



MANAGING MELTDOWNS: HOW YOU CAN ADDRESS YOUR CHILD'S CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR AND KEEP YOUR COOL

It's a rare parent who doesn't have to deal with a child's temper tantrum, meltdown, or other challenging behavior at some point. Why do young children act up, and what triggers the behavior? This article will help to answer those questions and assist you in developing a plan that can improve your child's behavior.

The first thing to realize is that all behavior has a purpose: communication. Children who don't have an appropriate way to express ideas and feelings may cry, hit, or pout to let you know they *need* something, such as food; *want* something, such as a favorite toy; or *want to avoid* something, such as going to bed. Children may act up for other reasons as well. They may have limited social skills, may have learned that misbehaving is more effective than language, may be physically uncomfortable, may not know what's expected of them, or may be faced with unreasonable expectations.

The situations may be different, but one theme unites them: Children engage in challenging behavior because it works for them.

The first step in helping children improve their behavior is to determine what they are trying to communicate and when the behavior is most likely to occur. Keeping a record of when and where the behavior happens can help

you identify patterns. Be sure to note what was happening just prior to the behavior, what you observed, and what happened afterward. Is there a certain time of day or a particular activity that seems to be more difficult for your child?



Once you have determined the purpose of the behavior, you can create a plan to change it. This behavior plan should have three parts: prevention, education, and consistency.

Prevention: Try these strategies to help increase desired behaviors and decrease unwanted ones.

- Consistently praise and encourage children when they are acting properly. Being specific in your praise helps children learn what you want them to do. For example, rather than telling your son he's a good boy when he shares his toys, say, "Great sharing! I like it when you share your toys with your brother."
- Express clear, realistic expectations to your child. For example, if your daughter is not able to pick up all her toys by herself but could help you with the task, you might express that realistic expectation by saying, "I'll pick up 10 toys and you'll pick up 10 toys." After the toys are picked up, praise your child for her cooperation.

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- Set a few clear household rules. Be sure to state the rules in a positive manner, explaining what you want your child to do, not what you don't want. For instance, you might say, "use gentle touch" rather than "no hitting." Review the rules daily and make sure your child understands what is expected. If you also have consequences for breaking the rules, make them clear and be sure to give them consistently.

Education: Teach your child new skills for communicating and participating in routines or expectations.

- Teach your child the language to use in order to meet his or her needs. For example, if your son tries to grab a toy from another child, teach him how to obtain that toy in an appropriate manner. You might say, "Zach, please ask Jenny to give you the blocks when she is finished playing with them. Now say thank you." If your daughter whines when she wants a drink of juice, you could say, "Sally, say 'juice please.'" (For a nonverbal child, teach the sign or picture to use.) Once you have given her the words and she has the ability to use them, tell her you will expect her to use her words to ask for juice next time and ignore the whining. Give Sally the juice only when she uses her words or signs.
- Children also need to learn and practice problem-solving skills. If your son throws his plate to indicate that he wants to be done with a meal, teach him the words or sign language for "all done." Give him several opportunities to practice, and then be sure that he can no longer escape mealtime by throwing his plate. Remember to praise your child when he uses his words or signs to let you know he's finished with a meal.

Consistency: Be consistent in making sure your child's challenging behaviors are no longer effective.

- Respond to your child's unacceptable actions with consequences that are practical and logically related to the behavior. For example, if your daughter is using a toy in an inappropriate way, calmly remind her how it is to be used and make it clear that if she persists, the toy will be put away. If she continues using the toy inappropriately, calmly remove the toy. Your child will learn that you expect her to play with toys in an appropriate manner. Logical consequences teach children that they have control over their own behavior.

By understanding why children have challenging behaviors, you can plan effective responses. Prevention strategies, new skills, and proper reinforcement of desired behaviors can all help. As you develop your behavior plan, make sure that it will fit with your family and that you are committed to the work and energy it will take to follow through.

To provide your child with consistency, you also may find it valuable to involve child-care providers, preschool teachers, extended family members, or other people who care for your child in a plan to address challenging behaviors. If your child has an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP), you can ask the team members how to create and follow through on a behavior plan.

Children engage in challenging behavior because it works for them.

Change won't happen overnight, but as children learn that challenging behaviors no longer work for them, they will begin to use the new skills you have taught them. As you lay the foundation for helping them learn new ways to interact and behave, the quality of their relationships will improve and your time with your child will become less stressful and more enjoyable.

For additional information and resources on family-centered positive behavioral supports, visit:

PACER Center
PACER.org

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI)
challengingbehavior.org/communities/families.htm

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundation for Early Learning
vanderbilt.edu/csefel

University of Minnesota-Center for Early Education and Development (CEED)
cehd.umn.edu/ceed/

University of Minnesota-Positive Behavioral Supports Resources and References
cehd.umn.edu/ceed/events/SummerInstitute/2008PBSResources/

Won't or Can't: Why Don't Children Behave?

There are two ways to look at challenging behavior. One is to conclude that the child *won't* behave. In that case, the first response may be to punish. Punishment, however, seldom teaches a new skill or behavior. The other view is that the child *can't* behave. In that case, the response is to teach the child the skills that would help meet his or her needs in a more appropriate manner.

SIBLINGS FOREVER

Any parent will tell you, raising a child isn't easy—and raising more than one is additionally complex. If one of the children also has a disability, it can create a unique set of challenges for parents and siblings alike.

Two PACER staff members—Sean Roy and Kim Kang—share their different perspectives on what impact a child with a disability can have on a family. Sean is project director for transition and workforce development and grew up with a brother on the autism spectrum. Kim is PACER's public policy director and early childhood coordinator and the mother of two teens, one with traumatic brain injury.



PACER's Sean Roy and his brother, Andrew

A Brother's View

Sean was 8 when his brother, Andrew, was born. Everything seemed fine at first, but within a year the family became concerned that Andrew wasn't progressing and meeting milestones. When he was 2, he was assessed and diagnosed with autism. "Andrew wasn't talking, and he was really acting out," Sean says, recalling those early days. "His behaviors became challenging at times. He would strip all the new wallpaper off his bedroom wall, for example, and it was hard to take him out in public. He would have tantrums, especially if he didn't want to leave somewhere."

It was 1981 in a small Minnesota town. Schools weren't well equipped to address the needs of children with autism or their families. "The school in our town didn't have a program for Andrew, so the district paid to transport him 40 miles each way," Sean says, noting that Andrew began receiving early intervention services when he was 3.

While the family had to make adjustments, "there certainly wasn't a big hubbub about Andy," Sean recalls. "We did what we had to do. He was just my brother. He didn't draw attention away from me. I was aware that he had a disability, but our whole life did not revolve around it.

"I'd play sports and have one parent there and the other home with Andrew—but I didn't care. My childhood wasn't defined by him. He was very much a part of it. I didn't feel like an only child. We always had brotherly experiences. I taught him how to ride a bike, play video games, and swing a bat."

Being in a small town was, in some ways, an advantage. People were accepting of differences. "There were never any instances where he was a barrier or an embarrassment," Sean says. "I don't think that's as atypical as people may think. A lot of it has to do with how the family reacts to the disability. It was just, 'okay, this is what we have to do, let's move on.'"

For Sean, the experience was positive. "I think it probably gave me an increased level of responsibility in the family," he says, adding, "having a sibling with a disability is character building. You learn humility and acceptance, and you learn to view people in an inclusive way. That's an experience that shouldn't be ignored."

In Sean's case, it became an impetus to a career path. "It gave me a perspective into people with disabilities and the systems that are in place to support them in the community. I see what I do at PACER as a way to blend a life expertise and a desire to be in a helping profession.

"It's important – the point I made about never feeling shortchanged," he adds. "Andrew has grown up to be a very well-spoken and fun young man and a fantastic uncle to my children. He plays golf and intramural sports. It's been amazing to watch him blossom."



PACER's Kim Kang and her daughter Rachel

A Parent's Perspective

Fourteen years ago, Kim and her husband welcomed their second daughter, Rachel, into their family and looked forward to watching her and 3-year-old Chelsea grow up together. Six months later, Kim received a phone call from a hospital saying Rachel was in the emergency room, the victim of shaken baby syndrome while at her day-care provider.

As a result of the abuse, she suffered cortical visual impairment and developed both a seizure disorder and cerebral palsy. She is in a wheelchair and has the cognitive level of a 2- or 3-year-old.

"I had no frame of reference for what disability looks like," Kim says, remembering that traumatic time. "When I grew up, my school had a separate building for children with disabilities."

Suddenly having a child with a disability had a profound impact on the whole family. Rachel's doctor appointments

and numerous weekly therapy sessions took an enormous amount of time, leaving less attention for Chelsea. "Rachel definitely received more attention," Kim says. "Chelsea had always been incredibly self-reliant and the kind who could entertain herself, so that really helped."

The situation affected parenting as well. "We really had to look at each child for her uniqueness and strengths, and think about how to build on those strengths," Kim says.

"I also knew I wasn't going to be able to spend equal time with my children," she adds. "It was a practical point. I had to get over feeling guilty. I'm still working on that."

Due to necessity, Rachel is the center of attention, Kim adds. "Everyone spends more time with her," so you have to balance it by saying to Chelsea "we'll try to do these other things with you."

While there have been challenges, there are also benefits, Kim notes. "The siblings of children with disabilities I have talked to say they've matured faster, have more empathy, and are in tune with people's feelings. It changes how you see the world," Kim says. That's been true for Chelsea. "She's become a person who believes in social justice. I think that's because of Rachel."

Every family deals with disability in its own way. The type and severity of the disability, the number of siblings, how far apart they are in age, and even where a family lives can all shape the experience of parents and siblings. Balancing needs, striving for fairness, and grappling with guilt can all be

factors. At the same time, there can be amazing gifts and surprising benefits of compassion, maturity, and even a career path.

We really had to look at each child for her uniqueness and strengths, and think about how to build on those strengths.

-Kim Kang

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



Whether you're wondering about your child's readiness for kindergarten or confused about what "outcomes" are, PACER's early childhood advocate Judy Swett has some answers.

Q. My son turns 5 this summer. The early childhood special education (ECSE) professionals on his Individualized Education Program (IEP) team are proposing that he go to kindergarten in the fall. I do not feel he is ready and would like him to remain in ECSE for another year. What are my options?

A. Under Minnesota law, all children who are age 5 by September are eligible for kindergarten. The mandatory school attendance age is 7. Therefore, you have the right to hold your child back from kindergarten for another year. However, if the school district has proposed an IEP that can meet his special education needs and provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) within a kindergarten program, then it has met its legal obligation to provide services to your child. It is not obligated to keep him in ECSE for another year.

You have three options:

1. Allow your child to attend kindergarten as the team proposes, making sure the IEP addresses his strengths and needs and provides any supports and services he may need in order to succeed there.
2. Decline special education services and delay kindergarten enrollment for another year. Like many

parents who choose this option, you may wish to enroll your child in a preschool program at your own expense for a year. Once your son is in kindergarten, you have the right to request that he be re-evaluated to see if he qualifies for special education services.

3. Use the conciliation and mediation process to disagree with the proposal and voice your concerns about the appropriateness of the placement.

Remember, your child does not need to be academically ready for kindergarten in order to succeed. His IEP should support his unique learning and development needs and help him make progress in the kindergarten curriculum.

Q. My daughter is turning 3 and moving from Part C early intervention to Part B preschool services. Her service coordinator has asked me to provide some information to help determine my child's "outcomes" from early intervention services. I thought we were looking at progress on my daughter's Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) goals, but these were different. What is she talking about?

A. The goals that were written into your daughter's IFSP were developed based on your daughter's evaluation and your concerns and priorities for her. They are unique to your daughter. The outcomes that your service coordinator is asking you about are different.

The federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires states to report outcomes for all children leaving the Part C program who have received services for at least six months. These outcomes are:

1. Developing positive social-emotional skills (including social relationships)
2. Acquiring and using knowledge and skills
3. Taking appropriate action to meet needs

The purpose of this annual report is to see if Part C services are making a difference in the lives of the children and families served by the program. The outcomes data is used at the local, state, and federal level to ensure high-quality services and supports for young children and their families.

If you have additional questions, please contact PACER Center and ask to speak with an early childhood advocate.

TOYS FROM A TO Z



Toys provide all children with an important way to learn about the world, themselves, and their abilities. For children with disabilities, toys may offer an even more important way for the child to gain a variety of life skills through play.

As a parent, you have unique insights into your child's age, interests, skills, and abilities. With that knowledge, you may want to intentionally choose toys that will help your child develop everything from motor, language, and social skills to self-esteem and imagination.

Depending on your child's disability or developmental delay, you may need to make simple adaptations to make the toy usable. For example, you might want to add foam grips to the handles of toys or crayons for a better grip, or you might add a simple switch to a CD player to allow your child to select music.

On the next page are some examples of toys and adaptations that can promote your child's skill development. You'll also find ordering information for a PACER publication on toys and child development.

Center for Early Literacy Learning Offers Fun Language Guides

Listening games, books, magnetic letters, and writing tools are a great way to encourage your child's literacy skills. So is talking with your child. Friendly chats can help your son or daughter develop language skills and learn new words. By talking and asking questions, you can encourage your child to share ideas. Some of the important questions begin with "wh"—where, when, what, who, and why.

The Center for Early Literacy Learning (CELL) offers free practice guides that show you how you can use everyday activities to encourage young children to listen, talk, and learn the building blocks for early literacy. The guides are available for parents of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Learn more at earlyliteracylearning.org/pgparents.php.



SKILLS	HELPFUL TOYS	ADAPTATIONS
Physical (gross-motor) skills, such as reaching, crawling, walking, running, climbing, jumping, throwing, catching, and balancing	Balls, pull-push toys, swing sets and slides, wagons, trikes	Add a phone book to your child's push toy or riding toy to weight it down and prevent tipping.
Fine-motor skills, such as handling toys with hands and fingers	Magnetic blocks, writing tools, puzzles, bath toys, lacing and thread sets	Add foam grips to the handles of toys or crayons for a better grasp.
Mental skills, such as problem solving and learning cause and effect	Board games, card games, shape sorters, electronic games, puzzles	Add a simple switch to electronic devices to allow your child to use them. Add knobs to puzzles.
Language skills, such as interacting with others and using words for favorite playthings and activities	Listening games, books, magnetic letters, writing tools	Add page fluffers to books to make the pages easier to turn.
Social skills, such as learning to follow directions, cooperating with others, taking turns, following the rules, and sharing	Games, blocks, play household items	Add visual symbols to the play area to help children communicate their choices and feelings to peers.
Personal skills, such as achieving goals through play and developing self-esteem	Games, art projects, wading pool and water toys, blocks	Add pillows, wedges, or beanbags to help position child for success with play.
Emotional skills, such as experiencing pleasure, bonding with others, and working through feelings during role play	Dress-up clothes, dolls, puppets, stuffed animals	Add Velcro to clothes for easy closure.
Creative and imaginative skills, such as exploring artistic expression or pretending to be a doctor, teacher, parent, firefighter, or person in another profession	Clay, crayons, paints, paper, musical instruments	Add a voice-output device for communicating feelings, interactions, and comments. Add a slant board or easel to hold paper.

Learn More about Toys

Find more ideas in “Toys: Universal Tools for Learning,” a 12-page booklet that explains how toys can affect the development of a child with a disability. It also outlines buying tips, categories of toys, and how children learn new skills through play. Download it for free at PACER.org/publications/stc.asp or order one free copy of STC-14 by calling PACER at 952-838-9000. Additional single copies are \$3; 10 or more copies, \$2.50.



PACER CENTER 
CHAMPIONS FOR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES™

8161 Normandale Blvd.
Minneapolis, MN 55437
952-838-9000 (Voice)
952-838-0190 (TTY)
800-53-PACER (Greater MN)
952-838-0199 (Fax)
PACER@PACER.org (E-mail)
PACER.org

PACER Executive Director:
Paula F. Goldberg

Senior Editor/Writer:
Julie Holmquist

Editor/Writer:
Marcia Kelly

Early Childhood Director:
Kim Kang

Early Childhood Coordinator:
Judy Swett

Design:
Jenna Hanson

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PACER is a coalition of organizations founded on the concept of parents helping parents. PACER strives to improve and expand opportunities that enhance the quality of life for children and young adults with disabilities and their families. This Early Childhood Project is partially funded with training funds provided by the Minnesota Department of Education.

(Alternate format is available upon request.)

Say Hello to PACER's Baby Welcome Project

Every new baby deserves a warm welcome—and PACER's new Baby Welcome Project offers a friendly greeting to all newborns at North Memorial, the project's pilot site. A growth chart and magnetic picture frame with PACER's phone number are given to each family. If parents there or anywhere in Minnesota have an infant with a disability and they call PACER for support, they also receive a larger baby welcome basket that includes diapers and other gifts. Now that's a warm welcome! Learn more at PACER.org/babywelcome.

