

## MY CHILD'S BEHAVIORS... WHAT CAUSES THEM AND WHAT CAN I DO?



By Debra Springer, BS

Watching your child develop his/her little personality is such an amazing experience! Is this personality what you had expected to see? Understanding your child's disposition is one way you can learn what causes his/her behaviors in certain situations. You can then learn how to "match" your parenting style to your child's specific strengths and needs.

By doing this, you may be able to anticipate behaviors before they occur and, therefore, implement strategies to help "prevent" a behavioral outburst as opposed to "react" to one. However, we all know that behaviors pop up...and sometimes at the most inconvenient times or when we least expect them. What can you do when this happens?

"Time to clean up your toys...we're going to grandma's house." "Let's put on your coat so we can go to the playground." Grandma's house and the playground sound fun, right? If so, why is my child resisting my direction to clean up or put on her coat?

It's important to first understand that behaviors are a form of communication. There may be two questions you ask yourself regarding your child's behavioral outburst or tantrum:

- 1) What is my child trying to communicate?
- 2) What is it that may have "triggered" my child's behavior?

In the first example of cleaning up the toys in preparation to go to grandma's house, is it possible that your child is trying to communicate that he wants to bring a certain toy to grandma's that you've asked him to clean up? If so, is bringing that toy a possibility? Understanding this and asking him if he would like to bring a toy with him may result in a more positive transition.

Looking at the second example of your child not cooperating with putting on her coat to go to the playground, is it possible that she preferred to wear another coat? Is the one she preferred to wear appropriate for the weather? If so, letting her choose which coat she would like to wear may help with eliminating the uncooperative behavior of getting dressed and ready to go outside.

Providing choices to your child is a great way to help teach problem-solving skills and independence. Another tactic that you may use to encourage cooperative behaviors may include "rewording" things. When you are making a request, instead of stating it in a way where a "yes" or "no" answer is possible from your child, "reword" it in a way that does not allow for this. For example, instead of saying "Are you ready for dinner?" say "It's time for dinner. Would you like your red or blue spoon?" With this tactic, you may find dinnertime to be more pleasant. You deserve a nice meal time too, mom and dad!

When you are trying to handle a challenging behavior, here are some other things you may want to think about:

- Avoid getting into a power struggle with your child. First of all, this is never a good feeling. Secondly, it is likely that the behavior will occur again. You want to remember that you are a role model for your child. If your child sees you reacting in a certain way, it is likely that your child will "mirror" this behavior. In these situations, it is good to

practice calm, patient behavior when redirecting your child.

- Sometimes, we may find ourselves addressing the negative behaviors more often than pointing out the positive ones. This is an easy trap to fall into. Work on acknowledging the positives. You may decide that you want to set up a reward chart where you can list the goals that you would like your child to work on. When you notice your child successfully accomplishing these goals, he/she is rewarded. By doing

this, your child will begin seeing that his/her positive behaviors receive attention and therefore may be less likely to display negative behaviors. Provide praise!

- Validate what your child may be feeling and provide suggestions on appropriate ways to manage these feelings in healthy ways that will not harm him/her or others. This will let your child know that it is ok to experience a range of feelings while also learning there are safe ways to express and manage them.

- Again, offering age-appropriate choices when possible helps to promote problem-solving skills, independence, and confidence!

Lastly, don't forget about you! It is important to also take care of yourself. Yes, time is something we all feel we need more of...where could we even think about fitting in time for ourselves? This may be a challenge, but doing something for YOU will help both you and your child. After all, aren't we instructed when flying to put the oxygen mask on ourselves first?

*Debra Springer is the Director of Penn Foundation's Family Autism Center. For over 20 years, she has worked with children and adolescents with mental and/or behavioral challenges and their families.*

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