



Why Are They Doing That?!

What children are telling us through their behaviors

Brenda S. Metzler

Just reading this title most likely brings to mind a scenario you have experienced with a child. It could have been while you waited in line at the grocery store or in the doctor's office. Maybe it was this morning as you were gathering children and lunches and backpacks to leave for work or getting someone into a car seat. It may have been around the dinner table last evening or when you announced bedtime. It happens in the classroom. Children act out.

Acting out takes on many forms—crying, clinging, screaming, being oppositional, stomping feet, slamming doors, whining, thrashing, arching back, running away, hurting others—and the list goes on. When children misbehave, act out, don't cooperate, melt down, tantrum—whatever form it takes—they are giving us a message. Part of our job as caretakers is to try to understand what is happening for them, what message they are sending, in order to best care for them.

There are some **basic reasons why children behave in these ways**. Knowing why a child may be acting in a certain way helps us know how to help them and to meet their needs. A child may be tired, hungry or sick. These are **physical conditions they can not control**. They need us to monitor and care for their physical well-being. It is our job to feed them a nutritious and balanced diet on a regular schedule. Give them adequate sleep with consistent bedtime, wake time and comforting routines. Notice when they're not feeling well. Be aware of symptoms. Keep them comfortable and hydrated. Give extra rest. Consult with your pediatrician as necessary.

Sometimes our expectations are unreasonable. It's useful to remember that children's brains are still developing. They are wired for impulse, so they will act impulsively. And children's brains are hungry to be engaged. Expecting children to sit around quietly for long periods of time is not a realistic expectation. Plan ahead for waiting times. Provide safe play options for everywhere. Allow for lots of physical activity at every age. Involve children in the everyday activities of family life. If their brains are not engaged, children will create their own incidents. Clear and consistent rules and predictable routines provide children with structure that they need. You can find helpful information on reasonable expectations at The Family Place, from your pediatrician and in your local library.

Acting out can also relieve the tension of powerful feelings. It may be a cry for help from feeling frustrated, misunderstood, anxious, disappointed, helpless or any of the whole realm of feelings that humans experience. Even young babies have powerful feelings that need to be acknowledged. Since everything is new to them, children need help identifying and managing their feelings. Listen to your children, give them words for their feelings, physically comfort them. Show them safe ways to regulate their feelings. Sometimes they just need to be heard.

Children are savvy detectors of our feelings, and often reflect them back to us. **The more stressed we are, the more likely they will act out.** So it is essential to take care of ourselves. Avoid burdening them with adult responsibility, and reassure them that things will be okay.

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It is helpful to remember that children's distress behaviors are genuine, and not just to annoy us. **It is a result of their immaturity**, and an opportunity to pay attention to what they are trying to communicate so that we can better care for them and ultimately teach them how to care for themselves and others. It can be a challenge to manage our own feelings when children are acting out. It takes practice to remain calm and rational. Be creative! Start by listening to discover what the child really needs so you know what your job will be. Strategize to prevent behaviors, offer choices, distract, communicate with your child and throw in a healthy dose of humor. Your child will be grateful that you are doing your best to meet his or her needs.

Fall Classes

Confident Parent / Confident Child: School-age Children

Tuesdays Oct 13, 20, 27 and Nov 3, 10, 17

6:00—8:00 pm

At The Family Place

Taught by Nancy Rosenblum with Brenda Metzler

Fee: \$50

Please call 802-649-3268 ext 125 to register.

No child care is provided.

Infant Massage

Saturdays Nov 7 and 14

10:00—11:30 am

At The Family Place

Taught by Sarah Canterbury

Free of charge

Please call 802-649-3268 ext 125 to register.

No child care is provided.

We'd LOVE to see you
at our *Seventh Annual*

Gingerbread Festival

A fundraising event to support The Family Place

Saturday

December 5th, 2009

10:00 am — 3:00 pm

Tracy Hall
Norwich, VT

\$10 for families
\$5 for individuals

