Early Childhood Resources   Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies

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Growing Ideas - Behavior Communicates

University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies

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GROWING IDEAS
Behavior Communicates

What is really going on?

All child care professionals who provide quality inclusive child care strive to understand what children are telling them through their behavior. When a child behaves in a way that indicates a need for extra help and support, ask the question, "What is really going on here?" Be a detective to discover possible messages in the child's behavior.

Is the child in question really saying…

I have a need that isn't being met.

- I feel hungry, tired, or ill.
- I need help learning how to interact with others and developing relationships. I'm lonely. I want attention.
- I'm bored or overwhelmed.
- I feel sad, scared, anxious, or angry.
- I want…

I don't know how to do it.

- The activity is too hard for me. I'm frustrated!
- I don't understand the directions. I'm confused!
- I feel uncomfortable.
- The room is too noisy and crowded and the lights are too bright.
- It's hard for me to sit still at circle time.

When a child's behavior communicates a need for help, ask questions that guide planning for the child.

- What is happening here? (Describe the behavior.)
- Why is it happening? (Gather clues from the child, family members, and staff.)
- Where and when is it happening? (Notice if the setting, activity or time affect the child's behavior.)
- How can I help support this child's growth and development? (Teach and model new skills, modify the program, and create a plan.)
- Is the plan working? (Try, reflect, and adjust.)

Make the positive assumption that each child is doing the best he or she can with the skills and abilities he or she currently possesses.

What is behavior communicating in this situation?

Jonah is building by himself in the block area. Two other children are building roads with the blocks and playing with cars. Jonah grabs a car and yells, "You can't play here!" When the other children try to take the car back, Jonah throws the car across the room.

What is happening here?

Three children are in the block area. One child takes a toy away and tells others they can't play. The situation escalates and the toy is thrown.

Why is it happening?

Some possibilities:

- The block area may be too small to support the play or there may be too few preferred toys.
- Jonah may need a quiet space to play alone.
- Jonah may not know how to ask to use a toy or enter play with others.

How can the child/children be supported?

- Look at the environment; can the block area be rearranged?
- Observe carefully — does Jonah have friends?
- Help Jonah learn to express his needs.

Create a plan based on the answers to the above questions.

- Enlarge the block area.
- Rotate or incorporate more preferred toys.
- Offer an alone space in the room.
- Help Jonah use words, signs, pictures or gestures to express his needs.
- Use puppets to model positive social behaviors.
- Assess the effectiveness of the plan and revise if necessary.

Attitude counts!

When we recognize that all children want to belong and realize that challenging behaviors signal a child's need for help, we will not blame children for having problems they cannot solve alone. We will work together to find solutions.

Understanding what behavior communicates and knowing how to respond can be one of the most challenging aspects of teaching.

Consider ways to do the following:

- Assure that each child is treated respectfully.
- Help each child build relationships with children and adults.
- Understand each child's developmental level, temperament, and sensory needs.
- Design the environment and activities so every child can participate and succeed.
- Ask for help and seek new solutions when something is not working.

Concepts in this handout were adapted from: Educational Productions, Inc. (Producer) (1997). Reframing Discipline: Understanding Difficult Behavior [videotape series]. Available from Educational Productions, Inc., 9000 SW Gemini Drive, Beaverton, OR 97008-7151.

Where to learn more:

See "Behavior Communicates — Selected Resources" online at http://ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/behavres/

See "Behavior Communicates — Virtual Toolkit" online at http://ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/behavvtk/

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