



Behavior Has Meaning:

An Introduction to Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health

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The Pennsylvania Key





... 15-Minute ...
In-Service Suites



BEHAVIOR HAS MEANING



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Objectives

- Explain the importance of children's behavior as communication
- Analyze and interpret the meaning of children's behaviors
- Cover strategies that address children's behaviors and build a supportive environment

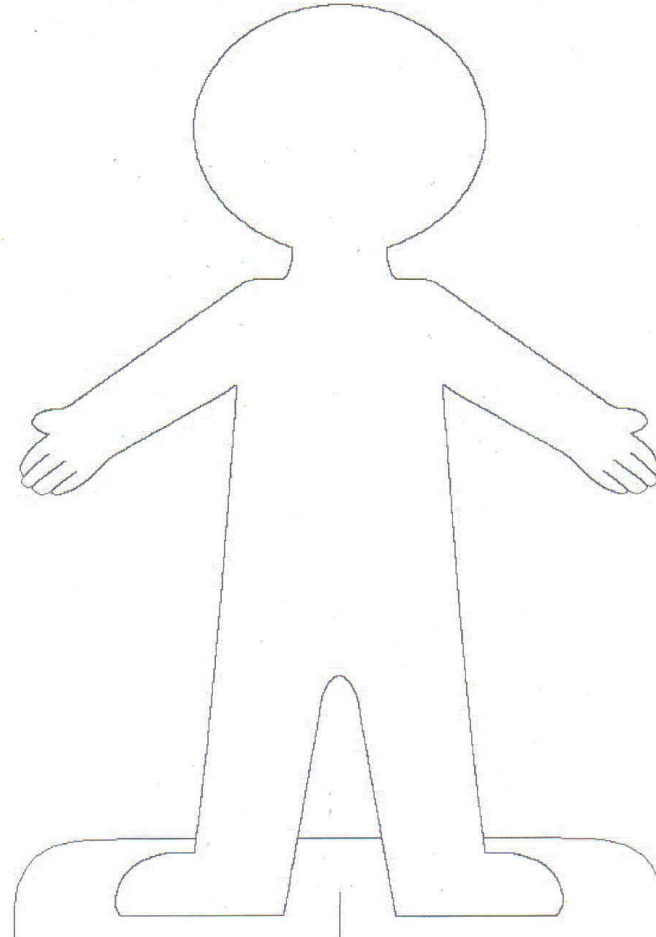
Behavior

- What is behavior?
- What do you believe about young children and their behavior?



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You Can't Not Communicate



- All behavior is a form of communication and has meaning
- Children give us cues to help us understand what they want to communicate long before they have words

“I’m trying to tell you something!”



Behavior

Every communicative behavior can be described by its form and function.

Form (What) vs. Function (Why)

- **Form:** the behavior used to communicate. What is the behavior?
- **Function:** the reason behind the communicative behavior. What is the **purpose** of the behavior from the child’s perspective?

15-Minute In-Service Slices

TIPS FOR FAMILIES
BEHAVIOR HAS MEANING


FORM & FUNCTION

Children let us know their wants and needs through their behaviors long before they have words or verbally express their feelings. They give us cues to help us understand what they are trying to communicate.

Each behavior has a reason or purpose and it is up to adults to figure out what the child is trying to communicate.

Each behavior has a:

FORM = the behavior the child is using to communicate
AND A
FUNCTION = the meaning of the behavior



Here are some examples of common forms and functions.

- Your infant cries about 30 minutes after she has had her bottle. The **FORM** is crying and the **FUNCTION** could be that she is tired and ready for a nap or is wet and needs a new diaper.
- You announce that dinner is ready, but instead of coming to the table, your preschooler runs around the living room. The **FORM** in this example is running around the room and the **FUNCTION** could be that he is excited that you made his favorite meal.

As you interact with your child, look for different behaviors that your child shows you and try to figure out the meaning of the behavior. When you respond to your child’s efforts to tell you what they want or need, they feel valued and important. They learn that you will “hang in there” and try to understand what they are communicating through their behavior.

Below is a list of common behaviors and their possible meanings to better help you figure out what your child is trying to communicate with their behaviors.

CHILD’S AGE	FORM	POSSIBLE FUNCTION
Infant	Crying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’m hungry • I’m tired • I’m wet
Toddler	Biting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want the toy another child has • I’m teething
Preschooler	Hitting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel mad or frustrated • I want you to stop talking on the phone and play with me

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Forms of Communication

- Crying
- Cooning
- Reaching for caregiver
- Kicking their legs
- Gaze aversion (looking away)
- Squealing
- Biting
- Tantrums
- Pointing
- Smiling
- Pulling adult
- Clapping
- Words
- Jumping

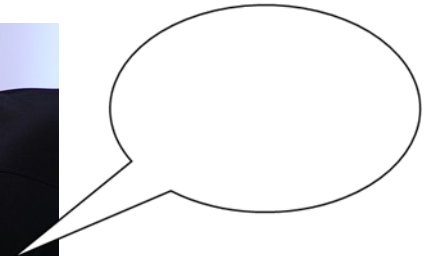
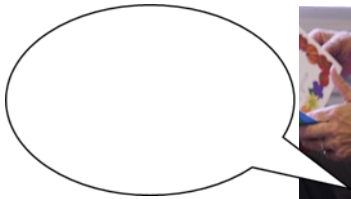
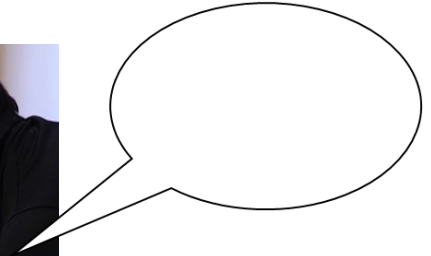
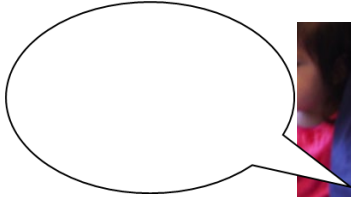


Functions of Communication

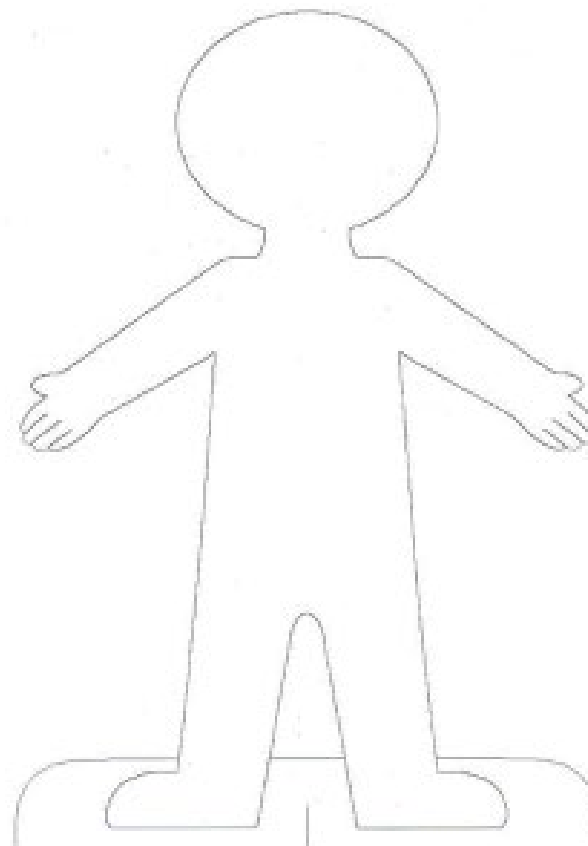
- Obtain an object, activity, person
- Ask for help
- Initiate social interaction
- Request information
- Seek sensory stimulation
- Escape demands
- Escape activity
- Avoid a person
- Escape sensory stimulation
- Express emotion
- Express pain or illness



Form and Function



Your
“Button
Pusher”



Form and Function

- A single form of behavior may serve multiple functions
- Multiple forms of behavior may serve a single function



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What and Why

- A single form of behavior may serve multiple functions
- Multiple forms of behavior may serve a single function



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Behavior Has Meaning

Why is it important to understand children's behaviors?



- Children feel valued and important
- Children feel like competent and confident communicators
- Children learn to communicate their intentions, feelings, and emotions



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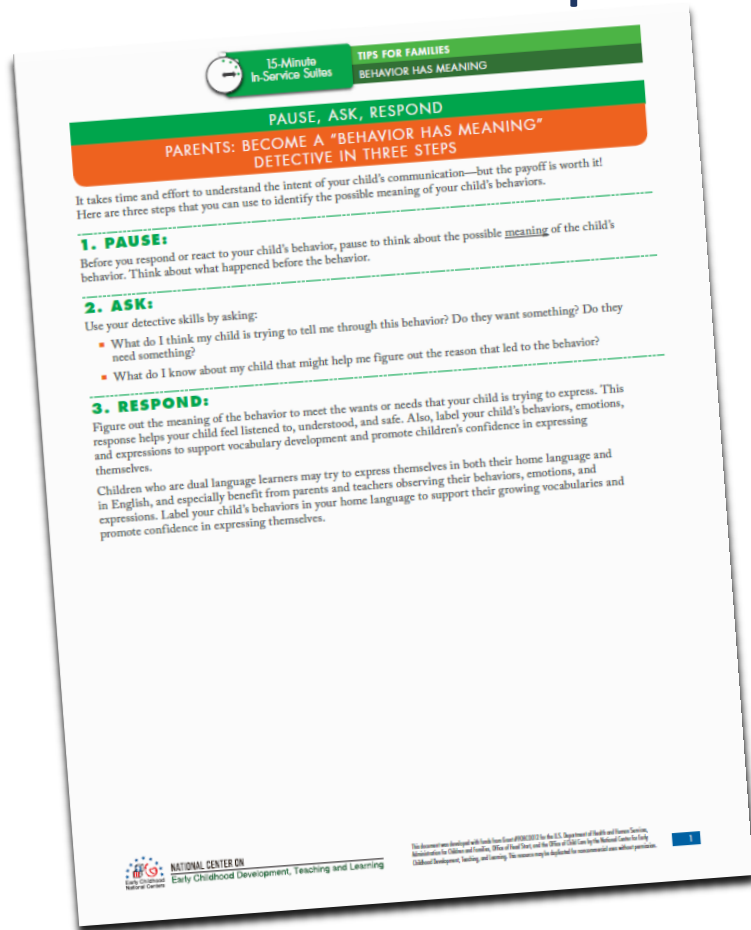
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Behavior has meaning, and how we respond holds value



Interpersonal experiences directly influence how we mentally construct reality. This shaping process occurs throughout life but is most crucial during the early years of childhood. (Siegel, 1999)

Relationships Have Impact



Why is it important to understand children's behaviors?

- Relationships are the intervention
 - Adults build nurturing and responsive relationships with children
- Adults pause before they react
- Adults determine what skills we need to model and teach children

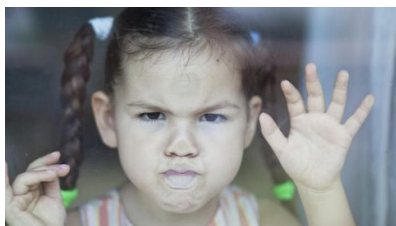


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ATTENTION SEEKING

CONNECTION SEEKING

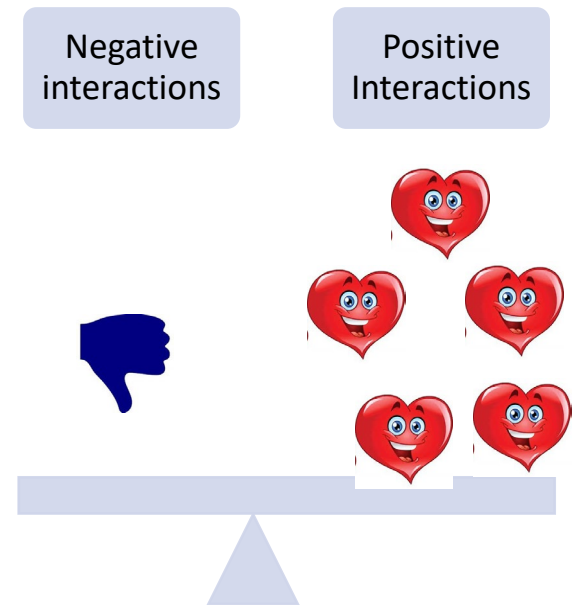


“The kids who need the most love will ask for it in the most unloving of ways.” –Russell A. Barkely

Relationship is the KEY: A child that connects with his/her teacher is a child that trusts, feels safe, and is motivated to behave.

How to build a stronger sense of connection and belonging?

5:1



Relationships Have Impact

Play can be a powerful tool for learning and engagement.

- As adults we can talk about our feelings, children don't often have the words to fully communicate their feeling and instead may play out their feelings.



More things to consider

What else might impact behaviors?

Trauma/ACEs

Biological
Reasons

Developmental
Delays



What do you know of the
classroom you currently serve?

ABUSE



Physical



Emotional



Sexual

NEGLECT



Physical



Emotional

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION



Mental Illness



Incarcerated Relative



Mother treated violently



Substance Abuse



Divorce



Behavior Has Meaning: Scenario

Mom has left five-month-old Jenna in center care for the first time. It's been a rough two weeks so far for mom, baby, and the caregivers. When mom leaves, Jenna bursts into tears and screams. She only calms down when held by a teacher. Whenever they need to put her down, she immediately starts crying.

What are your initial thoughts?



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Behavior Has Meaning: Scenario

What can we do?

- Observe Jenna's behaviors before she gets upset
- Pause and reflect on what Jenna is trying to communicate
- Communicate with Jenna's parents about strategies used at home to soothe her



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Behavior Has Meaning: Video Example 1



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Behavior Has Meaning: Video Example 2



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Be a “Behavior Has Meaning” Detective



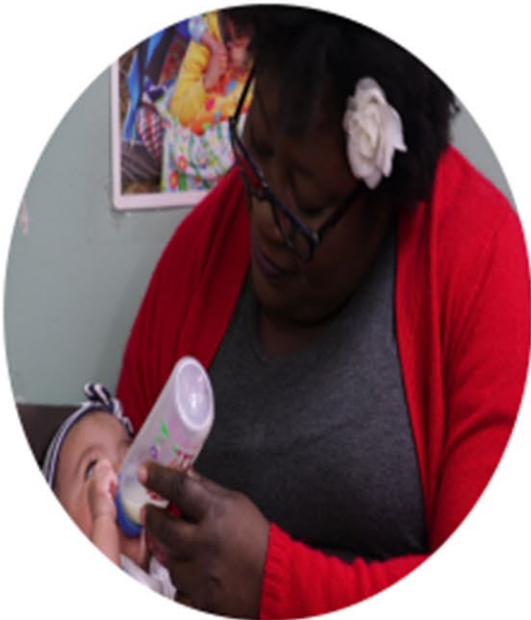
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Review



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