

# BEHAVIOUR

Behaviour is everything we do, from the way we speak to how we act. All behaviour is communication. Understanding the basic purposes of behaviour helps us recognize what children may be trying to express, especially when their behaviour feels challenging.

Behaviour often comes from a sense of feeling unsafe, overwhelmed, or unsure. A child's body may respond to perceived threats the same way it responds to real ones. Even small things like a loud sound, unexpected change, or unclear directions can feel threatening to a child's nervous system.

**Note:** These are suggestions. Not all strategies work in every moment or for every child and should be adapted as needed. Co-regulation, building safety, and helping children name their emotions are key.

## Four Common Reasons for Behaviour

### 1. Seeking Connection or Attention

When children seek attention, they are often looking for connection. This is a positive sign! It means they trust you and feel safe turning to you, even though the way they do it may be challenging.

How to support:

- Spend time playing together and let the child lead play.
- Label connection time so you can plan it for later.
- Give eye contact, turn your body toward them, and listen fully.
- Repair and reconnect after big emotions so they know the relationship is okay.
- Offer affection and help in a warm, responsive way (e.g., hug until they pull away).

### 2. Avoidance or Escape Behaviours

Children may avoid tasks or directions when they don't understand, lack skills, feel anxious, or are being miscued. Distraction is different than avoidance. It's important to check that the child understands your expectations.

How to support:

- Explain the reason why something needs to happen.
- Use "First... Then..." language (sequence steps).
- Use simple language and explanations. Ask if they understand.
- Demonstrate actions or join them in the task.
- Offer alternatives or choices. Providing choices can support autonomy.
- Support skill building with just the right level of help (enough for success but encouraging independence).
- Determine if anxiety is underlying the avoidance.

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## Four Common Reasons for Behaviour Continued:

### 3. Regulation

Children often behave in certain ways to calm themselves, manage big emotions, or focus. Behaviours can appear when they feel overwhelmed, under-stimulated, or unsure how to handle their feelings. Big emotions are normal, especially for younger children.

How to support:

- Connect and acknowledge feelings (if it's not triggering), make eye contact.
- Keep language simple and minimal.
- Decrease stimulation and lower expectations.
- Take a break from the environment or activity.
- Offer sensory strategies (see the Calming Sensory Strategies resource guide).

### 4. Trying to Gain Access to Something

This behaviour happens when a child wants something they cannot have or when they are seeking control. Wanting control can signal that they feel powerless in other areas of their life.

How to support:

- Offer choices or alternatives where possible.
- Use humour to lighten the moment.
- Provide clear time limits and explanations.
- Provide just the right challenge to support them in achieving their goal.
- Consider whether the denied request is your need or the child's need.

## Understanding Miscuing

Miscuing happens when messages are mixed, or when tone, actions, or body language don't match the words.

For example:

- A caregiver says, "Yes, I'll get you a snack," but walks toward the bathroom instead of the kitchen.
- A child demands a snack in an angry tone, but what they truly need is comfort and connection, along with the snack.

Miscuing can confuse both the child and the adult. When we slow down and tune into the child's needs and feelings, we can interpret their cues more accurately. See the resources at the bottom of this guide for more information on miscuing.



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## Observing and Understanding Behaviour

Observing behaviours can help you determine what the next step should be.

Here are some strategies to investigate behaviours:

- Spend time learning your own triggers. Ask yourself: Are you overwhelmed, overstimulated, or tired?
- Reflect on the big moments. How, why, when?
  1. Start observing one moment or one behaviour at a time. Keep it simple to start.
  2. Ask yourself what need the child is trying to meet with this behaviour.
  3. Make a list of the possible reasons for the behaviour and see if there are patterns.
- Reflect and problem-solve. Take notes and track the moments of and before challenging behaviours.
- Learn if the child has sensory challenges or needs that may be contributing.

## Supporting Yourself

It is important to support yourself so you can respond well when behaviours occur. Take a time out: give yourself breathing room, find what recharges you, and ask for help from a colleague, partner, co-parent, or friend. Allow time to adapt, for both you and the child.

## Strategies That Don't Help Change Behaviour

**Strategies that don't help change behaviour:** Time-outs, spanking, yelling or shouting, shaming or putting the child down, threats, and unrelated or unclear consequences.

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Need More Support?

## Local Resources:

- Family Physicians, Pediatricians, or Nurse Practitioners
- Child Development Therapy Supports
- Counsellors
- Art Therapists

## Podcasts:

- [Kelty Mental Health – Parenting Kids with Challenging Behaviours](#)
- [Janet Lansbury – When Troublesome Behaviour Continues... and Continues](#)

## Resources Available at the WKCCRR Library:

- Discipline Without Damage by Vanessa LaPointe
- My Magic Breath by Nick Ortner and Alison Taylor
- Anxiety, Yoga and Mindfulness Book Pack
- Exploring Feeling and Emotions Exploration Kit
- Making Faces: A First Book of Emotions by Abrams Appleseed

## Online Resources:

- [Dan Siegel Model of the Brain, Flip the Lid](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Practice – Gov BC Website](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Practice in Child Care Settings](#)
- [Confident Parents: Thriving Kids](#)
- [Circle of Security – Miscues and Music](#)