

# HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF YOUR CHILD'S CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

FEBRUARY 2015 RESOURCE SHARING

As a parent or caregiver, you may see your child behave in a way that doesn't make sense and ask yourself, "Why does she keep doing that?" It can be very frustrating, especially when it seems like it should be easy for your child to figure out on her own a more appropriate way to behave. In moments like this, it is important to remember that children continue to use a behavior because it works!

Your child's behavior is a powerful communication tool that she uses to tell you what she needs or wants. Sometimes, when a child does not know the appropriate way to express her needs or wants she may use challenging behavior (such as hitting, screaming or spitting) to communicate. Challenging behavior gives children the ability to send a message in a fast and powerful way.

Children will use challenging behavior to communicate until they learn new, more appropriate ways to express their wants and needs. To change the behavior, it is important for you to first discover what is causing the behavior. If you know why your child is choosing a behavior, you can then teach her to communicate her wants and needs in a new way that everyone feels good about.

Children use challenging behavior to either:

1. get something, such as attention or a toy, or
2. get out of doing something, such as going to bed or eating a new food.

The first step you must take to help your child learn a new behavior is to determine if she wants something or wants to avoid doing something.

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## TRY THIS AT HOME:

- **Observe.** Pay careful attention to what is happening when your child displays challenging behavior. Keep a chart to see repeated patterns in behavior.
- **Track.** Keep track of when the behavior occurs.
- **List.** Brainstorm ideas about what your child is trying to get, or avoid doing, by using challenging behavior.
- **Teach.** Once you have an understanding of why your child chooses to use a challenging behavior, you can teach him a new way to behave in that situation. Pick a time outside of the situation when you can:
  - *Role play.* Use puppets, trains, dolls or other toys to act out the new skill with your child.
  - *Read Books.* Ask your child questions about a character in a book as a way to start to talk about your own child's behavior.
  - *Talk about the situation ahead of time.* Take a few minutes to include your child in the plan since quick transitions can feel overwhelming.