

Behavior Is Communication

A Resource for Child Welfare Support Staff

If the young people you work with or support are sometimes exhibiting challenging, disruptive, or confusing behavior, it's important to remember that behavior is communication.

Through their bodies' temperament, children can tell us their needs, fears and even when they may be experiencing or have experienced trauma. We created this resource guide to better connect you with the young people you work with.

As you support the children and youth you serve, here are some strategies to recognize what their behavior is saying:

Behavior You Might See	What the Behavior Might Mean
Increased withdrawal, sadness or nervousness.	I am worried about my safety and the safety of my peers.
Breaking, damaging or throwing objects.	I am frustrated and would like attention and support.
Irritability with friends, teachers or activities.	I am uncomfortable and need additional support to connect to authority, peers and activities.
Angry outbursts and/or aggression, tantrums and disruption.	I feel a lack of control and trust. <i>Note: Anger is a common trauma response.</i>
Increased negative physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, stomachaches, trouble sleeping).	I feel emotions such as stress, fear and overwhelm.
Increase in risk-taking behaviors and activities.	I am seeking coping mechanisms to help me heal and process my emotions and experiences.

Remember:

- Anger is a common trauma response.
- Behavior is neither good nor bad. It's an insight into what emotions children are feeling.

- Our first instinct may be to punish and stop what we see as challenging behavior.
- The best solution is to see the behavior as an opportunity for conversation.

Creating a Trauma-Informed Environment

1. Provide a Safe Space:

- Have a designated physical space where youth can go to release feelings of stress.
- Include activities that support emotional regulation, such as arts and crafts, journaling, and wellness.

2. Build Awareness:

- Use resources around your space that allow youth to raise awareness of emotions in a nonjudgmental and empowering way.
- This might include a feelings wheel or colors that represent emotional states.

3. Encourage Open Communication:

- Incorporate conversations about emotions, including your own, into daily routines and encounters with youth.
- Allowing youth to express their emotions consistently and openly can support better behavioral regulation over time.

Key Takeaway:

Following these tips and starting your discussions with, "Can you tell me what might have happened to you?" instead of, "Why are you behaving this way?" is essential to healing and resiliency for youth experiencing trauma.

Additional Resources and Support:

- Child Welfare Information Gateway: www.childwelfare.gov/

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN): www.ptsd.va.gov/
- NAMI: www.nami.org