



Common Misconceptions About Children's Social-Emotional Development

Common Misconception	Dangers of Thinking This Way	Helpful Truth
<i>"Some children are just bad or mean."</i>	Viewing a young child as simply "mean" or "bad" can harm their self-esteem, damage the parent-child relationship, and overlook important developmental needs. https://www.zerotothree.org/our-work/national-parent-survey-tuning-in/the-expectation-gap	If young children's 'bad/mean' behaviors are treated as communication, interactions and learning can continue, giving the child a chance to develop more socially appropriate and effective ways to express their needs. CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html
<i>"Children take after their relatives and there is nothing caregivers can do about it."</i>	Assuming children behave a certain way just because they "take after" their relatives can lead to overlooking the child's individual needs, strengths, and challenges. This mindset may cause parents to dismiss important developmental or emotional factors, limit effective support, and unintentionally reinforce negative behaviors by expecting them to be fixed traits rather than addressable actions. https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/tips-on-temperament/	Temperament traits may be inherited, but they do not determine the child's behavior. Across temperament traits, children can be taught to communicate their messages productively. The early years are the ideal time to teach social communication skills because a young child's brain is developing rapidly. https://www.zerotothree.org/early-brain-development/
<i>"Children behave badly on purpose to get attention/get what they want."</i>	Assuming the child is being purposefully manipulative can fuel frustration and anger, leading to harsher discipline and less empathy for the child's needs. https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/managing-emotions-as-parents	Young children often go through a developmentally appropriate "me stage" as they learn to assert themselves and understand their emotions. Their behaviors are usually ways of communicating unmet needs or feelings they can't yet fully express, not deliberate attempts to manipulate. Recognizing this helps parents respond with patience and empathy, supporting the child's emotional growth and building a stronger, more trusting relationship. https://childmind.org/article/the-power-of-positive-attention/
<i>"Children behave badly to push my buttons."</i>	When parents believe very young children are intentionally trying to "push their buttons," it can lead to power struggles, escalating behaviors, and the child feeling misunderstood. This mindset overlooks the child's limited emotional and communication skills, making it harder for parents to respond with patience and understanding.	Toddlers between 18 and 36 months are just beginning to understand cause and effect. Their behaviors are often experiments to see what happens, not intentional attempts to annoy or upset. Recognizing this helps parents respond with patience and guidance, supporting the child's learning and emotional growth while strengthening their bond.

	https://headstart.gov/publication/learning-get-along-young-childrens-social-emotional-development	https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/growing-independence-tips-parents-toddlers-and-two
<i>“Sometimes children just don’t want to behave. One minute they are fine, the next minute they aren’t.”</i>	<p>This thinking oversimplifies young children’s behavior, leading parents to view it as willful disobedience rather than normal developmental fluctuations. This creates unreasonable expectations for young children, making it harder for parents to respond with patience and understanding.</p> <p>https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html</p>	<p>Young children’s behavior naturally varies as they develop, often shifting quickly as they navigate new emotions and skills. This is influenced by factors that change throughout the day, such as sleep, hunger, sensory overload, and growth spurts. These factors lead to fluctuations in a child’s ability to regulate behavior and emotions. By responding with patience, consistency, and predictable routines, caregivers can help children communicate and self-regulate over time.</p> <p>https://sleepeducation.org/sleep-problems-may-affect-childrens-behavior/</p>
<i>“Children say ‘no’ because they are disrespectful and defiant.”</i>	<p>When a caregiver perceives a response of “no” as purposeful disrespect, it leads to the caregiver often raising the level of frustration and intensity of the interaction. Pushing back when the child says, “no” or doesn’t follow instructions immediately can create a power struggle and result in tense interactions, loss of communication, hurt feelings, and a missed opportunity for both caregiver and child to find common ground and understanding.</p> <p>https://www.zerotothree.org/issue-areas/parenting/</p>	<p>Saying “no” is a normal part of development as children assert independence and test boundaries. Understanding the reasons behind a child’s behavior in context is key to choosing the right response. Sometimes the child is expressing a preference; other times, they’re trying to assert control. Accurately interpreting these messages helps caregivers respond effectively and supports the child in learning better ways to communicate over time.</p> <p>https://agesandstages.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ASQSE2-Social-Emotional-Development-Guides.pdf</p>
<i>“Ignoring the behavior is the best way to get them to stop.”</i>	<p>Ignoring a very young child’s behavior can overlook the child’s need for guidance, support, help, or communication. Ignoring may lead to increased frustration for the child, escalate challenging behaviors, and children may think their feelings are not important. In addition, the behavior may occur more frequently because it was never addressed appropriately.</p> <p>https://monadelahooke.com/the-hidden-costs-of-planned-ignoring/</p>	<p>Acknowledging the child’s message is always appropriate. Young children use behavior to communicate needs and emotions they can’t yet express in words. Sometimes this involves temporarily looking past the behavior used to deliver the message and focusing instead on the need or request at its core. Supporting children in becoming effective communicators helps children learn that their feelings are understood and important.</p> <p>https://fipp.ncdhhs.gov/wp-content/uploads/Communicating-With-Your-Child-Using-HUGS-Strategies-to-Achieve-Success.pdf</p>