

TIP SHEET: *SEEK TO UNDERSTAND A CHILD'S BEHAVIOR*

All behavior has meaning. When trying to understand a child's behavior, it is important to step back, calmly reflect, and consider all perspectives.

This Tip Sheet includes *Questions to Ask* as you seek to understand a child's behavior. It also includes possible *Actions to Take* based on what you learn.

WHEN AN UNSAFE OR CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR OCCURS

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- What is happening in the child's life?
- What happened just before the behavior?
- What is the child telling you with their behavior?
- How can we adjust the environment to help the child be successful?
- What skills can I teach the child so they can handle the situation?
- What input does the family have about the situation or behavior?
- How are the adults in the classroom responding to the child and the behavior?
- Is the classroom environment flexible enough to respond to children with differing experiences and/or needs?



ACTIONS TO TAKE

- Implement Key Strategies to Structure the Environment and Strengthen Relationships.
- **Strengthen your relationship with the child.** A positive relationship will help the child feel secure, and foster the child's cooperation and engagement in the classroom. This brief [article](#) describes Building Positive Relationships with Young Children.
- **Create consistent routines.** Routines help children to understand what to expect and what is expected of them. Visual schedules help children understand and meet these expectations.
- **Help children with transitions.** There are many strategies to help children move between activities and handle changes to the usual routine. This Tip Sheet provides helpful classroom strategies for [Helping Children Transition Between Activities](#).
- **Set positive behavior expectations.** Provide clear expectations for all children so they know what they should be doing. Provide the child with challenging behavior with [positive descriptive feedback and encouragement](#). These [starters for giving positive feedback and encouragement](#) can help this become a habit.
- **Teach social and emotional skills.** When a child has learned social and emotional skills needed in a variety of situations, they are more successful and engage in fewer challenging behaviors. Check out the resources under Teaching Social Emotional Skills on the Practical Strategies for Implementing the Pyramid Model webpage for ideas for intentionally teaching these skills, and more:
 - Labeling emotions
 - Calming or self-regulation
 - Interacting with peers
- **Build positive, culturally responsive relationships with families.** Partnerships with families are a critical part of supporting children's social and emotional competence. Building strong, reciprocal relationships with families helps with understanding a child's experience across contexts, and working together toward common solutions. This [Guide to Developing Relationships with Families from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement](#) provides valuable strategies that can be used by all early childhood professionals.
- Seek out more information from the child and family. Consider the situations from their perspectives to gain a more complete understanding.
- Watch closely for other health or developmental challenges that might be connected.
- Use the [Routine Based Support Guide](#) to explore why the behavior might be occurring and how you might respond.



WHEN A CHILD CONTINUES TO ENGAGE IN THIS BEHAVIOR

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- Are we implementing the behavior plan consistently and with fidelity (using strategies as designed)?
- Have we given the plan enough time to work? Are there signs that it might be working?
- Has the child learned new skills to use in place of the behavior(s) that are challenging in the classroom? Are we reinforcing these new skills?
- Do we need to adjust our plan? What aspect of this strategy isn't working?
- What data do we have to guide our discussions and decisions?
- Are there factors (e.g., move, loss of a caregiver, new teacher, illness, change in routines) that might be contributing to the challenging behavior?
- Have we completed a developmental screening to determine if further evaluation is needed?
- How are we supporting the other children in the classroom?

ACTIONS TO TAKE

- Use a screening tool to check for potential developmental concerns. The Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ and ASQ-SE) are now available online and through the Sparkler App.
- Collect data about what the child does and says, the environment, what happens before and after the behavior, and how often the behavior occurs. This checklist can help you consider the circumstances related to the behavior that may help to figure out the purpose or function of the behavior, and inform the creation of a plan.
- Collect data about the behavior before and after a behavior plan is put in place. Sometimes the frequency or intensity of the child's behaviors will temporarily increase when the responses to a behavior changes. Work with your team to track data over time and make decisions.
- Reach out for support.
 - **Early Childhood Consultation Partnership (ECCP)** offers early childhood mental health consultation to early care and education programs (including public schools) in CT.
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 - The **Child Development Infoline** offers information about referrals, services, and child development.
 - **Emergency Mobile Psychiatric Services** can respond immediately in-person or by phone within 45 minutes when an emotional or behavioral crisis occurs.
 - Consider other community organizations with which you collaborate or have formal agreements.
 - Connect with the child's family to make a plan that addresses how to prevent the behavior, how to respond to the behavior, and how you will communicate about progress.

IF CHILD AND FAMILY RECEIVE ONGOING SUPPORT THROUGH ANOTHER AGENCY OR ORGANIZATION

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How can we support the family in making any decisions about their child's care and education?
- How can I continue to support this child and family?
- How can our program ensure a smooth transition if appropriate?
- What does the family and child need from us to feel supported through this process?

ACTIONS TO TAKE

- With family permission, share information about the child's experience in your program with their other providers. Share strengths and strategies used to support this child.
- Work with outside providers to be "on the same page" with interventions and strategies when possible.
- Prepare and support the child and family with any transitions, including addressing facts and logistics, as well as emotions.
- Communicate with the family and support providers (with family permission).
- If the child is continuing in your care, work to learn and implement new strategies in collaboration with the family and support providers.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Center on Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports. (2022). Early Childhood PBIS. <https://www.pbis.org/topics/early-childhood-pbis>

Institute of Education Sciences: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance. (2008). Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom. Available at: https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/behavior_pg_092308.pdf

National Center on Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI). (n.d.). Behavior Intervention. Available at: <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Pyramid/pbs/index.html>

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. (n.d.). What are children trying to tell us?: Assessing the function of their behavior. Available at: https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/whatworks/WhatWorksBrief_9.pdf