

# early years are learning years

## Understanding Behavior: A Key to Discipline

**T**eachers, parents, and caregivers all struggle with some behaviors and actions of the children in our care. Wouldn't it be nice to have a magic formula—a specific bit of advice or strategy to work in all situations? Of course there is no magic formula, but it helps to remember that children's behaviors do not occur in a vacuum. Instead, they are driven by five basic issues or possibilities that help explain a child's actions. Understanding these issues and being a *reflective* rather than *reactive* parent or caregiver will result in more positive outcomes for both the caregiver and the child, creating in the process an atmosphere that supports and nurtures the child.

### 1. Is this a developmental stage?

Many problems that occur in infancy and early childhood appear at the onset of a new developmental stage. Each new phase of development brings challenges for the child and the child's caregivers. For example, body independence in the child's second year and an emerging sense of an independent self elicit a period of negativism.

Feeding and sleeping problems also may occur during developmental transitions, and it helps if caregivers are extra patient and loving in their responses. It's best to give a child choices, use humor, and be firm but supportive. Parents will find this period good practice for the teenage years when many of the same issues of independence emerge again on a more complex scale.

### 2. Is this an individual or temperament difference?

Not all children of a certain age act the same way. These individual differences may be rooted in a variety of causes. Biological factors such as visual impairments, tactile sensitivities, auditory and speech disorders, or motor disabilities may affect a child's behavior.

Temperament qualities such as shyness, adaptability, moodiness, or inflexibility also may account for many of the differences in children's (and adults') behaviors. Adults who learn more about their own temperament traits are better able to recognize those situations that result from conflict of two different attitudes toward or approaches to the same behavioral problem.

### 3. Is the environment causing the behavior?

Sometimes the setting provokes a behavior that may seem inappropriate. An overcrowded child care setting or the lack of an appropriate number or types of toys can increase aggression or spark jealousy. Look around your home or program setting and evaluate it in light of your child's behaviors. We need to get down on our knees and see the environment from a child's viewpoint.

### 4. A child does not know something but is ready to learn

Clues to this situation include sensing that the child is in new or unfamiliar ter-

ritory or is facing a new task or problem. Perhaps this is the first time a two-year-old without siblings has been asked to share a toy or treasured object. Developmentally he does not truly understand the concept of sharing, so it is up to us as parent and teacher to calmly explain to the child how the other children will react. Patience and repeating the message over and over again are necessary. Children rarely learn or master a desired response on the first try.

### 5. Unmet emotional needs

Emotional needs that are unmet are the most difficult cause of behavior to interpret. In these situations, the child's behavior has a particularly driven quality about it and occurs with regular frequency in all settings.

The child who continually harms himself or other children should be stopped and may need an assessment by a trained professional. Careful observation, thoughtful reflection, and communication between parents and teachers who respond with quiet firmness and patience can be critical to the future emotional health of children with emotional needs.

If a child needs, for example, extra love and attention, we don't want to withhold that from her but rather find ways for validating and acknowledging the child during the school day, encouraging participation in circle activities, and acknowledging empathetic behavior toward others.

This release was adapted from an article by Judy Reinsberg entitled "Understanding Young Children's Behavior" that appeared in the July 1999 issue of *Young Children*. The author is an instructor at California's Diablo Valley College in Pleasant Hill and Solano Community College in Suisun City.