

# Parenting Tool: Understanding Behavior Problems

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**Behavior problems are best treated by behavioral therapies involving children and parents working together.**

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All children have occasional problem behaviors. They are learning the rules for getting along with others and how to control their emotions. Some children learn these rules easily, but for others it takes more work.

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## **What are child behavior problems?**

Child behavior problems are unpleasant or inappropriate behaviors that children use to get their way or meet their needs. A child's behavior may be a problem if it doesn't match your expectations or if it is disruptive.

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## **Why do behavior problems happen?**

Child behavior problems often begin as a normal response to frustration, as an effort to become more independent, or as a way to communicate their desire for something. Young children have fewer strategies for dealing with frustration and letting others know what they want. They are also less aware of others' feelings or how their behaviors affect others. For these reasons, kids may develop disruptive or unpleasant behaviors to get their needs met.

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## **How can we understand the purpose of a behavior?**

All behaviors have a purpose or "function," but often this is not obvious. People usually show behaviors that get them something they want or help them to avoid something unpleasant. For example, a child might show a behavior to get attention, a toy they want or a sense of control. Or, they might show a behavior to get out of doing chores, a class they don't like, or a situation that makes them nervous.

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## **Why do behavior problems continue?**

Children usually do not plan their problem behavior in advance. But, when a behavior "works," your child is likely to repeat that behavior in the future and in similar situations. The longer it works, and the more situations in which it works, the harder it will be to change.

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### **To Learn More**

- Outpatient Psychiatry Program  
206-987-2164
- Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine  
Unit 206-987-2195
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- [seattlechildrens.org](http://seattlechildrens.org)

### **Free Interpreter Services**

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.



### How do I change a behavior problem?

The keys to changing a behavior problem are to:

1. Identify the purpose of the behavior.
2. Change the consequences (what happens after the behavior), so that the problem behavior doesn't "work."
3. Change the antecedents (what happens before the behavior) so that your child is less likely to do the problem behavior.
4. Teach your child more appropriate, "replacement" behaviors that they can use to get the same results and reward them for showing these behaviors.

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### What type of treatments help with behavior problems?

Behavior therapy is the type of treatment that works best for behavior problems. You are the key to this type of therapy. A therapist will work with you to help identify the purpose of your child's behavior problems, develop strategies for responding to the problems, and ways to develop and encourage more appropriate behaviors. Then you and your child will practice these new tools during therapy, and work on them at home between sessions.

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