

## The Meaning of Behavior

The familiar Native American proverb says, “Don’t criticize someone until you’ve walked a mile in his (or her) shoes.” When a child is misbehaving, in major or minor ways, it’s easy to either take it personally or imagine that the child deliberately wants to be annoying or disruptive.

Instead, if we follow the proverb, we try to understand why he or she is behaving in a certain way. If we put ourselves in the child’s shoes and see things from his or her point of view, we are better able to help the child change the difficult behavior.

### What does behavior mean?

In general, behavior is a form of communication that something is not right:

- The child’s needs are not being met in some way (the child is hungry, tired, bored, frustrated).
- The child doesn’t know how to tell adults how he or she is feeling so he or she acts out.
- The child feels out of control.



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- The child feels ignored; perhaps he or she has tried to communicate needs to an adult but no one has paid attention so problem behavior is a way of sending a message.

### What to do

- Be proactive rather than reactive; try to prevent problem behavior before it happens.

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- Consider what triggers the problem behavior (e.g., what happened just before the child started kicking; what may be happening at home that is upsetting the child?) Determine the effect of the behavior (e.g., does the behavior get the child what he or she wants?).
- Help the child find positive, socially acceptable ways to communicate their needs to others.
- Pennsylvania supports Positive Behavior Support in early care and learning facilities. This is a process for understanding the purpose of challenging behavior and can be used successfully to address a wide range of behaviors.

Visit [www.papbs.org](http://www.papbs.org) for more information, or contact your local Early Learning Resource Center.

## R E S O U R C E S

*What are children trying to tell us: Assessing the function of their behavior*, Center for the Emotional and Social Foundations of Early Learning, [csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/handout9.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/briefs/handout9.pdf)

*Determining the Meaning of Challenging Behavior, Positive Beginnings: Supporting Young Children with Challenging Behavior*, Florida State University, [pbs.fsu.edu/altSite/module2.html](http://pbs.fsu.edu/altSite/module2.html)

Pennsylvania Positive Behavior Support, [www.papbs.org](http://www.papbs.org)

Programs and families can contact the program leadership directly at [PAIECMH@pakeys.org](mailto:PAIECMH@pakeys.org) with questions or concerns.

