

Reflecting and Growing with Children Whose Behavior Challenges Us

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Introduction

This workbook, part reflection guide and part practice resource, supports practitioner coaches, program implementation coaches, infant and early childhood mental health consultants, and early childhood practitioners in having meaningful conversations about approaching children’s behaviors with connection and care.

Understanding the child and their environment is foundational to the Pyramid Model and positive behavior support. This workbook also invites practitioners to turn inward and reflect on how their personal experiences, beliefs, and backgrounds influence what they expect of children, how they understand and support behavior, and how they build positive relationships with every child.

Reflecting on what they bring to challenging moments, learning, and growing with children can help practitioners feel more confident and fulfilled in their work. It can also help children feel safe, connected, and respected.

Using This Workbook in Coaching

This workbook is designed to be flexible and adaptable. While it is intended to be used within coaching partnerships, it can also support individual reflection, learning, and growth. Coaches and practitioners can choose how to use it, either by working through it in order or by focusing on the sections that feel most timely and meaningful.

How This Workbook is Organized

The workbook is divided into two parts. Both sections are written directly for practitioners, but coaches can also use these questions and activities within the coaching process.



We suggest starting with Part 1 to reflect on current practices and then moving on to Part 2 to apply the new insights. However it is used, the workbook can support thoughtful, strengths-based growth over time.

Part 1: Reflecting on Practice

This section focuses on reflection, encouraging you to consider how your experiences and beliefs influence your understanding and support of young children. The questions will help you reflect on your daily practices, connect meaningfully with children and families, and create environments where everyone feels a sense of belonging. You and your coach can decide how to use this section to reflect individually, during collaborative conversations, or both.

Holding Onto the Joy in Early Childhood



Early care and education practitioners have many responsibilities, but holding onto the joy that makes early childhood special is essential.

Joy supports children's curiosity, discovery, and connection. Joy also sustains your sense of meaning and fulfillment. These questions encourage you to reflect on how you intentionally create and protect moments of joy for yourself and children each day.

What parts of my work feel the most joyful and meaningful?

How do I create fun during the day so children and adults enjoy time together?

How do I create opportunities for play and surprises within routines and structure?

When do I pause to observe children and notice how they explore, learn, and grow?

What helps me start each day by remembering that children are here to connect, learn, and find joy?

Reframing Behaviors Through a Developmental Lens



Challenging behaviors are a natural part of child development.

When you approach behaviors with empathy, patience, and curiosity, you can focus on connecting with children and supporting their social and emotional development. These questions invite you to reflect on how your perspectives, experiences, and expectations influence your interpretations of children's behavior.

What recent behaviors have I found challenging? How might these behaviors be connected to a child's stage of development, how they communicate, their sensory needs, or what is happening around them?

How have my life experiences affected how I think about children's behaviors?

How do my values and beliefs impact what I expect from children?

Do I expect different things from different children? How can I make sure I respond in a way that meets each child's strengths, preferences, and needs?

Understanding Behavior in Context



Children's behaviors are influenced by their families and life experiences.

Taking time to think about your relationship with a child and learning more about their family's perspective can support meaningful connections. These questions help you reflect on how you interpret children's behaviors and how you can partner with and support families in respectful ways that build trust.

How might my background and values affect how I interpret children's behavior?

When I try to understand a behavior, do I think about how a child might be feeling, how they communicate, what their body is experiencing, and what is happening in the environment?

What do I know about each child's family and home environment?

What can I do to learn more about the family's perspectives and preferences about preventing and responding to their child's behavior?

How do I show empathy and build trust when talking with families about their child's behavior?

Understanding Behavior through Connection



Children show us how they are feeling and what they need in many ways, including through behaviors that can be hard to interpret.

Focusing on connection instead of control or compliance can help children feel understood, valued, and supported. These questions invite you to reflect on what a child's behavior might help you understand and on how your connection and care can make a difference.

What helps me learn about each child's wants, needs, and preferences instead of making assumptions?

How do I support each child in using their home language and preferred ways of communicating?

How do I ensure each child has a variety of meaningful choices, aligned with their strengths and preferences, to express themselves (e.g., gestures, visuals, Augmentative and Alternative Communication [AAC])?

What need, feeling, or preference might a child's behavior highlight?

How do I consider sensory and environmental factors when I reflect on a child's behavior?

What can I do to help children feel understood and supported, especially when things are hard for them?

Part 2: Applying Insights to Practice

Building on your reflections from Part 1, this second section includes activities to help you apply your insights in meaningful, strengths-based ways. You and your coach can decide how to use this section to complete individually, during collaborative conversations, or both.

Supporting Co-Regulation

These activities help you strengthen your personal regulation strategies and identify opportunities to support co-regulation with children throughout the day.



Wellness Toolkit

Compile tools and strategies to help you feel calm and focused. You might include:



Items to hold or fidget with:

Stress balls, sensory objects, other things that help you regulate



Ways to calm your body:

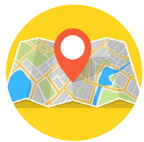
Breathing exercises, stretching app, yoga poses



Supports for reflection:

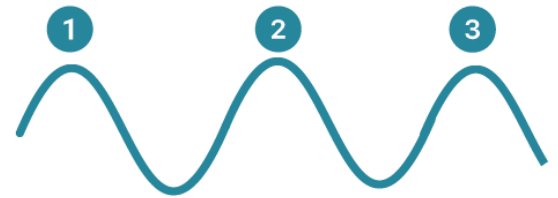
Calming phrases, gratitude reminders, positive self-talk statements

What will you include in your wellness toolkit? Where will you keep it to remember to use it?



Regulation Map

Think about a few times during the day when children or adults might need extra support. These could be busy or tricky moments, such as during transitions or when energy is high. Plan one or more calming strategies you (as the adult) can use during each of those times, and consider ideas for how you can connect with children.



1	2	3
Moment of Day:	Moment of Day:	Moment of Day:
Strategies to Promote My Calm:	Strategies to Promote My Calm:	Strategies to Promote My Calm:
Ideas to Connect with Children:	Ideas to Connect with Children:	Ideas to Connect with Children:

Related Pyramid Model Resources

Help Us Stay Calm
Strategies that help you and your child during challenging behavior

Stay Calm | Reflect | Re-Connect

When your child is engaged in challenging behavior or experiencing anger, stress, sadness or frustration, it is important to stay calm. If you express your anger and frustration, it might result in more challenging behavior from your child. Remaining calm will provide the safety and support your child needs as they learn how to calm themselves.

Step 1: Calm Yourself

- Count until calm (1, 2, 3, 4...)
- Connect with a friend
- Drink some water, Have a snack
- Take deep breaths
- Ask for help
- Think something positive or fun about your child

Step 2: Reflect

- What feelings and thoughts came up?
- How do you think your child is feeling?
- What might your child need to prevent the behavior from occurring again?
- Are you calm enough to re-connect with your child?

Help Us Stay Calm

Things That Will Help Me Stay Calm Toddlers

Try to understand what my behavior is communicating.

- I want your attention.
- I'm tired.
- I need a break.
- I need a diaper change.

Consistency throughout our day. Having a similar order to the day and doing activities in a similar way helps me feel safe.

- reading a book or telling stories at bedtime
- singing a song during diaper time

First Read a book

Then Sleep

Connect with me throughout the day; talking, smiling, hugging, singing, holding.

- When we play together, let me take turns with you.
- Join in my play and follow my lead.
- Talk about what I am doing or watching.
- Talk and play with me at my level.
- Bring me up or lower yourself down.

Stay close in new places and with new people. I feel safe.

Teach me about emotions. Name your feelings and my feelings throughout our day.

Help Us Stay Calm Toddlers

NCPMI Developing a Neutralizing Routine

Planning for how to address challenging behavior when it occurs is helpful to ensure your response does not escalate a behavior and limits implicit bias that might impact your decision-making. A neutralizing routine is a brief instructional response that neutralizes the effects of implicit bias on decision making. They help adults respond to the behavior in a productive and supportive manner that is aligned with their values.

Reflections on Adult Responses to Child Behavior

Elements of the Situation

When deciding how to respond to an instance of challenging behavior, pause to consider:

- Are you making a snap decision?
- Is this a high-stakes situation that could result in use of exclusionary practices?
- What influences your response? Time of day? Location of the incident?

Attributions to the Behavior

- Are you attributing something negative or positive about the behavior?

Person's Decision State?

Check in with yourself and check how you are feeling.

- What types of statements are you telling yourself?
 - I'm so tired.
 - I'm so stressed.
 - I'm so frustrated.
- Is how you are feeling impacting your decision of how to respond to the child?

Use a Neutralizing Routine

A neutralizing routine can help you respond to behavior more effectively. Neutralizing routines should include these components:

- Brief statement
- Brief action with clear steps
- Double in the moment
- Provides a space between child behavior and the adult response

Sample Neutralizing Routine

When I am feeling stressed and children engaged in behavior that I find challenging, I will PAUSE.

- Pause and reflect
 - Take a deep breath.
 - Think about what happened before the behavior occurred.
- Ask
 - What is this child trying to tell me?
 - Do they want something? Do they need something? What do I know about this child that will help me figure out the reason for the behavior?
- Respond
 - When I respond, the child feels validated, listened to, understood, and safe.
 - I guide the child to use appropriate alternative behavior.

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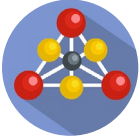
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Stay Calm with Neutralizing Routines



Reframing My Responses

Use these activities to reflect on how what you say and what you do prioritizes connection with children.



Leading with Connection

- Think about phrases you often use with children, and ask yourself: *Do these phrases help build connection, or are they more about getting a child to comply with an adult-created expectation?*

- Choose a few phrases you often use and rewrite them to focus more on connection, encouragement, and strengths.
- Try using your new phrases during the day and notice how they feel for you and the children.

Child's Behavior	Word/Phrase	Connection or Compliance?	Rewrite
Wandering	Sit down	Compliance	<i>It looks like your body is feeling wiggly. We have a rocking chair or a spinning chair you can try. What feels best?</i>



Can I Be More Flexible?

Think of a behavior you often redirect. Now ask yourself:

- Could this behavior cause harm or be unsafe? Yes No
- Might it damage materials or the environment? Yes No
- Or, is this behavior just different from what I usually expect? Yes No

If the behavior is not unsafe or destructive, consider:

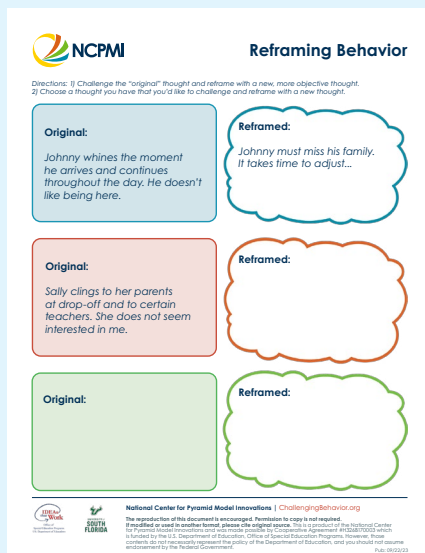
What can this behavior help us learn about the child's strengths, interests, preferences, or needs?

Could this behavior be helping the child engage, learn, or regulate in their own way?

How could I offer more choice, flexibility, or autonomy at this moment?

Is there a skill the child needs support in learning over time?

Related Pyramid Model Resources



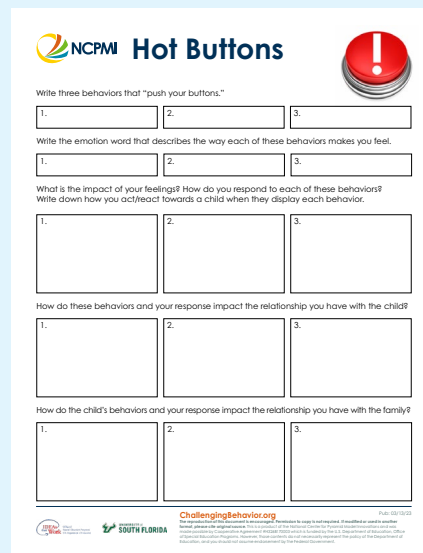
NCPMI Reframing Behavior

Directions: 1) Challenge the "original" thought and reframe with a new, more objective thought. 2) Choose a thought you have that you'd like to challenge and reframe with a new thought.

Original: Johnny whines the moment he arrives and continues throughout the day. He doesn't like being here.	Reframed: Johnny must miss his family. It takes time to adjust...
Original: Sally clings to her parents at drop-off and to certain teachers. She does not seem interested in me.	Reframed:
Original:	Reframed:

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Reframing Behavior Activity



NCPMI Hot Buttons

Write three behaviors that "push your buttons."

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Write the emotion word that describes the way each of these behaviors makes you feel.

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

What is the impact of your feelings? How do you respond to each of these behaviors? Write down how you react/respond towards a child when they display each behavior.

1.	2.	3.
1.	2.	3.
1.	2.	3.

How do these behaviors and your response impact the relationship you have with the child?

How do the child's behaviors and your response impact the relationship you have with the family?

ChallengingBehavior.org

Hot Buttons Activity

After one week, reflect together on what you have noticed by asking:

Are we expecting something different from this child than others in the same situation?

If so, are our expectations based on the child's individual needs, or might they be based on an assumption we are making?

What might we be assuming about this behavior or about this child? Can we think about this with more curiosity?

What patterns do we notice in adult expectations, interpretations, and responses?

How might we shift our expectations, interpretations, and responses in ways that feel respectful, flexible, and supportive for both adults and the child?

Related Pyramid Model Resources



BIR Tracking Data: Reflect on patterns in how behaviors are noticed, interpreted, and responded to across children, environments, and teams. Consider opportunities to support adult expectations, decision-making, and perceptions that may influence challenging moments.

Building Trusting Relationships with Families



Strong partnerships with families help children feel safe, supported, and connected. Use this activity with your team to make a plan for building trust and learning from each family.



Getting to Know Families Plan

Work with your team to think about and create a plan.

How will we gather insights from families in ways that work for them (such as texts, emails, short conversations, surveys, check-ins)?

How can we create two-way communication that shows we value families' knowledge and ideas about their children?

How will we partner with families over time, especially when a child needs extra support, to learn what works and adjust as needed?

After making your plan, reflect together:

Are we really learning what families want us to know?

Are we checking in regularly and not just when there is a concern?

Are we showing families that we are working together for their children?

Related Pyramid Model Resources



[Authentically Partnering with Families at the Program Level Resource Collection](#)



[Family Engagement](#)

Next Steps

Teaching, caregiving, and coaching are all about learning and growing. As you finish this workbook, take a moment to think about what you want to carry with you in your daily work.

If You Are a Practitioner

What is one way you will continue to focus on connection with children and families each day?

What is one idea from this workbook you want to keep thinking about or learning more about?

If You Are a Coach

What is one way you will continue to support practitioners in developing strong, caring relationships with children and families?

What is one part of your coaching you would like to build on, especially around connection?

*Thank you for the care and thought you bring to this work.
Every small change you make helps create places where every child and family knows they belong.*