Family Engagement in Early Care and Education

Understanding Children’s Behavior as Communication
Overview

This module will focus on:

• Understanding that children’s behavior has meaning
• The importance of responsive relationships between parents and educators for children’s emotional well-being and development
• Effective ways to communicate with families about children’s behavior
• Partnering with families when adults find a child’s behavior to be challenging
By the end of this module, you should be able to:

OBJECTIVES

- Describe behaviors that children use to communicate and their possible meanings
- Explain the effect of responsive relationships on children’s well-being and development
- Identify effective elements in communicating with families about behavior
- Partner with families seeking help with behavior that they find challenging
Form small groups and read the scenarios about children.

In each case, think about the possible perspectives and feelings of the parent, educator, and child.
Understanding the Meaning of Children’s Behavior
Behavior as Communication

Young children communicate their needs and wants through cues or behavior.

Image credit: EarlyEdU
Influences on Behavior

Possible influences:
• Typical developmental stages
• Relationships with others
• Experiences and culture
• Individual differences, such as temperament and health issues
Observing Children’s Cues

How do infants, toddlers, and preschoolers communicate with you and families?

Form groups and brainstorm responses for each age group.
Ways That Infants Communicate

- Smile
- Cry
- Gaze
- Reach
- Wave arms
- Turn away
- Arch back, stiffen body
- Kick feet

Image credit: EarlyEdU
Ways That Toddlers Communicate

• Say words
• Use facial expressions
• Squeal
• Walk
• Run
• Climb
Ways That PreschoolersCommunicate

Preschool-age children typically are beginning to use language, but they also communicate with their bodies.

They may:
- Say words and sentences
- Smile
- Laugh
- Scream
- Kick
- Hit
- Cry
Expressing Emotions

Starting at birth, children quickly develop their abilities to experience and express their feelings as well as their ability to manage them.
What Could This Behavior Mean?

DISCUSSION

- A young infant arching her back
- A mobile infant pulling a peer’s hair
- A young toddler holding onto his mother’s leg
- A preschooler throwing a toy
Looking for Clues

• When you observe children’s behavior, look for clues that indicate what it means.

• Sometimes the behavior’s meaning is clear, such as when a child smiles at someone. Other times, you may need to guess.

• Over time, you can learn what a particular child’s communication means.
Talking About What Behavior Means

Conversations with parents about children’s behavior are important so that everyone:

• Knows what a child is doing in home and early learning environments, and with different adults

• Can discuss the meaning of behavior and best responses to support the child
Think about these questions while you watch this video:

• What is the child in the foreground doing?
• What do you think the behavior means? Why do you think that?
• How does the adult respond?
• What else could the adult have done?
VIDEO: The Tower
You may have noticed the child:

• Trying to put a block on another child’s tower
• Turning away and picking up a train when the other child pushes her hand away
• Helping to knock down the tower when it starts to fall
Understanding Your Child’s Behavior: Reading Your Child’s Cues from Birth to Age 2

Image credit: EarlyEdU
The Importance of Responsive Relationships
Describe a time when you noticed a parent’s warm response to his or her child’s behavior and shared that observation with the parent.

What else could you have added to this interaction or to future conversations with parents?
Strong Partnerships With Parents

Ongoing, positive relationships that you form with parents are important for close parent-child relationships.
Supporting Parents and Children

• Notice and describe parents’ positive and responsive interactions with their children.

• Listen for times when families need help in responding to children; and provide modeling, information, and resources to match the family’s needs.
Children grow and learn in the context of supportive and reliable relationships with parents and other caregivers.
Responsive care of young children requires paying attention to, accurately observing, and responding to their cues.
Responsive Interactions . . .

- Help children to feel safe and to trust that their needs will be met
- Build brain architecture and cognitive skills
- Help children learn to calm themselves
- Teach children that interacting with others can be positive
Reading Together

Watch the upcoming video and think about:

• What does this mother do to build a relationship with her child?

• How does she respond to the child’s communications?
The Tower

Watch this video

• What behavior catches your eye?
• What do you think CC is trying to communicate?

VIDEO: Reading Together
The mother:

- Responds to her child’s interest (which is shown by the child’s intense gaze, arms on the book, and waving) by describing with excitement what the child may see
- Matches the child’s tone and moves up and down when the infant waves her arms
Some ways that educators and parents can respond to the communications of infants and toddlers include:

• Matching children’s tone and facial expressions
• Commenting on children’s interests
• Helping children transition to a new activity
Responding to Preschoolers

Educators and parents can respond to children’s communications and encourage their language skills by:

• Expanding their words, or repeating what they say and adding more
• Asking open-ended questions
• Listening to what children say
Learning to Manage Emotions

When adults respond to children in a warm and supportive manner, children learn to understand, express, and regulate their emotions and behaviors.
Challenges for Adults

Helping children manage their emotions can be difficult for families and educators.
Responding to Our Own Feelings

DISCUSSION

• How do you respond when a child’s communication or behavior stirs up negative feelings for you?
• What else would you like to do?
• Find a partner and share.
Communicating About Behavior
Learning From Families

- What strategies do you use to learn from families about their children’s behavior?
- How do you demonstrate that you value and use the information they share?
- What kinds of information about behavior would be important to share?
Talking about and responding to children’s cues and behavior should be part of an ongoing relationship that you have with parents that includes:

- **Strengths-based attitudes**
- **Relationship-based practices**
Viewing Videos With Families

Video can be a useful tool for looking at children’s behaviors with families. You can:

• Highlight positive aspects of children’s behavior and the parent-child relationship
• Encourage families to guide the discussion and share what they see
• Remain strengths-based, and listen to family observations
• Acknowledge what families notice, and share feedback
• While you watch the story time in the video, think about positive observations you might share with a parent about De’Angelo.

• Consider including the child’s strengths, using specific, objective language and questions for the parent.
VIDEO: My White Shoes
Find a partner and act out a possible conversation between De’Angelo’s parent and the educator.

Using the reading activity as a focal point, include observations about De’Angelo’s strengths, using specific, objective language and questions for the parent.
Parents and educators may have different expectations about how children should behave based on their culture, knowledge, gender, and experiences.

These expectations can influence how parents and educators respond to and guide children’s behavior.
Cultural Perspectives

- Create a list of questions to ask families about their expectations for young children’s behavior and how they model and teach those.
- Reflect on your own answers to those questions.
- Compare lists with a partner, explaining why you chose the questions you did.
- Talk about how you would approach a situation where a family had expectations that were different from yours.
When Adults Find a Child’s Behavior to Be Challenging
Perspectives on Behavior
Adults Find Challenging

• What is your definition of behavior that is challenging?
• What makes behavior feel challenging?
Behaviors That Adults Find Challenging
Send Messages

• Children will use certain behaviors until they learn new ways to communicate what they want and need.

• To address and influence behavior that adults find challenging, adults need to understand what the behavior means.

• Gaining a better understanding of what the behavior means for the child can help the adult develop effective strategies that meet the child’s needs.
GLASS Poster
Communicating With Families

• An established positive relationship with families helps when you need to discuss child behaviors that adults may find challenging.

• Start with the family’s perspective.
As you watch the video on the next slide, think about what effective practices the educator uses that are strengths-based and that help to build the relationship with the parent.
VIDEO: Libby & Kim
Middle Ground Conversation
The educator:

• Starts by asking the parent a question about what she sees

• Shares a positive observation about the child

• Recalls a previous conversation

• Describes a challenge the child is having, and asks the parent if she is seeing this at home too
Seeking Help

When behaviors that adults find challenging persist, families and educators may need to reach out for help.
How Can You Help?

• Listen to families’ concerns and priorities for their children.

• Check in with families regularly about their progress toward goals, and help them follow through if needed.

• Get to know your community agencies.

• Connect families with professionals who can help them meet their goals.
Resources for Families

In the video on the next slide, listen to the recommendations of Dr. Kathleen Meeker in the College of Education at the University of Washington.
VIDEO: Resources for Families
The speaker recommends several possible resources for family members who have concerns about their children:

- Pediatricians
- Early childhood mental health providers
- Local school districts
Who Else Can Help?

A variety of professionals in Head Start can help when families and educators have concerns about their children’s behavior:

• Behavior specialists
• Mental health consultants
• Disability specialists
• Family services staff
Possible factors that influence family well-being and children’s behavior and development are:

• Poverty
• Unemployment
• High housing costs
• Food insecurity
• Community violence
• Poor health
• Stressful work environment
Think about a time when your family was facing a challenge.

- How did this challenge affect you and your family?
- How did you respond to the challenge?
- What helped you respond to and manage the challenge successfully?
Bringing It All Together
# The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework

## Positive & Goal-Oriented Relationships

- Equity, Inclusiveness, Culture and Linguistic Responsiveness

## Program Foundations

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## Program Impact Areas

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## Family Outcomes

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<td>Family Engagement in Transitions</td>
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<td>Family Connections to Peers and Community</td>
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<td>Families as Advocates and Leaders</td>
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## Child Outcomes

- Children are:
  - Safe
  - Healthy and well
  - Learning and developing
  - Engaged in positive relationships with family members, caregivers, and other children
  - Ready for school and
  - Successful in school and life
Where Does It Fit?

Which part of the Framework does this topic relate to?

• Form a small group and share ideas.
• Be ready to share your thoughts with the whole group.
• Families and educators can work together to understand and respond sensitively to children’s behavior.

• Positive relationships impact children’s well-being and behavior.

• Effective communication about child behavior is an important part of educator-parent conversations and efforts to address behaviors that adults find challenging.