Overview of Topic

How do we read an infant or young child’s behavior to understand what they are trying to communicate or what they need? How do we use the language of the child’s behaviors to strengthen their relationships with important caregivers such as parents/foster parents/ grandparents or other guardians? The ability to appreciate the relevance and meaning of behavior is the aim of this topic. **The core message** is that “behavior” is a form of communication – particularly important when an infant or child is preverbal, has no language or has neither the developmental level or psychological capacities to “tell us” how they are doing and how “we are doing” with them.

Recommended Duration: 3 hours

**New Jersey Birth to Three Early Learning Standards**
Domain I: Social & Emotional Development
Components: Trust & Emotional Security
Self-Regulation
Relationships with Peers and Adults

**Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health Competency Guidelines**
Theoretical Foundations
Knowledge Areas: Infant/very young child development & behavior
Infant/very young child & family centered practice
Relationship-focused practice
Family relationships & dynamics
Cultural competence

**Learning Objectives**

1. To view behavior as a form of “communication” and to enhance the participant’s observational abilities to understand the nature of this “language”.
2. To increase observational skills that will assist in “reading” the child’s behaviors.
3. To use the language of behavior to highlight parent/child or caregiver/child relationship.
4. To be aware of ways to increase opportunities for shared attention and attunement.
5. To be able to identify the function of challenging behaviors.
Phil’s Story

Adapted from: Head Start Training Guide: Supporting Children with Challenging Behaviors: Relationships Are Key

Phil is a four-year-old child. His family has been displaced from their home since Superstorm Sandy. They are living with his maternal grandmother in a community far away from their home. Phil’s father now has a very long commute to his job which adds to the long hours he is away from home. Just before the storm, Phil’s mother gave birth to a baby girl.

For a few weeks following the storm, Phil’s parents drove him to his preschool in their home community. This became too much of a burden and so Phil started attending a new preschool closer to his grandmother’s house.

Phil is described as being “very active.” He likes to ride his tricycle, and he loves superheroes, especially Batman. Phil has been wearing his grandmother’s apron to school, which he calls his “Batman cape.” When he wears his cape, he runs around the classroom, knocking down everything in his path. He recently knocked down a girl and she had to get stitches.

It is not easy for the preschool staff to predict Phil’s behavior. He has scratched and bitten other children a number of times. Just last week, in the middle of story time, he pulled down his pants and urinated on the carpet. When asked why he did it, Phil said, “Batman told me to do it.”
Assumption 1

Phil can be really wild and unpredictable. He has a hard time following directions and transitions are hard for him. Sometimes he just cries and cries. I try to comfort him, but forget about touching him. Once I tried to hug him and he hit me. It’s pretty obvious that Phil needs to be seen by a specialist, there is nothing I can do for him. I’m not a psychologist or a social worker.

Assumption 2

Phil needs something to help him calm down or he won’t be able to learn or make friends. I wonder why his parents have not put him on Ritalin. Maybe if he took some, he wouldn’t be such a behavior problem. Ritalin was a miracle drug with my son. I don’t know why some parents don’t get their kids the help they need.

Assumption 3

Phil has a great imagination. Sometimes I listen to him as he is playing with his action figures. He always makes up these elaborate and detailed stories. Sometimes the action figures are the helpers and they help people get out of their houses before the “bad water” comes. Sometimes the action figures are bad guys who knock down people’s houses. I think Phil is really a scared little boy. I don’t think he feels safe at school or home. He must miss his home and friends.
Assumption 4

I don’t think Phil likes me. He always seems to act up when he is in the group I’m working with. I’ve watched him with the other teacher assistant, and he’s a different kid with her. When he’s with her, he is calm and he listens. He never hits the other kids or runs around wildly. For some reason, we just don’t click. I don’t have any problems with the other kids in this class. Maybe he should be moved to the other preschool class.

Assumption 5

I’ve noticed it’s hard for Phil to sit for a long time. Sometimes he can’t wait for his turn and he starts to get upset. I don’t think his behavior is so much different from some of the other children. Maybe he just needs time to settle in to our program. I wonder what he is thinking about when he acts up. He really loves his action figures and gets upset when we take them away. I’m not sure we should handle his behavior by taking away his favorite things. He already has been through so much. We need to figure out other ways to help him.
Key Temperament Traits

- Activity level-always moving or more relaxed?
- Rhythmicity-patterns of daily life, regular eating/sleeping?
- Approach/Withdraw-shy away from new people or things or a friend to everyone?
- Adaptability-how someone handles change or transition?
- Emotional Intensity-reacts strongly or mostly calm, easy going?
- Mood-even, steady mood or stormy, unpredictable?
- Attention Span/ Persistence-gives up easily or keeps trying?
- Distractibility-easily distracted or able to focus?
- Sensory-tolerant or bothered by noises, lights, textures?
Language of Interaction (Summarized from Michael Trout, 1987)

Three Dimensions to Consider

1. Tactile-Kinesthetic Interactions
2. Visual Interactions
3. Vocal/Verbal Interactions

Illustrations of Some Questions we Might Consider:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tactile-Kinesthetic Interactions</th>
<th>Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o How much touching?</td>
<td>o “Fit” when held?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o The kind of touching.</td>
<td>o Stiffen or withdraw when picked up or held?</td>
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<tr>
<td>o How does parent position the baby?</td>
<td>o Seeking physical proximity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Synchrony in parent and baby’s movement?</td>
<td>o Cuddly?</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Parent’s approach to baby.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual Interactions</th>
<th>Child:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>o Routine “visual check” on baby?</td>
<td>o Baby engages in “visual checking”?</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Initiate mutual gaze?</td>
<td>o Synchrony in eye to eye contact?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Respond with return gaze?</td>
<td>o Satisfaction (smile, stress reduction) in visual check or mutual gaze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Avert Gaze?</td>
<td>o Avert Gaze (in response to what)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Context of gaze responses? (Affection, anger, etc,)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o Qualitative nature of parent’s looking? Position of looking? (Sideways, full eye contact, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Vocal/Verbal Interactions</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parent:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Child:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Content of Parent’s words (references, allusions, memories, attribution, perspective)?</td>
<td>- How much does the baby cry?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How much vocalizing occurs</td>
<td>- Nature of baby’s crying (pitch, intensity, persistence)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Quality of vocalizing</td>
<td>- Change in response to parent?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How much other vocalizing occurs?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Quality of baby’s vocalizing?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- After language: What sort of adult phrases does the baby repeat; language/communication to express needs, in play, to persons?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Questions for Reflection - Challenging Behaviors in Young Children

- How long does the behavior last?
- How long has the behavior been occurring?
- How does the behavior compare with other children the same age?
- Is it happening at home?
- How troublesome is the behavior?
- What do others see/think? (Can someone else help me think differently about this child/behavior?)
- Is this a developmental stage?
- Is this an individual or temperament difference?
- Is the environment causing the behavior?
- Is the child ready to learn the skill?
- Is this an unmet need?
- Do I really need to do something? Should this behavior get attention or be ignored?
The Language of Behavior

Part of a series funded by:
The New Jersey Department of Children and Families

Workshop 1: In the Beginning – What Happens Early Matters
Workshop 2: Infant & Early Childhood Development
Workshop 3: The Language of Behavior
Workshop 4: Encountering Early Stress and the Power of Meaningful Connections
Workshop 5: Relationship-based Practices
Workshop 6: Me, My Family, My Community
Workshop 7: Reflective Practices: Caring for Ourselves
Behavior and Emotions in children

- Are forms of communication.
- Are “observable” expressions of “unobservable” processes: biological, psychological and social influences.
- Must be viewed through the “eyes of the child”.

Core Message

Infants, children and families often cannot “tell us” what is bothering them or “where it hurts” in term of emotions, relationships and experiences.

INSTEAD- they communicate to us in “alternate ways”. One significant “language” is behavior.
This workshop helps us to “wonder” about the possible “messages” being sent......

Challenging Behaviors

- Behaviors which disrupt social exchanges, including learning
- Inflict harm on others or destruction of property
- Typical limit-setting strategies often ineffective
Challenging Behaviors

- Are not understood as normal responses
- May be related to neurological, sensory and regulatory problems
- May be related to real life events that challenge trust, security and control.

Or

*Any behavior that adults don’t like and want to stop!*

Each child’s story is different and we must be like *detectives in seeking answers and solutions!*
Group Activity- Top Ten List

- Work together to make a Top Ten List of challenging behaviors you see in young children.
- Put a star next to the “TOP THREE”
- VOTE WITH YOUR FEET for the “MOST” challenging behavior

Video-What’s Going On?

Temperament

- The individual way we interact or respond to the world.
- We are born with a specific temperament and it stays with us during our lifetime.
- It is not something a child chooses or a parent can change.
- Temperament is influenced by experiences.
Temperament

- Temperament shapes a child’s behavior, development, and relationships.

- **Personality** is a combination of temperament and experiences.

- Parents can help by understanding the features of their own & their child’s temperaments. We can help children learn to adapt to situations.

Key Temperament Traits

- **Activity level**- always moving or more relaxed?

- **Rhythmicity**- patterns of daily life, regular eating/sleeping?

- **Approach/Withdraw**- shy away from new people or things or a friend to everyone?

- **Adaptability**- how someone handles change or transition?

- **Emotional Intensity**- reacts strongly or mostly calm, easy going?

- **Mood**- even, steady mood or stormy, unpredictable?

- **Attention Span/Persistence**- gives up easily or keeps trying?

- **Distractibility**- easily distracted or able to focus?

- **Sensory**- tolerant or bothered by noises, lights, textures?
Caregiver/Child Match/Mismatch

- What is your temperament type? What about the child’s?

- Think about areas where you might not “fit”. As the adult, you should be flexible and try to adapt to the child’s needs.

- Think about the matches/mismatches you might have with a child. What can you do to help yourself and the child?

4 Categories of Temperament

- Easy babies
  - happy & cheerful
  - regular sleeping & eating patterns

- Slow-to-warm-up babies
  - withdrawn & moody
  - take longer to adapt to new situations

- Difficult babies
  - fussy
  - fearful of new situations

- No-single category babies
  - show variety of traits

Easy, Flexible

- Usually calm, happy, regular in sleeping, eating.

- Not easily upset, “goes with the flow”

- Not demanding so sometimes parents need to talk with them about their emotions, hurts, frustrations.

- Parents need to find out what they are thinking.
Difficult, Active, Feisty

- More fussy, may not be regular in eating, sleeping patterns.
- More fearful, hesitant of new people, situations.
- More intense in their reactions. May be upset by noises, changes in routine, surprises. May need more physical activity to work off frustrations.
- Parents need to prepare them for changes and help them manage and deal with strong emotions.
Slow to Warm Up, Cautious

- May be fussy, withdraw from new people, situations.
- Slower to try new things, does better with routines.
- Parents can help by giving them time to warm up to new things, planning for extra time, modeling curiosity, supporting their need to take it slow, don’t rush them.
- Over time and with understanding, reactions gradually become more positive.

Some Things to Think About

- It is normal to prefer some of your child’s temperament traits over others.
- Your child’s behavior may “stir up” things you don’t like about yourself or you wish you were different.
- The ways your child is different from you may feel uncomfortable (you are shy, your child is outgoing).
- Remember the goal is not to change your child’s temperament, but to support and help them make the most of their unique styles.
Temperament Take Home Message

To understand the language of behavior we must first acknowledge and understand:

- The child’s temperament
- Our temperament
- Developmental perspective/expectations

What might this baby be communicating?
Informal Methods of Assessment
Alternate Means of Communication

“How you can observe a lot by watching.”
-Yogi Berra

Group Activity

How about these “moments”? 

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The Language of Interaction
Three Dimensions to Consider

- Tactile-Kinesthetic Interactions
- Visual Interactions
- Vocal/Verbal Interactions

Tactile-Kinesthetic Interactions:

Parent:
- How much touching?
- The kind of touching
- How does parent position the baby
- Synchrony in parent and baby's movement
- Parent approach to baby

Child:
- "Fit" when held
- Stiffen or withdraw when picked up or held
- Seeking physical proximity
- Cuddly

VISUAL INTERACTIONS

Parent:
- Routine “visual check” on baby
- Initiate mutual gaze
- Avert Gaze
- Qualitative nature of parent’s looking

Child:
- Baby engage in “visual checking”
- Synchrony in eye to eye contact
- Satisfaction (smile, stress reduction) in visual check or mutual gaze
- Avert Gaze (in response to what)
Vocal Interactions

Parent:
- Content of Parent’s words
- How much vocalizing occurs
- Quality of vocalizing

Child:
- How much does the baby cry or vocalize?
- Nature of baby’s crying or vocalizing (pitch, intensity)
- Quality of baby’s vocalizing
Infant Observation
Aspects of Infant-Caregiver relationship to wonder about:

- Content, theme or “purpose” of interaction
- Responsiveness/availability
- Level of Attunement
- Extent of infant initiated interactions
- Extent of parent initiated interactions
- “Serve & Return”
- Quality/Range of Affect
- Range of Modalities involved (e.g. visual, vocal, touch, movement, etc.)
- Response to distress
- Overall affective quality

Observation as Inquiry

- Observation of Child:
  - State – Affect Relatedness/Development
- Observation of Caregiver:
  - State – Affect – Reading/Responding to Cues/Signals
- Nature of Interaction:
  - “Fit”, Visual, Touch/Movement, Vocal/Verbal

OBSERVATION ACTIVITY
1. What are the child’s behavior and affect attempting to communicate?

2. What factors in the child’s biology (sensory, regulatory, constitutions, state), psychology (history, experiences, developmental level), and social experiences (environment, family, culture) can we address to enhance the child’s communication?

Organizing Principles: Thinking about Behavior

• All behavior is meaningful and occurs within a context. Not all meaning is inherently clear.
Organizing Principle

Purposeful, organized and shared behavior requires the integration and cooperation of biological, psychological and social factors.

Organizing Principle

Misbehavior is not always misbehavior

Organizing Principle

Behavioral and affect regulation are enhanced through primary caring relationships

Organizing Principle
The Language of Behavior - Dealing with Challenging Behaviors

Two Approaches to Understanding and Treating Behavioral Problems

Front-end
- Historical
- Antecedent
- Developmental
- Process-oriented
- Search for meaning and function
- Goal: social cooperation

Back-End
- Current
- Consequence
- Behavioral
- Product-oriented
- Meaning and function not relevant
- Goal: social compliance

Underlying Assumptions About Challenging Behaviors

- Problem behavior is the result of unmet needs.
- Problem behavior is a way to communicate.
- All behavior has meaning not all meaning is always clear. “Misbehavior is not always misbehavior”
Function of Challenging Behaviors

Positive: “I get what I want or need” ……..
- Obtain Objects
- Obtain Activities
- Obtain Attention
- Obtain Sensory input

Function of Challenging Behaviors

Negative: “I push away or get rid of things/people” ……..
Avoid/Escape:
- Objects
- Activities
- Attention
- Sensory Input

Adapted from: DEC booklet: Practical Ideas for Addressing Challenging Behaviors

Reframing Thoughts About Behavior

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem Behavior</th>
<th>Reframed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He whines from the moment he gets here until the time he gets on the bus to go home.</td>
<td>He really misses his family. We need to help him build relationships in school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She always knocks over what the other children have built with the blocks.</td>
<td>She may want to play with them but not know how to ask.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From: http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/
Group Activity

- Pick a challenging behavior.
- What are some assumptions adults might make about a child based on this behavior?
- What are some new ways to think about this behavior or child?
- **Don’t come up with solutions, reframe** the behavior to help it seem more manageable.

Talk Among Yourselves

Discuss your response to the following statements.

What does it mean in terms of challenging behaviors and managing them?

Will having this as a guiding principle be helpful to you? How?

- Children who **seek attention** are children who need attention. The behavior may be ignored but not the need.
I realize that at times I am part of the problem—My personal reaction to the child keeps me from perceiving the child’s true needs.

“He does it on purpose.......”
“She knows better.......”
“Why is he doing this to ME?

“Every child needs one person who is crazy about him.”

Uri Brofenbrenner
• When you want something to change, you must change something.

• To recognize and meet the needs of young children, you must recognize and meet the needs within yourself.

Activity

PHIL’S STORY

Adapted from: Head Start Training Guide:
Supporting Children with Challenging Behaviors:
Relationships Are Key
Phil’s Story-Assumption 1

Phil can be really wild & unpredictable. He has a hard time following directions and transitions are hard for him. Sometimes he just cries and cries. I try to comfort him, but forget about touching him. Once I tried to hug him and he hit me. It’s pretty obvious that Phil needs to be seen by a specialist, there is nothing we can do for him. I’m not a psychologist or a social worker......

Phil’s Story-Assumption 2

Phil needs something to help him calm down or he won’t be able to learn or make friends. I wonder why his parents have not put him on Ritalin. Maybe if he took some, he wouldn’t be such a behavior problem. Ritalin was a miracle drug with my son. I don’t know why some parent don’t get their kids the help they need..........

Phil’s Story-Assumption 3

Phil has a great imagination. Sometimes I listen to him as he is playing with his action figures. He always makes up these elaborate and detailed stories. Sometimes the action figures are the helpers and they help people get out of their house before the “bad water” comes. Sometimes the action figures are bad guys who knock down people’s houses. I think Phil is really a scared little boy. I don’t think he feels safe at school or home. He must miss his home and friends.
Phil’s Story-Assumption 4

I don’t think Phil likes me. He always seems to act up when he is in the group I’m working with. I’ve watched him with the other teacher assistant, and he’s a different kid with her. When he’s with her, he is calm and he listens. He never hits the other kids or runs around wildly. For some reason, we just don’t click. I don’t have any problems with the other kids in this class. Maybe he should be moved to the other preschool class………

Phil’s Story-Assumption 5

I’ve noticed it’s hard for Phil to sit for a long time. Sometimes he can’t wait for his turn and he starts to get upset. I don’t think his behavior is so much different from some of the other children. Maybe he just needs time to settle in to our program. I wonder what he is thinking about when he acts up. He really loves his action figures and gets upset when we take them away. I’m not sure we should handle his behavior by taking away his favorite things. He already has been through so much. We need to figure out other ways to help him.

Questions to Ask?

- How long does the behavior last?
- How long has the behavior been occurring?
- How does the behavior compare with other children the same age?
- Is it happening at home?
- How troublesome is the behavior?
- What do others see/think? (team approach)
Questions to Ask

- Is this a developmental stage?
- Is this an individual or temperament difference?
- Is the environment causing the behavior?
- Is the child ready to learn the skill?
- Is this an unmet need?