



What to do When...

Helping a Child to Express their Wants and Needs

(“What to do When...” provides short term advice for teachers when they are confronted by common challenging situations. Refer to the Additional Resources to learn more about preventing and managing children’s challenging behavior.)

When a young child uses inappropriate behavior to communicate what (s)he wants or needs, such as whining or hitting other children:

1. Ignore the whining or similar vocalizations so as not to reinforce the unwanted behavior, while at the same time preparing to offer an alternative means for the child to communicate. If the child has attacked another child, check that the “victim” is safe, and encourage him to express how (s)he feels to the child who attacked; calmly but firmly tell the child of concern “ Hands are for holding (or other positive function), not hitting. We use our hands for helping (or caring for), not hurting other people.”
2. If the child has used appropriate gestures, such as sign language or pointing, eye gaze because of his or her limited words or speech, accept this as a positive attempt, and respond positively in return by saying the word(s) back to the child.
3. Try to read the child’s body language to anticipate other wants or needs that (s)he might express during the day.
4. Provide the child with choices – objects, activities, or photographs from which the child can choose. Limit the number of choices to two, and be prepared to accept either choice.
5. Help children grow their language and its use, by being prepared with cues associated with needs and wants. Carry or post picture schedules; label tasks, activities, people and objects.
6. Talk with children in short phrases (according to the child’s level of understanding), rather than lengthy sentences, and break directions into short segments.
7. Encourage and praise effort that the child makes to communicate positively, saying the word(s) that the child tries to express (such as “banana” or “play outside”).
8. Repeat the correct words for needs and wants in different settings throughout the day to help the child learn to use their vocabulary appropriately (for example, “Want more juice”, “Need more music”).

Additional Resources available online at www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel

What Works Briefs: Summaries of Effective Practices for Supporting Children's Social-Emotional Development and Preventing Challenging Behaviors. The Briefs describe practical strategies, provide references to more information about the practice, and include a one-page handout that highlights the major points of the Brief.

Brief 2

Understanding the Impact of Language Differences on Classroom Behavior by R. M. Santos, M. M. Ostrosky

Brief 9

What are Children Trying to Tell Us?: Assessing the Function of Their Behavior by L. Fox, M. Duda

Brief 11

Using Functional Communication Training to Replace Challenging Behavior by G. Dunlap, M. Duda

Brief 15

Using Choice and Preference to Promote Improved Behavior by G. Dunlap, D. Liso

Brief 19

Helping Children Express Their Wants and Needs by M. M. Ostrosky, M. L. Hemmeter, J. Murry, and G. Cheatham

What Works Training Kits: Based on the What Works Briefs topics, short training packages are available that include PowerPoint slides with accompanying note pages, activities, and handouts, which provide a trainer with the materials needed to conduct a short staff development program on a focused topic.

Training Kit 2

Understanding the Impact of Language Differences on Classroom Behavior by R. M. Santos, M. M. Ostrosky

Training Kit 9

What are Children Trying to Tell Us?: Assessing the Function of Their Behavior by L. Fox, M. Duda

Training Kit 11

Using Functional Communication Training to Replace Challenging Behavior by G. Dunlap, M. Duda

Training Kit 15

Using Choice and Preference to Promote Improved Behavior by G. Dunlap, D. Liso

Local Resources to contact online: Region A Partnership for Children at www.regionakids.org, for a list of resources to promote social emotional competence and prevent challenging behavior in your county and in Region A.

