



Responding to Challenging Behaviors

All children, at one time or another, exhibit challenging behaviors: aggressive, anti-social, and/or disruptive actions. Children use challenging behaviors, such as “tantrums” to send a message: *I am bored; I am sad; you hurt my feelings; I need some attention; I want to play too.* These behaviors are developmentally appropriate early in life, and children may continue to use them, occasionally, into the preschool years – especially, when they’re very angry or having a bad day. Some children may use these types of behaviors when they experience very difficult situations, such as when parents separate or divorce, a new baby arrives, or the family moves. Try these tips for dealing with challenging behaviors and help your child learn to behave appropriately.

INFANT:

- Respond to your infant’s needs quickly. If she is crying, she might be hungry, need her diaper changed, or just need some one-on-one time with you. If your baby cries for extended periods of time or is extremely fussy, talk with your pediatrician; it might be a sign of a health issue.

TODDLER:

- Stay calm. Don’t yell or spank. Your child may be using this behavior to get your attention.
- Set up consequences for inappropriate behavior and be consistent. If you tell your child that she will not be able to go to the park if she hits people, remember to cancel your park plans if she hits.
- Teach your child things that he can do, not what he can’t do. For example, say: “I see that you are upset. However, it is not okay to throw your toys. Why don’t you tell me how you feel or go to your room and stomp your feet, instead of throwing things.”

PRESCHOOLERS:

- Read the book *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst. Talk with your child about what she does when she has a terrible day.
- Mirror your child’s strong emotions. For example, in a forceful voice, say: “You are telling me that you want to go to the party RIGHT NOW!”
- Talk with your child about his behavior when he is calm and not misbehaving. Talk about why his behavior was not appropriate.

Book Suggestions

No Biting! Karen Katz. Grosset & Dunlap, 2002.

Sometimes I’m Boombaloo. Rachel Vail. Scholastic, Inc., 2002.