Behavior Has Meaning
3 Steps to Understanding and Responding to Challenging Behaviors

This tool offers a 3-step approach for helping you figure out what children might be communicating through their behaviors. Included are also suggestions for how to best respond by using the Observe, Learn, and Respond 3-step process.

Biting

**Observe**
- What happened before the biting?

**Learn**
- Is the child:
  - Teething or meeting a need or oral stimulation?
  - Trying to engage someone?
  - Frustrated? Angry?
  - Defending a toy?
  - Protecting his space?

**Respond**
- Offer objects the child can safely bite and chew
- Offer crunchy foods
- Provide simple words: “No” “I want”
- Say firmly, “No biting. Biting hurts.”
- Offer a “safe space” with books, quiet toys, where the child can regroup

Tantrums/Managing Reactions

**Observe**
- What happened right before the tantrum?
- Are there patterns in the child’s tantrums? Are there certain situations that trigger them?

**Learn**
- What might be causing the child’s loss of control?
  - Frustration
  - Unable to do something
- Not enough language to express his thoughts/feelings
- Irritability due to hunger or fatigue

**Respond**
- Stay calm
- Stay close by and keep child safe
- Validate the child’s feelings: “You are really having a hard time. Everyone needs a break sometimes.”
- Afterward tell him what a good job he did calming down

Inconsolable Crying

**Observe**
- What usually prompts the crying?
- What usually works to console the child?
### Learn
- Is the child feeling:
  - Sick? Tired or hungry?
  - Sad or mad? Why?
- Overwhelmed with stimuli (light, sound, touch) in the room
- Sad or crying for no clear reason

### Respond
- Soothe a baby with swaddling, rocking, and murmuring
- Rub baby’s back or tummy; try infant massage
- Take the child outdoors
- Get help if you are feeling frustrated and need a break

### Separation

**Observe**
- How do the parent and child separate? (Does the parent say a quick goodbye or linger? Is the parent sneaking out of the room?)
- How does the child react to the separation?

**Learn**
- What is the child’s temperament? Is change hard for her in general?
- Does the child feel safe in group care? Has she bonded with the caregiver and other children?

**Respond**
- Ask the parent to be upbeat when separating and to avoid lingering or showing worry when saying good-bye
- Have the child bring a comfort item from home
- Play peek-a-boo games
- Show the child photos of his family
- Remind the child that “Daddy always comes back...”

### Socially Withdrawn

**Observe**
- Does the child play with other children?
- Can the child play with others if the teacher helps get the interaction going?
- Does the child seem content to play on his own or does he seem sad or depressed?

**Learn**
- Is the child:
  - Fearful? Shy?
  - Depressed?
  - Having difficulty using language to communicate?
  - Learning English as a second language?

**Respond**
- Put what you think the child is feeling into words: “You want to help Marco build the castle.”
- Help the child begin to play near and connect with other children who may be a good fit for him.
- Offer activities that do not require a lot of interaction, such as art.