

FOCUS

on Early Childhood Mental Health



Pennsylvania Key
*Early Childhood Mental
Health Consultation
Project*
717-213-2063
micwal@berksiu.org

Factsheet #18, 09/10

The Meaning of Behavior

The familiar Native American proverb says, "Don't criticize someone until you've walked a mile in his (or her) shoes." When a child is misbehaving, either in major or minor ways, it's easy either to take it personally or imagine that the child deliberately wants to be annoying or disruptive. Instead, if we follow the proverb, we try to understand why he or she is behaving in a certain way. If we put ourselves in the child's shoes and see things from his or her point of view, we are better able to help the child change the difficult behavior.

What does behavior mean?

In general, behavior is a form of communication that something is not right:

- The child's needs are not being met in some way (the child is hungry, tired, bored, frustrated)
- The child doesn't know how to tell adults how he or she is feeling so acts out
- The child feels out of control
- The child feels ignored; perhaps he or she has tried to communicate needs to an adult but no one has paid attention so problem behavior is a way of sending a message

What to do:

- Be proactive rather than reactive; try to prevent problem behavior before it happens
- Consider what triggers the problem behavior (e.g., what happened just before the child started kicking; what may be happening at home that is upsetting the child?)
- Determine the effect of the behavior (e.g., does the behavior to get the child what he or she wants?)
- Help the child find positive, socially acceptable ways to communicate their needs to others

Pennsylvania is beginning to implement **Positive Behavior Support** in early care and learning facilities. This is a "process for understanding the purpose of challenging behavior" and can be used successfully to address a wide range of behaviors. Check with your Regional Key to learn more about Positive Behavior Support.

Resources:

- "What are children trying to tell us: Assessing the function of their behavior," Center for Emotional and Social Foundations of Early Learning, <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/handout9.pdf>
- Determining *the Meaning of Challenging Behavior*, Positive Beginnings: Supporting Young Children with Challenging Behavior, Florida State University, <http://pbs.fsu.edu/PBS.html>
- "Five Facts Every Family Should Know," http://www.pbs.org/parents/inclusivecommunities/challenging_behavior2.html
- Pennsylvania Positive Behavior Support, www.papbs.org (click on PAPBS in Action/Early Childhood Resources)