

Understanding Behaviors Have Meaning

Many behaviors that are appropriate for children's ages and stages of development can be challenging for adults. As children do not have the ability to verbally express their feelings or thoughts, they will often communicate their needs and wants through cues or behaviors. When children's behaviors become challenging or concerning, adults tend to use tactics for stopping or decreasing the behavior. By understanding that there are often meanings connected to the behaviors, adults are able to help children develop effective ways to express their needs or feelings and independently learn to manage their responses.

Benefits:

1. Fosters a sense of empathy and understanding.
2. Promotes understanding of root causes of behaviors.
3. Enhances attunement for children's feelings.

When exploring the meaning to a child's behaviors it is important that you:

- **Approach each child or situation:** There are several possible influences on behaviors, such as typical developmental stages, a child's relationships with others, experiences, culture, as well as individual differences such as temperament or health.
- **Engage parents in revealing the meaning to their child's behaviors:** Ongoing positive relationships that you form with parents are important to promote open communication and an understanding of the family system. Having this understanding can help caregivers identify potential root causes of behavior.
- **Learn to manage your emotions:** When adults respond to children in a warm and supportive manner, children learn to understand, express, and regulate their emotions and behaviors.
- **Stay trauma informed:** Having knowledge of trauma informed care establishes a lens of understanding the connection between children's experiences, feelings, and behaviors.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR EXPLORING FEELINGS, THOUGHTS AND BEHAVIORS

1. Recognize behaviors as an opportunity to better understand hidden feelings and thoughts.
2. Allow children to work without letting situations become too frustrating/stressful.
3. Provide external support and use this support to help young children regain internal control when experiencing strong emotions.
4. Match children's tone and facial expression to foster a sense of empathy and understanding.
5. Be responsive and present, being at eye-level lets the child know you are there.
6. Ask open-ended questions and listen attentively.
7. Wonder aloud with children about their feelings and behaviors.
7. Look for hidden cues and clues to better understand the root of the behavior.
8. Validate that all feelings are OK.
9. Develop trauma-informed strategies to consistently respond to big feelings and behaviors.

Putting it to practice

Identify a child's behaviors you are struggling to understand. What feelings or thoughts might the child be expressing?