

Behavior breakdowns—What do you do?

Children’s behavior can frustrate adults. What can you do to help children learn appropriate behavior? When you learn WHY children behave as they do, you have new ways to approach HOW to prevent challenging behaviors. The next time your child doesn’t follow the rules, figure out the “why” behind the behavior, and try a new way to respond.

What are some reasons for children’s behavior?

To meet a real need

Young children often lack the language skills to tell adults directly what they need. They may act out when they are hungry, tired, or bored. Many children are cranky at the end of a day in child care because they are hungry or tired. Carry a snack, or allow a time for children to rest before moving into evening routines. Children get bored when waiting at a bus stop, in the doctor’s waiting room, or in line at the post office. Bring a few small toys or a pad and pencil with you for these times. These little tricks help children to be on their best behavior while you complete errands. If children’s real needs are met, they won’t resort to challenging behaviors.

To show independence

Your child may want to feel independent. Give them things they can do for themselves. Let them make a snack, pick an outfit from several sets of clothes that you have offered, choose a family activity—whatever you are comfortable allowing your child to do. Channel their drive for independence into manageable, appropriate options.

To get attention

The busier you are, the harder it is to slow down and pay attention to your child. Many families find it helpful to offer a snack when they pick up their child from child care. When you arrive home, instead of rushing to check the mail and get dinner ready, sit down with your child, read a book together, cuddle, and talk about the day. The rest of the evening will go better. Your child will be more contented to let you go and do other things because they have already had some personalized attention from you. Remember, your child may not know how to ask for attention, but that does not mean they don’t need it.



To express a strong emotion

It’s hard for a child to remember and follow adult rules when they are feeling stressed, frustrated, angry, or overwhelmed. Often children express their strong emotions in inappropriate ways. You can help your child express their feelings by giving them simple art supplies like paper and crayons or markers. Ask them to make a picture about how they are feeling.

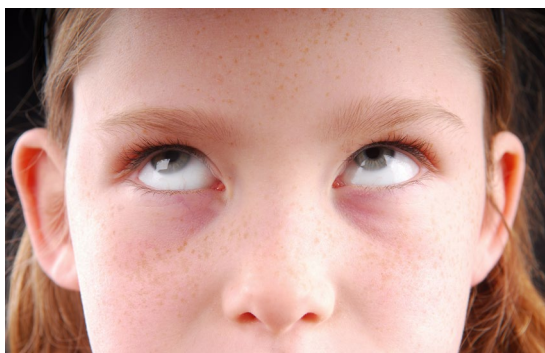
Remember, most children find any change to be stressful and are very sensitive to your stress. Even positive changes can be hard for children. Try to avoid making several changes at the same time.

Not yet able to follow rules

It takes time for children to mature enough to understand and follow rules. Adults need to repeatedly show children what they expect. For instance, if a child is too rough with a pet, take the child’s hand and use it to gently stroke the pet while saying, “Gentle touch.” Don’t assume that your child knows something you taught or showed him previously. Treat each situation like a new behavior lesson opportunity. For most children, the learning process takes many repetitions.



Children under age 2 need childproofing more than they need rules. Childproofing means doing as much as possible to block children from doing the wrong, even dangerous, thing. Put latches on cabinets and drawers. Close and lock doors. Childproofing is especially important for safety (electrical cords, open windows, etc.). Childproofing also helps protect valued items that children might want to touch and play with. By age 3, many children understand basic rules. Give simple explanations: "We put the toys away so we can find them later."



Sometimes children don't follow rules because adult rules are unclear or inconsistent or simply require too much self-control for the child's age or development. If your child is having trouble successfully following rules at home, it may be time to look closely at the rules. See if you can make them simpler or easier to enforce. The only rules you really must have are rules for safety and health.

Teach children the right place to do each activity: "If you want to make mud pies, you need to do it in the backyard, not in the living room." Give children a place where it is OK to be messy as long as they can also help clean up. Give children time outside every day to use their loud voices, and to run and climb and roll. They learn appropriate places and times for these behaviors.

Fresh start

The secret to breaking a cycle of challenging behaviors is to give your child a fresh start after each misstep. If you say, "You always..." or if your face shows your anticipation of a challenge, your child will "live down" to your low expectations. Instead, say, "We all make mistakes. I know you'll do better next time." Your child will live up to your positive vision of them and will continue to improve in their self-regulation and good judgment. Expect the best, and you will get it.

Learning about time

Have you ever noticed something funny about time? If you are waiting, five minutes can seem like an hour. If you are riding a fun rollercoaster, five minutes can seem like it is over in an instant. Since young children don't understand time well and live in the present moment, they must feel this way a great deal. This is why it can be so hard for a child to finish up something that is fun, and why they cry when you leave them at child care. It must be hard to understand when you will be able to do something fun again or see your dad again if you don't understand time.

You can help children cope with these problems by keeping to a regular routine. Make a goodbye ritual: a special kind of kiss or a wave goodbye that you use every day when you drop off your child at child care. It comforts your child to know what to expect when you drop them off. You can also help by making a daily routine at the end of the day. A family dinner time is a routine that children really benefit from. Did you know studies have found children do better in school if their family has at least one meal together every day? Make a bedtime routine that includes bath and story time. This can help children understand that it is time to sleep. You don't need to rigidly enforce a routine, but if you stick to the routine as much as you can you will give your child more security.



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