

A Whole Approach to Guiding Behavior

As with all aspects of caring for and educating infants and toddlers, guiding behavior happens in the context of the relationship between educator and child. Too often when discussing “behavior management,” the conversation is narrowly focused on the child and, more specifically, the behavior: what happened before, what the child did and why, and how to get the child to change her behavior.

Behavior guidance that flows out of consistently warm, nurturing interactions that build strong attachment is a much broader, more complex undertaking than simply getting children to be obedient. In a relationship-based approach to behavior guidance, the educator considers the “whole”:

1. **The whole child.** Everything known about typical child development and everything that has been discovered about the individual child, including the contexts of his family, community, and culture.
2. **The whole educator.** All she knows and can do as a professional, as well as all she knows about herself as a person.
3. **The whole relationship.** The kinds of interactions that help to build a trusting, secure relationship as well as the history of shared and enjoyed interactions.



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A vital piece of that whole is the educator. While it’s important to understand that there are many factors that influence a **child’s** specific behavior in a specific situation, it is equally important to be aware that there are also many factors that influence **one’s own** perception of that behavior.



The very first step in becoming more intentional about your response to a child’s behavior that you initially see as challenging or inappropriate is to hit the **PAUSE** button and ask *yourself*:

“Are my ‘gut level’ thoughts and feelings reasonable and appropriate, or are there factors distorting or clouding my perception of the child, the behavior, or the situation?”

Being curious about what is happening with a child during a behavior challenge *and* about what’s going on inside of us can help us move from subconscious, irrational reactions (that are often harsh) to conscious, purposeful actions.

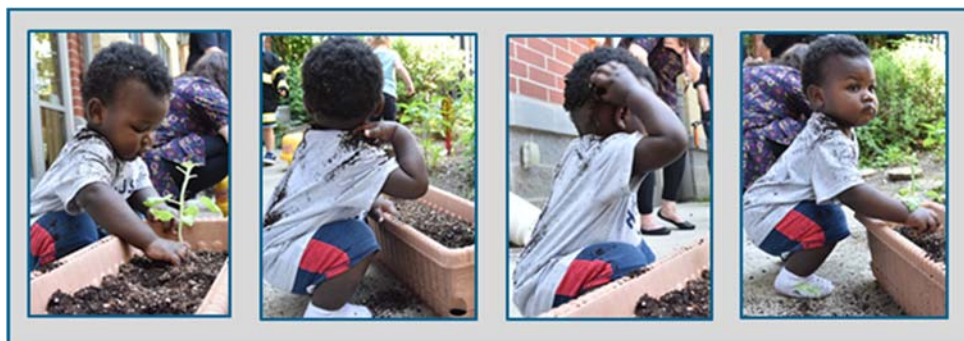
Hitting the **PAUSE** button doesn't come naturally or easily for most people, especially in the nonstop activity of an infant or toddler classroom or a family child care home. But it is a response that can be practiced and cultivated until it becomes more automatic. One way to start is to think about the following questions:

1. *When are you most likely to overreact to a child's behavior?*
2. *What are some ways you could remind yourself to pause and do a self-check of your reaction?*

Your Social Development Is Showing!

Just as children's behaviors reflect their own social–emotional knowledge and skills, educators' responses to behavior they see as challenging or inappropriate also reflect *their* social–emotional knowledge and skills. Looking back at the social–emotional competencies developing in young children and applying them to adults' reactions and responses to children's behavior can provide a new appreciation for how complex, and often subconscious, the adult side of the interaction is.

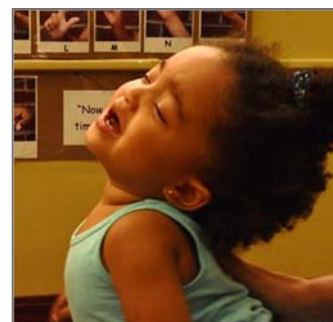
- **Social Perception:** As educators, we have the task of *noticing children's cues* that tell us whether they need support or help in managing or responding appropriately to an emotionally or socially difficult situation.
- **Emotional Regulation:** If their behavior upsets us, we have the difficult task of *regulating our own emotion*, calming our own limbic system responses.
- **Social Inference:** We make guesses, hopefully educated ones, about why the child is doing what she is doing. Studies of parent and educator responses to inappropriate behavior of young children have shown that, when adults believe the child acted intentionally, the adult's disciplinary response was harsher. Therefore, beliefs about intention are directly related to our choice of response.
- **Social Behavior:** Our response to a child's behavior reflects not only our judgments and assumptions about the child's intention in the specific situation but also our values, priorities, and beliefs about children and the people we are helping them to become, whether we are aware of it or not.



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When Additional Support is Needed

Early childhood education settings offer valuable opportunities for guiding children’s behavior and helping them to learn things such as impulse control, shared perspective, and empathy. However, sometimes there are circumstances that affect a child’s capacity to learn these social–emotional skills. For example, adverse circumstances that the family is experiencing—such as chronic stress or family discord due to poverty, unstable housing, unemployment, or other situations that cause significant disruption in the family’s functioning—are often reflected in very young children’s withdrawn or aggressive behavior.



In addition, some disabilities or developmental delays can affect a very young child’s ability to learn social–emotional skills at the same pace as typically developing children, sometimes resulting in more frequent conflicts, frustration that leads to emotional overload, or difficulty following directions.

Though infant–toddler educators’ work can require heroic levels of effort, educators don’t have to, nor should they, try to “do it all alone:”

Sometimes, children need more services than even the most skilled and flexible educator can provide. Infant–toddler educators play an important role in early identification and connecting families to appropriate supports when they see or suspect health, developmental, or mental health challenges in a very young child. If educators identify or suspect an infant or toddler in their care has one or more of these concerns, they should collaborate with families, the appropriate service provider(s), or both to address the child’s specific needs.

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Talk with colleagues or your administrator, licensing agency, or program support agency to find out:

- what services are available to children, families, and infant–toddler educators in your area;
- eligibility for those services; and
- how to access them.

As you collect the information, gather it into a file or notebook for easy reference for you and other educators with whom you may work.

Finally, don’t underestimate your own need for support, encouragement, and self-care. Working with especially challenging behavior can be mentally, physically, and emotionally exhausting, even when your efforts are successful.