

# Responding to Behaviour

## What is behaviour?

Behaviour is neutral (i.e., it is NOT “good” or “bad”). Blinking, eating, screaming, walking, sharing, stomping, and drawing are all behaviours. They are all ways a child is communicating a message about their feelings, wants, or needs.

Behaviour is what a person does. You notice behaviour based on what you can see and hear rather than making assumptions about the intention of the person’s actions.

## Why do *challenging* behaviours happen?

Educators *perceive* behaviours as challenging. We all have a threshold for what we consider “good and/or normal” behaviour and what we consider “challenging” behaviour. Our thoughts and feelings about what we perceive as challenging behaviours can fluctuate throughout the day and/or week based on how we slept, what we are eating, our ability to regulate during stress, our confidence in our skills, etc.

When we feel that certain behaviours are challenging, it is important to remember that all behaviour is a form of communication. There is always a reason. And there can be many reasons for one specific behaviour.

## What is a child trying to communicate?

Children use behaviour to either **request** something (i.e., connection with an adult or peer, a toy, a nap, etc.) or to **avoid** something



(i.e., eating a new food, moving from one space to another, having to sit still at large group time, etc.).

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## WANT OR DON'T WANT

### CONNECTION

With an adult or other child

### A THING

Item, activity, or food

### SENSORY STIMULATION

a noise, feeling, taste, smell,  
or something visually interesting

- possessing the social and emotional skills to communicate those needs and feelings

## Responding to Challenging Behaviour:

- Recognize your own stress responses and get yourself calm
- Recognize the child's state and figure out what they are trying to communicate
- Reframe the behaviour (i.e., thinking about a child's challenging behaviour and replacing it with something positive)

By looking at the potential reason for the behaviour, you can start communicating about how to solve the problem and work to stop the challenging behaviour in the future.

## Behaviours are also a *response to stress*. Children might not be:

- having their individual needs met
- understanding the verbal or environmental cues

### What We See

A child who pushes, hits, or bites...



A child who interrupts a lot...



A child who appears to not want to play with other children...



A child who refuses to eat lunch...



A child who doesn't follow instructions...



A child who acts silly in line...



The child who cries during table tasks



### What It Might Be

... may be telling you that they have lost control of their emotions and needs help

... may be showing a need to connect with you

... may feel anxious in social settings

... may have trouble with certain textures of food

... may not understand all the steps

... may not be able to wait the time they are expected to wait

... may not have had a good sleep the night before

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“See a child differently, you see a different child”

- DR. STUART SHANKER

## Preventing challenging behaviour through connection

Adult’s time and attention is very important to children, so we need to be sure that we are giving them positive time and attention throughout the day rather than only engaging with them when they are displaying challenging behaviour. Positive attention builds connection and helps children to feel secure and valued.

Research shows that having 5 positive interactions for every 1 negative interaction best supports child-educator relationships. Positive interactions may be friendly conversations, playing with the child, giving specific, positive feedback, a high five, thumbs up, or a smile.

## Strategies for Building Positive Child-Educator Relationships:

- Young children’s positive interactions with educators strengthen all aspects of their development, including language, knowledge, and social-emotional skills.

- Having realistic expectations of what a child can and cannot do. They may lack the skill or motivation to meet our expectations (i.e., a child may not clean up because they don’t want to stop playing (*motivation*) or may grab toys from others because they don’t yet know how to ask for a turn (*skill*)).
- Recognizing when you may need to adjust your expectations because the demand may be too big in the moment (i.e., reduce the number of songs sang during circle time – the child or children may not be able to pay attention that long).
- Remembering that every child is unique. Try not to expect one child to be able to do something because other children in the room can. Look at that child as an individual and recognize what that specific child can do and how they need to be supported.
- Observing and determining what skills children need to learn and then teaching the new skills and new ways to respond.

## For more information on responding to challenging behaviour:

### The MEHRIT Centre

Dr. Stuart Shanker’s organization is dedicated to understanding how we all respond to stress in the same way—we thrive when it is positive, we struggle when it is excessive: <https://self-reg.ca/>

**Tips for responding to challenging behaviour in young children:** [https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/PEP\\_Tips-responding-challenging-behavior.pdf](https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/PEP_Tips-responding-challenging-behavior.pdf)