home to cause the behavior.</li> <li>4. Indicate that the parent should take action to resolve the problem at home.</li> <li>5. Initiate the conversation by listing the child's challenging behavior. Discussions about challenging behavior should be framed as "the child is having a difficult time" rather than losing control.</li> <li>6. Leave it up to the parent to manage problems at home; develop a plan without inviting family participation.</li> <li>7. Let the parent believe that the child needs more discipline.</li> <li>8. Minimize the importance of helping the family understand and implement positive behavior support.</li> </ol>