



Understanding the Why Behind Behavior

UNDERSTAND
SUPPORT
CONNECT
GROW



A Parent Guide

REAL BEHAVIOR. BRIGHTER TOMORROWS.



Children
communicate
in many ways



1

Behavior communicates something

Children's behavior is not random. Behavior often happens for a reason, and understanding that reason can help caregivers respond with more support and less stress.



2

A helpful question to ask



Instead of asking, 'How do I stop this behavior?' try asking,
"What might my child be trying to communicate?"

3

Four common functions of behavior



Attention

to get interaction, help, or a response from others



Escape/Avoidance

to get away from something difficult, unwanted, or overwhelming



Access to items/activities

to get something wanted, such as a toy, snack, or tablet



Sensory/Automatic reinforcement

because the behavior feels calming, interesting, or good on its own

4

Important reminder



The same behavior can happen for different reasons in different situations. Looking at the whole situation helps us understand the "why" behind behavior.





Common Functions of Behavior

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Parent-friendly examples

A behavior may happen for different reasons. Looking at patterns can help you better understand what your child may be trying to communicate.

Real
Behavior.
Brighter
Tomorrows. 

1 Attention



The child may be trying to get interaction, help, reassurance, or a response from another person.

Everyday examples:

- Repeatedly calling, 'Mom! Mom!' while a parent is on the phone
- Whining or interrupting when a sibling is getting attention

2 Escape/Avoidance



The child may be trying to get away from something difficult, uncomfortable, boring, or overwhelming.

Everyday examples:

- Refusing homework, crying, or leaving the table when work feels hard
- Having a meltdown when asked to clean up toys or transition away from a preferred activity

3 Access to items/activities



The child may be trying to get something they want.

Everyday examples:

- Tantruming when the tablet is removed
- Grabbing for a snack, toy, or phone after being told to wait

4 Sensory/Automatic reinforcement



The behavior may feel calming, organizing, or enjoyable on its own, even without another person involved.

Everyday examples:

- Humming, rocking, or hand movements during downtime
- Chewing, tapping, or repeating sounds because it feels good or soothing



Keep in mind

One behavior can have different functions in different situations. The context matters.





Look at What Happens Before and After

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A simple way to understand behavior

Before labeling a behavior as 'bad behavior,' pause and look at what happened before and what happened after.

*Different
pieces help
us see the
bigger picture*



1 Before



What happened right before the behavior?

Think about the setting, the demand, the people involved, and whether something changed right before the behavior happened.

Examples:

- Was homework just placed on the table?
- Was the tablet turned off?
- Was the parent helping another child?

2 Behavior



What did the behavior look like?

Describe what you saw in simple, observable terms.

Examples:

- Cried
- Yelled
- Dropped to the floor
- Called for parent repeatedly

3 After



What happened right after the behavior?

Notice how others responded and what changed after the behavior.

Examples:

- The parent gave attention
- The task was removed
- The child got the tablet back
- The child was given more time



When caregivers look at what happens before and after behavior, they can better understand the "why" behind it.



4 A gentle reminder



Behavior is communication. Try to look at patterns before immediately labeling a child's behavior as 'bad behavior.'

