

Behavior is a Child's Language

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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations:

- Infant/very young child development & behavior
- Infant/very young child & family-centered practice
- Family relationships & dynamics

Working With Others:

- Building and maintaining relationships
- Empathy and compassion

Reflection:

- Self-awareness
- Personal development

Direct Service Skills:

- Observation and listening
- Developmental guidance

A child's behavior is their language to let those around them know if they are happy or if they have any unmet needs. Helping parents see the behavior through an infant mental health lens may help them see what their child is trying to communicate through their behavior.

Infant Mental Health principles tell us that we need to also look at the context of behavior in family culture. In Attachment Vitamins, Annmarie C. Hulette, Ph.D. and Alicia Lieberman, Ph.D. state that:

Parents across cultures expect children to follow their rules. However, it is hard for young children to learn how to follow rules! Young children have difficulty controlling their impulses. Remember their need for exploration. It is difficult for them to contain their curiosity. Most two and three year olds are able to follow directions only half the time. All young children need patient repetition to learn rules. Children also tend to test boundaries. Using social referencing, they want to see how you will react and determine how much they can explore before they reach those limits.

The Attachment Vitamins online MOODLE training on the Center for Development and Disability (CDD) website discusses the importance of the parent-child relationship as well as temperament, developmental milestones, and the effects of toxic stressors and

trauma. It is important for us, as early childhood professionals, to understand how all of these affect the emotional wellbeing of the child. Also, parents need to be aware of how their own mental health can affect the mental health of their child. Last year Early Childhood Education and Care Department home visiting programs reported that 24.1% of mothers who were screened were at risk for postpartum depression. This is double the CDC's reporting of 1 in 8 (12.5%) women in the United States being affected by postpartum depression. When a mother's depression is not treated they may not be present and attuned to their child. This may lead to child behaviors that present themselves in order to express unmet needs.

Children are eager to please adults and seek their approval. Praise helps reinforce desired behaviors! Praise and positive attention can also prevent undesirable behavior. When the child is doing something you like, catch them in the act and praise it. For example, if the child is sharing toys, you can say, "I like how you are sharing so nicely." When they are playing nicely we have the tendency to leave them alone and not interrupt their play, but that is when they need your feedback and praise for appropriate behavior. This is how they learn your expectations. "I like how you are playing with your toys and taking care of them" or "I like the way you are sitting at the table and eating."

It is important to guide parents to use "do" statements instead of "don't" statements. Telling a child what they should be doing helps them know what the parent expects and keeps the conversation positive. Examples:

Don't/Stop Statements

- Don't throw the toys!
- Stop yelling!
- Don't run!

DO Statements instead

- Keep the toys on the table
- Use a quiet voice.
- Let's walk

Breaking down directions into smaller, more manageable parts and giving specific praise can also be helpful for a child to understand the parent's expectations. Example:

General Statement

- "Clean Up!"
- "Thanks"
- "Great Job"

Directions/Praise

- "Put all the toys back in that bin."
- "Thank you for putting those away."
- "You did a great job following my directions."

Despite their best efforts, children may not always want to do exactly what parents want them to do. They have their own opinions and thoughts about what they want to do, and this can lead to conflict. As children grow, adults can learn to negotiate their needs versus the child's needs and try to become a partner with the child. When you partner with the child, you can address both your needs and the child's needs and figure out a

solution that works best for everyone. For example, a parent may be tired after a long day but their child is full of energy. They realize that if they help their child run off all that extra energy, they will have a nicer evening. In this instance they make the effort to overcome their fatigue and take their child outside or to a playground. You can also guide parents to give themselves permission to let smaller things go, and instead focus on changing behaviors that are more important to them. Guide them to be open to their child's perspective. What's the story behind the child's protest? What are some possible reasons the child could be so upset? Help them to find a compromise. Remind them to acknowledge the child's emotions. This will let the child know that you at least understand what they are going through.

Also be aware of behavior in the context of family culture. Understanding the important behaviors for the family keeps us from making assumptions. Through reflective questions and observation a home visitor can learn these expectations of child behavior. Being aware as a home visitor that there may be behaviors that are in conflict with our behavioral expectations of children is an important part of cultural sensitivity. In certain situations we may need to ask ourselves if the parent's expectations are merely disagreeable to us or are they truly unacceptable. These can be great discussions to have with your supervisor during reflective supervision.

Resources from the field:

There are many strategies when working with families that have concerns about their child's behavior. One home visiting program in Hobbs shared how they ask families if there has been any changes in the home environment and/or changes in who is coming and going in the household if the family notices changes in their child's behavior. They ask about the tantrums, what they look like, and then wonder together what the child is trying to communicate. They discuss behavior as a way a child might show feelings of insecurity or having a world that feels like it is out of control. They discuss ideas from Circle of Security™ and try teaching parents what it is like to be with a child and support the child's angry feelings at the same time. They talk about rewards and positive reinforcement. If the family is still concerned they might talk about setting up an appointment with their Primary Care Doctor. Play therapy has been hard to access, but after trying these strategies they sometimes try to refer to a Play Therapist or to family therapy when appropriate.

As you can see, through conversations and thoughtful questions, you can have meaningful conversations with families about their child's behavior. You can help them identify situations that may be contributing to their behavior. Parents may ask "What are tantrums?" We can help parents think of them as expressions of distress, rather than expressions of defiance. Young children feel emotions intensely, and their executive function skills, which help them contain their strong feelings, are still developing. Depending on their age, a child may also lack the language skills to express how they feel. According to the Early Childhood Education and Care Department, home visiting programs reported that 9.9% of children screened scored in the "at risk" category on the Ages and Stages Questionnaire Social Emotional Version 2

screening tool. Administering and scoring this tool offers an opportunity for home visitors to discuss the family's expectations around behavior, developmentally appropriate expectations, and how a child's behavior is their language. The conversation can then lead to developing culturally appropriate strategies to address any concerns and support the social emotional needs of the child and parent.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- Think about families from diverse backgrounds that you have worked with. How might culture have influenced the behaviors they chose to foster in their children?
- How might you engage families in a discussion about cultural traditions and child-rearing practices?
- Consider your own cultural background. How does it influence the way you approach your work with families? How might you approach working with families from a different background?
- How have you changed the way you think about responding to difficult behaviors in children? How might you talk with parents about your approach?

References/Additional Resources

New Mexico Early Childhood Education and Care Department. *ECECD New Mexico Annual Home Visiting OUTCOMES Report Fiscal Year 2020* retrieved from:

https://www.nmececd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/2020ECECD_HomeVisitingOutcomesReport.pdf

Hulette, A.C. Hulette, Ph.D. and Leiberman, A. Ph.D. *Attachment Vitamins* retrieved from: <https://hscmoodle.health.unm.edu/login/index.php>

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