



Common Factors that Influence Child Behavior

Many considerations may influence how caregivers interpret children's behavioral messages. For example, a child may cry at mealtime because they are overly hungry, not hungry at all, over stimulated, not interested in the food options, upset about the amount of help they are receiving, or a variety of other reasons. Knowing what message the child is communicating through their cry influences how the caregiver shows the child they understand the message and what responses might be productive under the circumstances.

The pages that follow provide information about the importance of considering common factors that influence behaviors and how a practitioner might use their knowledge regarding these factors to help the caregiver effectively **Hear, Understand, and Give**, in a way that shows the child they were accurately heard and models for the child appropriate communication. Practitioners can use this information to increase their own understanding as well as help caregivers understand how these factors not only influence the child's social-emotional development but also influence how the child communicates their message to the people around them.

Practitioners should seek to understand the factors that influence behavior for each particular child and use the information to help caregivers anticipate which factors may pertain to the child. In some cases, practitioners and caregivers may not know what factors are influencing specific child behaviors and therefore may need to try responsive strategies based on an informed guess. Using a coaching interaction style, as described in the **H-U-G-S**, helps practitioners ask effective questions to support the caregiver's analysis of the situation so the caregiver and practitioner can identify the likely message and discuss effective responses.

Practitioners should seek additional information on pertinent topics as needed. Resources for further information are included within each topic. These resources were included to provide practitioners with sources of additional information about factors that influence child behaviors and caregiver-child interaction styles and are examples of professional resources widely available to help promote child and family well-being. Your community partners may have additional resources that more specifically relate to the families you serve.

When the Child's Behavior Reflects Typical Child Development

Some behaviors caregivers might find challenging are typical and appropriate for a child's stage of development, context, or family situation. Young children naturally seek out strong attachments to a primary caregiver. As they become independent of their caregivers, they often continue to use the caregiver for "emotional refueling," and need the caregiver physically and emotionally present during tough times. Young children's development is also marked by turbulent transitions. Typically, children demonstrate a period of physical and emotional disorganization directly before a developmental growth spurt. The period of disorganization can often include rebellion, changes in communication, increased tantrums, inconsolability, and behaviors that seem to signal both "I need you" and "I want to do it myself" at the same time. The period of disorganization is difficult for most children to manage and can be confusing to caregivers. Sometimes knowing that periods of disorganization are expected and age appropriate makes it easier for caregivers to manage them and provide appropriate support to help the child navigate them.

Caregivers can use the **H-U-G-S** framework to help them provide a calm and consistent physical and emotional presence during these periods of disorganization. When the behaviors are not temporary or are so extreme that the child is causing injury to themselves or to others, alternative explanations and strategies may help. Seek out team members or mental health professionals equipped to help with dangerous behaviors.

The following is an example of how the **H-U-G-S** framework might be applied when the child's behaviors seem to represent expected child development.

| | Hear (Identify the cue and the emotion the child is expressing.) | Understand (Use simple words to express the message and the emotion you think the child is demonstrating.) | Give (Give the child a simple response to the message.) | Social-Emotional Competence |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Example during calm times... | The child put her socks on by herself and smiled. | "You put your socks on. You're so proud." | "Now we can put your shoes on and go outside." | Continue to narrate the child's messages and corresponding emotions during other calm times. |
| Example during tense times... | The child is frustrated that she can't pull on her pants up by herself. | "You want to do it by yourself, but you're having a hard time doing it. That's frustrating." | "Oh, look you're standing on your pants. Do you want to sit down and pull them up or lift your foot up?" | Look for new abilities the child is demonstrating and help the child find ways to use them. |

References

Recommended resources for more information about how typical child development impact behavior:

Administration for Children and Families (n.d.). Milestones: Understanding your child's social-emotional development. <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/feelings-milestonespdf-89401.pdf>

Zero to Three (2010, February 22). *Birth to 12 months: Social-emotional development*. <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/238-birth-to-12-months-social-emotional-development>

When the Child's Behavior is Influenced by Access to Interest-Based Activities

Children learn most efficiently when they are interested in what they are doing. When children are highly interested, they engage for longer, are more focused on learning, and experience more enjoyment. The more children interact with objects and people, the more they practice new and existing abilities and the more they learn about the world around them. As children learn and can do more, their interests tend to increase. As children's interests increase, so does their range of interest-based learning opportunities. Sometimes helping a child overcome tense interactions can be as simple as inviting and engaging the child in an interest-based, activity, routine, or interaction. Caregivers can do this by using the **H-U-G-S** framework.

The following is an example of how the **H-U-G-S** framework might be applied when the child's behaviors seem to be based on their interest or lack of interest in an activity.

| | Hear (Identify the cue and the emotion the child is expressing.) | Understand (Use simple words to express the message and the emotion you think the child is demonstrating.) | Give (Give the child a simple response to the message.) | Social-Emotional Competence |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Example during calm times... | The child is communicating they want to be picked up. | "You want to be close to Daddy right now. You missed him while he was at work." | "Daddy can't hold you right now because he's washing dishes, but you can stand on the step stool and help me." "You're excited to be with daddy." "Climb up with me." | Create more opportunities to do interesting things together. |
| Example during tense times... | The child is teasing for a sweet treat they can't have right now. | "You want a yummy snack. You feel hungry." | "Let's cut an apple. Apples are sweet and yummy." | Create more opportunities to do interesting things together. |

When the Child’s Behavior is Influenced by Toxic Stress or Early Trauma

For young children, traumatic events can include repeated disruption to attachments with primary caregivers (e.g., placement in foster care, incarcerated caregivers, military deployment of a caregiver). Traumatic events can also include a lengthy hospitalization, a serious accident, abuse, neglect, domestic violence, chronic chaos, poverty, a natural disaster, or other highly stressful events experienced by a caregiver or child. Research has shown that neural connections, which are particularly vulnerable in the early stages of life (even infancy) can be disrupted and damaged during periods of extreme and repetitive stress, referred to as toxic stress (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2019). Trauma can result in delayed or maladaptive development, inappropriate coping mechanisms, mental health disorders, and learning difficulties. Traumatic events can result in mild to severe tense interactions and have lasting adverse effects on a caregiver or child’s ability to maintain mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. ([SAMHSA, 2014](#)).

When a child is behaving in a way that is unexpected and seems irrational or extreme, they may be experiencing a trauma trigger. A trigger is some aspect of a traumatic event that occurs in a completely different situation but reminds the child of the original event. Examples may be sounds, smells, feelings, places, postures, tones of voice, or even emotions. When this happens, the brain shifts from higher functioning tasks (such as logic, reasoning, language, and planning) to emotionally and physically driven tasks (fight, flight, freeze, and fawn). Fight, flight or freeze can look like: irritability, fussiness, startling easily, being difficult to calm, frequent tantrums, clinginess, reluctance to explore, activity levels that are much higher or lower than peers, repeating traumatic events over and over in dramatic play or conversation, delays in reaching physical, language, or other milestones, holding breath, heart pounding and/or decreased heart rate, shutting down, or feeling unable to move (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014).

The following is an example of how the **H-U-G-S** framework might be applied when the child’s behaviors seem to be influenced by trauma triggers.

| | Hear (Identify the cue and the emotion the child is expressing.) | Understand (Use simple words to express the message and the emotion you think the child is demonstrating.) | Give (Give the child a simple response to the message.) | Social-Emotional Competence |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Example during calm times... | The child is looking off in the distance and avoiding some interactions. | “You look a little worried that I’m going to leave.” | “I’m going to stay here with you, would you like to read a story with me?” | Build a sense of safety and trust during everyday opportunities. |
| Example during tense times... | The child is repeatedly asking for a cookie treat. | “You are worried you won't get one.” | “Everyone is getting a cookie right after lunch. Here is yours. I will set it right next to you.” | Create more opportunities to build trust by saying what you will do and doing it. |

References

Recommended resources for more information about trauma and toxic stress:

Center on the Developing Child (2018, August 3) ACES and toxic stress: Frequently asked questions. Harvard University. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/infographics/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/>

Chudzik, M., Corr, C., & Santos, R. M. (2023). “. . . We’re not doing enough:” Trauma-Informed care in an early childhood special education center. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 45*(1), 43-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02711214231219282>

Hoffman, K., Cooper, G., & Powell, B. (2017) *Raising a secure child: How circle of security parenting can help you nurture your child's attachment, emotional resilience, and freedom to explore.* Guilford Press.

Kozłowska, K., Walker, P., McLean, L., & Carrive, P. (2015). Fear and the defense cascade: Clinical implications and management. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 23*(4), 263–287. <https://doi.org/10.1097/HRP.0000000000000065>

LoBue, V., & Ogren, M. (2022). How the emotional environment shapes the emotional life of the child. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 9*(1), 137–144. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23727322211067264>

Siegel, D. J. (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of well-being.* W.W. Norton & Company.

Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma.* Penguin Books.

When the Child's Behavior is Influenced by Language Delays

To have successful communication, both parties must be able to clearly understand what is being said and then clearly respond. When a child is using non-verbal means to communicate, it is hard to understand, or cannot express the words needed to convey their message, it can cause great frustration for both caregiver and child. When this happens, the adult should scaffold the child's participation. Scaffolding includes providing a "just right" amount of help so that the child can effectively and efficiently convey their message and know that it has been heard. Practitioners may need to consult with a speech-language pathologist for ideas on how to best scaffold the child's language needs.

When caregivers **Hear** the message the child is conveying, they can respond by repeating back the message to show the child they **Understand** the message the same way the child intended, and **Give** the child a response that models clear and positive communication using a mode of communication available to the child (words, gestures, signs, AAC, etc.). By responding to the child's message using the child's mode of communication, the caregiver is teaching the child how to have a **successful** communication loop. Using the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** models for the child how to use language to communicate more effectively.

The following is an example of how the **H-U-G-S** framework might be applied when the child's behaviors seem to be influenced by language delays.

| | Hear (Identify the cue and the emotion the child is expressing.) | Understand (Use simple words to express the message and the emotion you think the child is demonstrating.) | Give (Give the child a simple response to the message.) | Social- Emotional Competence |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Example during calm times... | The child is pointing to communicate he wants more milk. | "You want more milk right now. You feel thirsty." | "You can have a drink. Tell Grammy, "I want more milk" or "show me the sign for milk." | Create more opportunities for communication and interactions using the child's accessible system of communication. |
| Example during tense times... | The child throws his cup because he wanted juice instead of milk. | "You're disappointed because you wanted to juice instead of milk." | "We aren't having juice right now. You can have milk or water." Show the child how to communicate "water" using a system of communication accessible to them. | Find more times to anticipate what the child wants and help them communicate it using their accessible system. |

When the Child’s Behavior is Influenced by Temperament

Most experts agree that temperament has a genetic and biological basis that, in combination with environmental factors, maturation, and specific relationships, modify the ways a child’s personality is expressed (Saudino, 2005). Children are born with a temperament behavior style. It is not a choice they make (Parlakiam & Lerner, 2016). An individual’s temperament changes and matures, however, temperamental traits tend to endure over a lifespan. Temperament is one part of the unique wiring of an individual’s nervous system, but its expression is influenced by the dynamics of the family system (Kagan, 2012).

Although temperament traits influence behavior, they do not predict behavior. Practitioners can help caregivers understand the impact that differing temperaments can have on successful caregiver-child interactions. For instance, highly energetic caregivers who have a slow to warm-up child or slow-paced caregivers who have a highly active toddler or fussy baby can feel frustrated during interactions (McClowry, Rodriguez, & Kollwitz, 2008). What looks like a “behavior problem” may actually be a difference between the caregiver’s and child’s temperament. By understanding the wide range of individual temperamental differences within a family, practitioners can support strategies that foster greater goodness-of-fit in the family. Caregivers who understand both their own and the child’s temperament can work with the strengths of the child instead of trying to change them. Caregivers can use the **H-U-G-S** framework to understand the child’s message within the context of their temperament and diffuse tense situations.

The following is an example of how the **H-U-G-S** framework might be applied when the child’s behaviors seem to be influenced by their temperament traits.

| | Hear (Identify the cue and the emotion the child is expressing.) | Understand (Use simple words to express the message and the emotion you think the child is demonstrating.) | Give (Give the child a simple response to the message.) | Social-Emotional Competence |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|---|---|
| Example during calm times... | The fussy baby wants to be held a lot. | “You like to be close to your mom. You feel safe when you’re with mom.” | “Let me put you in our wrap and wrap you up close to me while I wash dishes.” | Notice other ways to soothe the child using their comfort objects or positions. |
| Example during tense times... | The child needs more time to warm-up before playing. | “You want to see what is going on before you get down and play. You’re feeling nervous.” | “You can stay close to me until you are ready to play.” | Look for other ways to teach the child strategies to feel safe when in a new environment. |

References

Recommended resources for more information about temperament:

Dunn, J., & Kendrick, C. (1982). Temperamental differences, family relationships, and young children's response to change within the family. In R. Porter & G. M. Collins (Eds.), *Ciba Foundation Symposium 89 - Temperamental differences in infants and young children* (pp. 87-105). Ciba Foundation. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470720714>

Kagan, J. (2010). *The temperamental thread: How genes, culture, time, and luck make us who we are*. The Dana Foundation.

Stocker, C., Dunn, J., & Plomin, R. (1989). Sibling relationships: Links with child temperament, maternal behavior, and family structure. *Child Development*, 60(3), 715-727. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1130737>

When the Child's Behavior is Influenced by Sensory Preferences

Each nervous system processes sensory information differently. Sometimes the differences can be quite large, even between people within the same family. Because of the differences in the way our bodies process our senses, it is normal for different individuals to have different preferences. (e.g., loud vs quiet, strong vs soft, more vs less). Understanding how an individual (parent or child) reacts to their environmental stimuli as well as what their preferences are for sensory input, can help us create environments that support the sensory needs of each individual within the home.

Dunn's Sensory Processing Framework (Dunn, 2014) presents us with four possible sensory processing patterns of behavior that impact how individuals perceive their world. Many of us exhibit multiple patterns during different circumstances and sometimes all at once.

- Registration (Bystanders): Bystanders are flexible and easy-going but may miss more sensory cues that others notice easily.
- Seeking (Seekers): Seekers find ways to get more sensory input to stay alert.
- Sensitivity (Sensors): Sensors are discerning, cautious, aware of all stimuli, and react quickly and more intensely.
- Avoiding (Avoiders): Avoiders create routines and sameness to reduce sensory input. They are content to be alone and may be withdrawn or disruptive. They may need places to get away and regroup.

If the practitioner and caregiver think the child's behavior is impacted by extreme sensory processing patterns, then the **H-U-G-S** framework can be helpful to select responsive strategies that compliment what the child needs in order to regulate. The following is an example of how the **H-U-G-S** framework might be applied when the child's behaviors seem to be influenced by their sensory preferences.

| | Hear (Identify the cue and the emotion the child is expressing.) | Understand (Use simple words to express the message and the emotion you think the child is demonstrating.) | Give (Give the child a simple response to the message.) | Social-Emotional Competence |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|---|
| Example during calm times... | The child is overwhelmed because there is too much going on in the bathtub. | "You don't like all the noise and splashing in the tub. It's too much." | "Let's turn the water off and take some of the toys out, so you can relax." | Look for other ways to teach the child how to control the environment. |
| Example during tense times... | The child is throwing things or crashing to create more stimulation. | "Your body feels like crashing. You're feeling uncomfortable." | "Let's put the pillows on the floor and you can crash into them." | Look for other ways to meet the child's sensory needs and narrate how you are doing it. |

References

Recommended resources for more information about sensory preferences and processing:

Corapci, F., Susa-Erdogan, G., & Benga, O. (2025). Role of parenting on self-regulation from a cross-cultural perspective: Major empirical findings from the first quarter of the 21st century. *Infant Behavior and Development*, 80, 102114.

Dunn, W. (2007). *Living sensorially: Understanding your senses*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Dunn, W. (2014). *Infant/Toddler Sensory Profile*

2. Pearson. <https://www.pearsonassessments.com/en-us/Store/Professional-Assessments/Motor-Sensory/Infant-Toddler-Sensory-Profile/p/100000389>

Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, 26(1), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2014.940781>