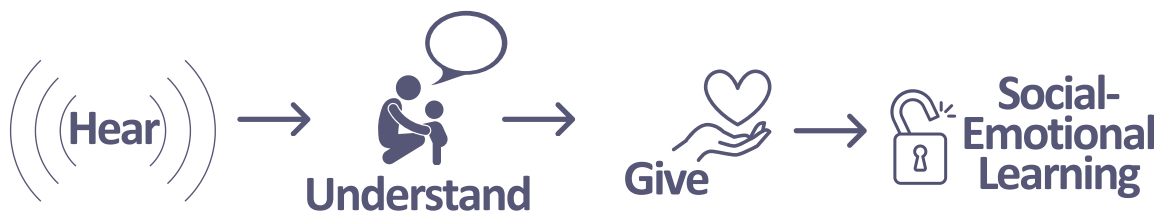




HUGS

Interaction Style



How The H-U-G-S Is Organized

The **H-U-G-S** Interaction Style resources are organized into three parts, (1) the Manual containing important information for practitioners about the **H-U-G-S** framework, how it supports social-emotional learning, and how to use capacity-building coaching to support caregivers; (2) the appendices providers may need as they coach caregivers (available *online*); and (3) the caregiver resources (available *online*).

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Introduction

What Is H-U-G-S?

The **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** is a framework for communicating with children in ways that promote **S**ocial-emotional learning. This interaction style can easily be used during both calm and tense situations. The framework behind the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** is based on the understanding that all behavior is communication and that young children learn appropriate and effective ways to express themselves when these strategies are modeled by a caring and responsive adult. **H-U-G-S** is a three-step interaction style that reminds the adult to:

1. Read the child's cues and interpret what the message behind the behavior is.
2. Put words to the child's message so the child knows they are understood.
3. Respond to the message in a developmentally appropriate way.

Who Is It For?

The **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** can be used by parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults interacting with children. It can be used with any age group, developmental level, and should be used within the context of the family's culture and developmental priorities.

The **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** is taught to caregivers by a coach (early intervention provider, behavior support coach, social worker, Early Head Start home visitor, home visiting nurse, etc.), using the materials in the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** resources. The manual and appendices are intended to be used by the coach to guide their understanding of the **H-U-G-S** framework and their use of evidence-based capacity-building coaching to support caregivers to use **H-U-G-S** strategies. The caregiver resources are intended to be shared with parents and caregivers as part of the individualized coaching they receive from their help-giving professional or coach.

Guiding Principles When Using The H-U-G-S

- All behavior is communication.
- Young children are not intentionally malicious. Their behaviors are intended to meet their own needs, not to undermine the comfort and security of others.
- Children must know their message has been heard and understood by the adult before they can focus on learning from the adult.
- Children learn social-emotional skills through diffused practice over time in real-life contexts.
- An adult must become regulated prior to teaching someone else to regulate.

The H-U-G-S Interaction Style Aligns with Natural Learning Environment Practices, Caregiver Coaching, and Family-Centered Practices

The **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** is intended to be used throughout the day to enhance the purposeful and incidental teaching that occurs during a family's everyday routines, in all the locations it occurs, at home, in the community, and at childcare or school. The **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** should be emphasized as a set of strategies that help children learn effective and functional social communication skills. Practitioners use evidence-based capacity-building coaching (Rush & Shelden, 2020) to help caregivers learn the strategies and reflect on the effectiveness of the strategies. Using **H-U-G-S** during the family's typical activities and routines and reflecting with the family on how it is working ensures that the support is centered on the family's strengths, priorities, and values, and provides an opportunity to align your support with the family's culture. When used regularly, interactions framed by **H-U-G-S** teach children positive social communication skills and reduce tense, challenging interactions that can cause stress for children and families.

The Role Of Co-Regulation Within The *H-U-G-S* Interaction Style

Regulation plays a pivotal role in helping individuals understand their emotions, connect positively with others, and build a strong foundation for social-emotional well-being. Because of the natural process of brain development, children frequently need help keeping themselves regulated, returning to a state of regulation after a big emotion, and knowing how to respond appropriately during social interactions. The supportive process between caregivers and children that fosters the development of self-regulation is called co-regulation (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017). When a child's needs are met with warmth and appropriate responsiveness, they learn to trust their caregivers and to self-regulate, reaching new levels of complexity over time. Sometimes caregiver-child interactions become intense, and caregivers may need extra help remembering strategies for regulating their nervous systems so they can effectively use the *H-U-G-S Interaction Style* with their child. Using the **H-U-G-S** is an effective strategy for keeping caregivers focused on the interaction and not the stress of the situation. **H-U-G-S** resources also include additional evidence-based strategies to help adults re-regulate when they have become dysregulated.

H-U-G-S is designed to support a child’s social-emotional competence, communication, and self-regulation during everyday activities and routines. The **H-U-G-S** mnemonic is a three-step interaction to help caregivers remember to use an effective communication loop with their child. It reminds parents to systematically use the same strategies many parents instinctively use to meet the needs of their newborns. Parents of newborns understand that the many behaviors in which an infant engages are communication messages and if we read those behavioral cues correctly, we can interpret what the infant is telling us and meet the need. For example, when the infant cries we might say, “Oh you’re uncomfortable in that wet diaper. Let’s change it.” When the infant smiles, we might say, “You like it when Nana holds you like that.” As children get older and develop more competencies, adults tend to shorthand those interactions. Shortening interactions can create miscommunication and confusion for the child, make it harder for the child to learn social and emotional language, and make it harder for caregivers and children to communicate positively with one another.

As young children are learning language, they need their caregivers to be good, clear language models, especially as it relates to social emotional competencies. It reminds us that all behavior, regardless of the age of the child, is communication. **H-U-G-S** reminds us to **H**ear the message behind the behavior, show the child we **U**nderstand their message by repeating it, and **G**ive the child a response to the message (not the behavior). Systematically using the **H-U-G** during day-to-day interactions teaches children that their adult “gets” them and models for the child the preferred way of expressing their message as they develop more competencies with their expressive language and their social skills. It also teaches them to interpret and express their own emotions and become socially and emotionally competent people. In short, using the **H-U-G** results in the **S**. Read more about what’s behind **H-U-G-S**:

Hear

Tune-in and **H**ear what the child wants, feels, or is interested in by using **H**ear strategies listed on the *Guide to H-U-G-S Responsive Caregiving Strategies* (insert). **H**ear strategies involve tuning into the child’s behavioral cues and interpreting what they may be communicating. For example, a child holding up their arms might be communicating they want to be picked up. A child pointing with an excited look on their face might be requesting the item they are pointing at. A child swiping their food off their highchair tray may be communicating they are done with their meal. Sometimes reading the child’s cue is easy, and at other times, much more difficult.

The **H**ear step requires the caregiver to consider the possible meanings behind a child’s messages and make an “experienced guess” as to the child’s true intentions. Because many factors influence a child’s message and the behaviors the child uses to communicate the message, caregivers may find it challenging to interpret the child’s behaviors. For example, a crying child may be communicating discomfort, tiredness, hunger, or frustration. Factors such as the child’s immediate environment and the caregiver’s experience with the child can provide valuable clues as to what might be influencing the child’s message. Other factors may be harder to decipher (see Appendix: *Common Factors That Influence Child Behavior* for more information about considerations that may help the caregiver and practitioner identify the message behind certain behaviors). The caregiver won’t be correct 100% of the time, and that’s OK. Being correct even half of the time is enough to model the appropriate words to express the child’s message, build the child’s trust that the caregiver “gets” them, and decrease the frustration over time.

Understand

Let the child know their communication message is understood regardless of the behavior they used to communicate it. Acknowledging the message temporarily stops the behavior so that the caregiver can address

the child's need. Once the caregiver has a good idea about what the child is communicating, the caregiver should let the child know they understand the message the same way the child intended by putting the message into words the caregiver would want the child to use. Putting the child's message into words and observing the child's reaction can help confirm the accuracy of the adult's perception (e.g., "You feel thirsty and want your drink," "You feel full and are finished with your snack," "You feel angry that Sister took your toy, and you want it back," "You miss Daddy," or "You don't want to go to bed yet."). The **U**-message given by the caregiver has two components, (1) naming the emotion the child is showing and (2) hypothesizing the message the child would say if they could say it in the moment. Typically, the caregiver can observe an indication from the child that their perceptions are accurate. The child's posture may relax, crying may subside, or the child may give a gesture of approval. The indication that the caregiver perception is correct provides a few seconds to complete the next step before the child's frustration resumes.

Give

Provide the child with a productive response (a response that moves the request forward with a resolution) to the message the child communicated. The "**G**ive" response provides multiple learning opportunities for the child.

- Provide a response to the request/message. The response should be directed at the request (message), not the behavior used to make the request. The productive response is not intended to give in to the child's request, it is a clear and simple answer to the request, based on child interest and caregiver priorities and boundaries. Based on the request, the answer may provide the child with an alternative ("I know you want a cookie. You can have crackers instead."), choices (e.g., "I know you don't want to take a bath, but it's time. Do you want to bring in your dolls or your dinosaurs?"), or a timeline (e.g., "I know you want to play outside for longer. We will come back outside right after dinner."). The child's protest may not stop right away or cease completely but using **G**ive responses consistently over time helps the child to anticipate caregiver responsiveness, and understand in more complex ways how to self-regulate. The rate at which a child develops this self-regulation is directly impacted by the frequency and the consistency with which the caregiver shows they understand the message and respond to it.
- In addition to giving a productive response, caregivers can model the behavior and actions that they wish the child would use in the future when communicating that message. Giving a productive response to the message does not give the child permission to behave unacceptably. It helps the child feel heard and helps the child be mentally and emotionally available for the teaching moments that follow. By consistently using the **H-U-G-S**, the caregiver can then help the child learn ways to communicate the message more appropriately, as well as learn new ways to meet their own needs. (e.g., "When you're finished, give it to Grandma," "When brother takes your toy, come tell Daddy," or "When you want your drink, say, 'drink'").



Social-Emotional Learning

Children learn **S**ocial-emotional skills from adults who are regularly using productive and predictable **S**ocial-emotional skills. Caregivers should engage with the child as often as possible during everyday activities and routines that provide opportunities to practice communication and self-regulation skills. These interactions should occur not only during tense situations, but in a variety of interactions throughout the day as a preferred interaction style. Using **H**ear, **U**nderstand, and **G**ive strategies throughout the day to acknowledge and respond to a child's communications, establishes a positive interaction style between the child and caregiver and, over time, helps the child regulate their own emotions and behaviors and use an appropriate and predictable communication style themselves.

For examples of how **H-U-G-S** is applied during both calm and tense times, refer to the online Appendix: *Common Factors that Influence Child Behavior*.

Instructions For Using The Tool

The **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** materials were developed to help practitioners support a caregiver as they interact with a child(ren) throughout their day. During interactions, caregivers can practice modeling the language children can use to express their wants, needs, and emotions in a way that ensures interactions are framed to enhance social-emotional development.

Getting Started

- Familiarize yourself with the **H-U-G-S Manual** and inserts prior to using with a family.
- Review the resources within the *Informative Feedback* guidance (p.10) early on so that you are prepared to share information with the caregiver when the need arises.
- Be mindful of your own regulation and adjust accordingly prior to the visit. Using strategies in the Appendix, *Practitioners Co-regulating with Caregivers*, practitioners can set a calm, neutral tone for positive caregiver-practitioner interactions, which sets the tone for positive caregiver-child interactions.
- Consider introducing the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** including the Social-emotional benefits prior to an intense situation. This allows practice with feedback and reflection before trying it during a tense or challenging interaction.
- Use the *Flow of a Coaching Conversation* (p.12) to prepare yourself to prompt the caregiver's reflections and be confident and ready to provide information about the **H-U-G-S** strategies as needed.
- Thinking about the caregiver's learning style, decide how much information and practice to provide in one visit. Caregivers may find it easier to practice one component at a time before putting all three components together.
- Know the limitations of your professional scope of practice and refer the family for additional help when their needs exceed your expertise.

Talking Points For Introducing The H-U-G-S To A Caregiver

When introducing the **H-U-G-S** to caregivers and as you revisit the concepts during visits, emphasize the talking points below:

- **H-U-G-S** is a communication style caregivers use to teach children how the caregiver wants the child to communicate with others.
- **H-U-G-S** is used throughout the day anytime parent-child engagement occurs and can be especially useful during tense situations when the child or caregiver becomes emotional and struggles with interacting positively.
- **H-U-G** stands for Hear the child's cues, use words to tell the child what you Understand their message to be, and Give the child a productive response to their want or need.
- It's ok and even expected to get the message wrong sometimes, especially at first. Caregivers can try to Understand the message again, taking into account any missed or new cues the child expresses.
- The "Give" response is not intended to give in to the child's request. It is intended to address the child's message in a clear productive way.
- Caregiver comfort is a priority. **H-U-G-S** instruction and coaching can occur in a variety of ways that respect caregiver preferences and learning styles. **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** is designed to enhance and accompany other behavior strategies that might already be in place in the family's home.
- When used consistently, the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** reduces the frequency, intensity, and duration of tense interactions and paves the way for more positive interactions and stronger relationships. These relationships include those between a child and their caregiver, siblings, and peers.
- Children are not innately equipped with social-emotional intelligence or the language with which to express themselves. These skills develop over time as they are modeled by caring adults who use appropriate language and social interactions.


- The **H-U-G-S** Interaction Style is designed as a tool to aid caregivers as they model the social-emotional skills. Children need confident social and emotional skills to get their needs met and participate in everyday activities.
- The **H-U-G-S** Interaction Style addresses undesirable behavior by giving the child the level of calm needed to learn and think clearly, teaching the child the words to use to deliver their message appropriately, and instilling new behavioral habits to replace the ineffective ones.

Sample Script For Introducing H-U-G-S To A Caregiver

When explaining the **H-U-G-S**, practitioners should use words and phrases that will be familiar to and easily understood by the family. Giving child-specific examples and relating the explanation to the family's experiences is a helpful way to promote understanding. Below is an example of how an introductory conversation might sound.


***H-U-G-S** is a meaningful communication style that is beneficial throughout the day in all types of situations. One of the benefits caregivers find particularly helpful is its ability to make intense interactions with their child calmer and more productive. It also serves as a great tool to help you model good communication and relationship building with your child when things get tough and patience wears thin.*

*Using the **H-U-G-S** throughout your day whether times are tough or easy can support you in modeling good communication with your child. A good model helps your child stay calm and learn to communicate feelings and needs with others.*

 **Hear** - You tune in to what your child is feeling, wanting, or interested in by paying close attention to their behavior. Even if your child uses words, they may not always have the vocabulary to express their emotions or needs clearly. That's why it's important to notice their facial expressions, body language, and actions.

For example, your child might lift their arms to be picked up, point excitedly at something they want, or push food off their tray to show they're done eating. Sometimes their message is clear—and sometimes it's harder to figure out, like when crying could mean they're tired, uncomfortable, frustrated, or something else entirely.

*The **Hear** step is about asking yourself: What might my child be trying to tell me right now? It means making your best guess based on what you know about your child and what's happening around them. You won't always get it right—and that's okay. What's important is making a consistent effort to understand your child's message, because even small moments of connection can make a big difference. Would you like to try?*


 **Understand** - No matter how your child communicates—through words, gestures, or behavior—it's important to let them know you **Understand** what they're trying to say. When you acknowledge their message, even if it came out as crying or acting out, it often helps pause the behavior long enough for you to respond to their need.

Once you have a good idea of what your child is trying to communicate, put their message into simple words you'd like them to use one day. For example:

- "You want your drink. You feel thirsty."
- "You're all done with your snack. You don't feel hungry anymore."
- "Sister took your toy, and you want it back. You're sad."
- "You don't want to go to bed yet. You're disappointed that it's bedtime."

When your words match their feelings or needs, your child will usually show some kind of relief—like relaxing their body, stopping their crying, or giving a look or nod that tells you they feel understood. That small moment

gives you a window to help them move forward or meet their need before frustration builds again. Would you like to try this part?

 **Give** - Once you've understood what your child is trying to tell you, your response can help them feel heard and teach better ways to express themselves. When giving a productive **H-U-G-S** response keep in mind: Respond to the Message, Not the Behavior. Focus on what your child is asking for, not how they asked. You don't have to say "yes," but your answer should be calm and clear. You can offer:

- **Alternatives:** "You want a cookie. You can have crackers instead."
- **Choices:** "You don't want a bath. We need to take a bath to get clean. Do you want to bring dolls or dinosaurs?"
- **Timelines:** "You want to keep playing. We'll come back out after dinner."


Even if they're still upset, consistent responses help your child learn what to expect and how to manage frustration.

Teach a Better Way to Communicate. Show your child how to express their needs in a more appropriate way:

- "When you're done, give it to Grandma."
- "Tell Daddy if brother takes your toy."
- "Say 'drink' when you want your drink."

You're not excusing the behavior—you're helping your child feel understood and modeling what to do next time they feel that way or want to express that message.

Would you like to try this part?

 **Social-Emotional Learning** - Using the **H**ear, **U**nderstand, and **G**ive strategies throughout the day helps your child feel heard and supported. When you consistently respond to their behavior with understanding and simple, clear messages, it teaches your child how to express themselves and manage their emotions in healthy ways.

Children learn social and emotional skills by watching and interacting with adults. That's why it's important to use these strategies not just during tough moments, but all throughout the day—during playtime, meals, getting dressed, or any routine. These everyday moments are great chances to connect, communicate, and help your child practice staying calm, expressing feelings, and asking for what they need.

Coaching Guidance

Coaching is an adult learning strategy that when used effectively can help the caregiver build knowledge, skills, and confidence to do something new. Many models and frameworks for coaching exist and most models that report capacity-building outcomes for the caregiver share a common set of characteristics. When coaches systematically use those characteristics with fidelity, they are more likely to achieve capacity-building outcomes. When coaching caregivers to use the **H-U-G-S**, the components below should be present throughout the coaching interaction.

Joint Planning

Joint planning occurs at the beginning and end of each coaching conversation. At the end of each conversation the coach helps the caregiver make a plan for what the caregiver will do between visits. The coach asks sufficient follow-up questions to ensure the caregiver has a clear, actionable plan and is confident with how to do it (e.g., “Based on what we did today, what do you want to practice between sessions?” “What’s that going to look like?” “What do you plan to do if...?”). At the beginning of each visit, the coach follows up with the caregiver about how well the plan worked and helps the caregiver fine-tune any strategies that did not work as well as expected (e.g., “Last time, you had planned to use the **H-U-G-S** during mealtime. How has that been working?”).

Observation

Observation happens as needed throughout the coaching conversation. The coach uses observation to identify the caregiver’s strengths in general, as well as their use of the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style**. After observation a practitioner has a greater understanding of how to adjust care giver supports. Sometimes, the practitioner may ask the caregiver if they need a strategy demonstrated, giving the caregiver an opportunity to observe the practitioner before trying the strategy themselves.

Action and Practice

Most people learn best by doing. Caregivers must be actively engaged in practicing strategies with their child. The coach is always thinking about how to position the caregiver to be the facilitator of the child interaction and themselves as a support role. Coaches create space for caregivers to practice each component of the **H-U-G-S**. When the coach needs to demonstrate something, they quickly reposition themselves so the caregiver can immediately try the strategy and resume their role as facilitator.

Coaches are always thinking about how the focus of the visit is empowering the caregiver to maximize their action between visits. Coaches must make sure caregivers have enough practice during the visit to confidently and effectively use the strategies between visits. The more the caregiver puts the **H-U-G-S** practices into action, the more benefit they will see as a result.

Reflection

Coaches use reflection during visits to prompt the active engagement of the caregiver and build the caregiver’s capacity to make thoughtful decisions about how to support their child’s learning between visits. Using reflective questions demonstrates respect for what the caregiver already knows and ensures that the intervention is applied in a way that aligns with the family’s culture, values, and preferences. Reflection questions are open-ended, systematic, and used for a variety of reasons such as:

- Helping you understand the family’s priorities and situation.
- Being aware of strategies they have already tried.
- Helping the family thoroughly analyze the situation and decide what is working, might need to be changed or should be discarded.
- Brainstorming alternative ideas or possible modifications to the strategies they are currently using.

- Helping the family identify the strategies they want to carry forward between visits to continue working on.

Feedback

In coaching, feedback is used to provide encouragement, acknowledgement, and information. Feedback is only provided after the caregiver has had a chance to make their own reflections. **Evaluative feedback** can help boost confidence and reinforce that the caregiver is competent at reading the situation accurately (e.g., “What you just did was a perfect example of using your child’s interest”). **Affirmative feedback** shows the caregiver you are listening and tuned into what they are share (.e.g., nodding, paraphrasing what they said). **Informative feedback** should align with the priorities of the caregiver and provide information on what the caregiver wants to know or would be helpful for them to know (e.g., sharing information about the **H-U-G** steps for supportive interactions). Focusing on caregiver priorities increases the chances the caregiver will find the information helpful and relevant. Coaches always check for understanding after sharing information to ensure the caregiver got what they needed and knows how to use it.

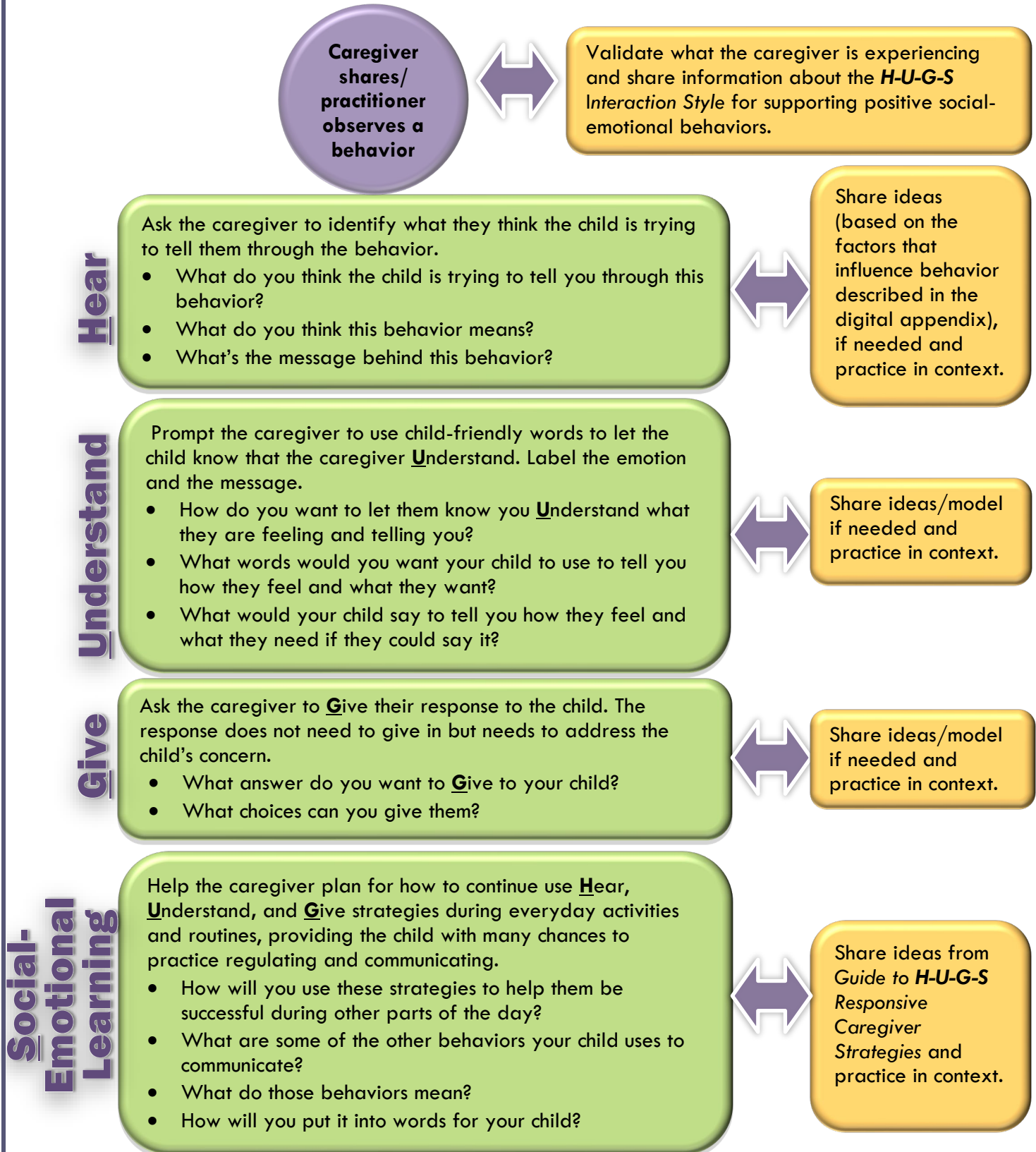
Joint planning, observation, action/practice, reflection, and feedback are woven together and used in varying measures during a coaching conversation. Page 12 shows how the characteristics can be used when coaching a caregiver to use a **H-U-G-S Interaction Style**.

Tips For Coaching A Caregiver To Use H-U-G-S

1. When explaining the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style**, give plenty of examples for how **H-U-G** might sound during the family's real-life activities and using the family's real experiences and situations.
2. Maximize caregiver practice by inviting the caregiver to try out the strategies discussed while you observe.
3. When the caregiver is reluctant to try, offer to model the strategy for the caregiver. When modeling:
 - Let the caregiver know what you will be doing and what they should watch for.
 - Demonstrate the strategy for the caregiver.
 - Prompt the caregiver to reflect on what they observed and how they think it would work for them.
 - Invite the caregiver to try.
 - Prompt the caregiver to reflect on how it worked and what they thought about the results.
 - Prompt the caregiver to reflect on how it worked and what they thought about the results.
4. Observe which strategies the caregiver is using confidently and competently, and which strategies might need fine-tuning. Focus your reflective questions, information, and practice opportunities on those components.
5. Reflect with the caregiver how it worked and help them fine-tune anything that wasn't working.
6. When brainstorming alternative ideas with families, remember that brainstorming is a collaborative process designed to build the caregiver's capacity. Prompt the caregiver to share ideas before adding your own. Use open-ended reflective questions to help the caregiver consider how the information relates to their child and consider how they want to use that information to be more effective with the **H-U-G-S** strategies.
7. Provide the caregiver with information related to topics pertinent to the individual family and their needs/interests (see digital appendix, *Common Factors that Influence Child Behavior*).
8. Carefully select handouts (see digital caregiver resources) to support the caregiver's current interest and focus of practice. Use the handouts to provide caregivers with a written reminder of the strategies.
9. Caregivers benefit from the opportunity to apply the strategies regularly. Consistently encourage opportunities to use **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** within individual visits as well as between visits. Regular use of the strategies provides adequate time to see the benefit of the caregiver's efforts, gain comfort and familiarity with **H-U-G-S**, and internalize strategies to fidelity.
10. Prompt the caregiver to make a plan for how they will use the strategies between sessions.

Flow Of A Coaching Conversation With H-U-G-S

The diagram below shows the basic flow of a capacity-building conversation when coaching a caregiver to use the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style**. In a capacity-building coaching conversation, the practitioner systematically helps the caregiver consider and use each component of the **H-U-G-S** framework (**H**ear, **U**nderstand, **G**ive, and **S**ocial-emotional learning). The practitioner provides informative feedback and ideas for being responsive (gold box) throughout the process as needed.



Frequently Asked Questions

The manual includes the answers to frequently asked questions to help practitioners refine their use of the **H-U-G-S** framework and families' use of the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style**.

How does the H-U-G-S compare with other behavior management approaches?

The **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** focuses on successful communication exchanges as well as the developmental and environmental factors that result in more opportunities for increased social-emotional learning, successful and enjoyable parenting, and nurturing and supportive relationships. Maintaining a child's purposeful learning and engagement is key for learning the socially and emotionally acceptable exchanges that are expected in everyday life.

Many behavior management approaches focus on an aspect of social-emotional learning, like the development of self-regulation skills (e.g., Conscious Discipline), addressing challenging behaviors (e.g., Triple P), or setting up environments and situations to maximize positive support for social-emotional learning and modifications for children who need them (e.g., Pyramid). H-U-G-S focuses on teaching caregivers an effective communication loop to support caregiver-child interactions throughout the day and can be used alongside other approaches.

I feel that I don't have the expertise to fully help the caregiver. How do I know if I have exceeded my professional scope of practice?

Even with the guidance provided in this manual, some children and caregivers need more help than what you are able and ethically allowed to provide. If you find that implementing the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** and guidance is not working, or if the behaviors of the child or the caregiver are more extreme than what you feel comfortable with (e.g., the child seriously injures him/herself, a family member, or pet or the caregiver's behaviors are influenced by a complex mental health condition) the child and caregiver likely need additional professional help. If you have read through all the guidance in this manual and the guidance is not helping you and the caregiver **U**nderstand and diffuse tense interactions, involve other members of your multidisciplinary team or refer to local mental health providers for additional help. Practitioners can continue to help caregivers use the **H-U-G-S** responsive strategies even while they are getting supports elsewhere. If you are uncertain whether the services being provided fall outside of your scope of practice, you can also access your professional organization for information on behavioral supports.

What if the strategies are not working right away?

The strategies must be used consistently and across contexts to be effective. If the strategies are not working, consider providing caregivers with more opportunities to practice by providing a burst of services within a short period of time and/or focusing on using the strategies during multiple activities or routines. Consider how you are preparing the caregiver to use the strategies between visits. Caregivers may need more practice with the strategies or may need the strategy modeled in order to replicate it in context effectively. Also, consider the degree to which you are implementing the **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** as intended. When practices are not implemented as designed, the effects can be diluted.

What if I am already using other behavior strategies, like the Pyramid Model?

Behavior support programs like the Pyramid Model, Conscious Discipline, Triple P, RULER, and **H-U-G-S** share a foundational commitment to promoting children's social-emotional development through responsive, relationship-based strategies. Each program emphasizes the importance of caregiver-child interactions, emotional regulation, and proactive guidance to reduce challenging behaviors and foster resilience. For example, the Pyramid Model uses a tiered framework to support nurturing relationships and positive behavior

interventions, while Conscious Discipline integrates neuroscience and emotional intelligence to help adults model self-regulation and connection. Triple P empowers caregivers with practical tools to build strong relationships and prevent behavioral issues before they escalate. Similarly, RULER teaches elementary educators skills like recognizing and regulating emotions to create supportive learning environments for children. The **H-U-G-S Interaction Style** complements these approaches by filling a gap. **H-U-G-S** shows family support providers how to use coaching to teach caregivers a three-step process for engaging with a child using supportive communication strategies. Despite differences in delivery, these programs use much of the same research base and align in their emphasis on caregiver empowerment, emotional literacy, and the use of evidence-based strategies to support healthy social-emotional learning and development. The programs mentioned pair nicely and are often layered with one another. This means, you don't have to stop using one program to adopt another. Practitioners can identify what support a caregiver needs in the moment and employ the strategies that will be most useful. Practitioners often use **H-U-G-S** as their foundation for teaching an easy-to-remember interaction style and layer in information from other approaches as a caregiver needs it.

With whom is using the H-U-G-S Interaction Style appropriate?

H-U-G-S is a framework for prompting clear communication that focuses on listening to the message the communication partner is trying to convey. This responsive interaction style can be used anytime, anywhere, with any person with whom you are trying to communicate. It is especially effective when tempers get hot, one or both people become dysregulated, or when one person is struggling with how to express their message. Using **H-U-G-S** puts the focus on the message rather than the behaviors the communication partner uses to communicate that message. It has been successfully used in the workplace, in elementary schools, and in homes to foster positive and effective communication across the life span.

Appendices

The appendices below provide practical and detailed guidance on topics related to social-emotional learning. Practitioners can use the appendices to deepen their knowledge and expand their use of **H-U-G-S** with families and caregivers.

Reading Children’s Cues: Understanding how children communicate their feelings—especially when subtle—can be challenging. This document highlights common cues children use to show when they want to engage or disengage, helping adults better interpret and respond to their needs.

Emotional Words To Use with Young Children: Using emotion words with young children builds the foundation for emotional literacy, communication, and empathy. This document shares simple, age-appropriate vocabulary caregivers can use to support children’s social-emotional development.

Practitioners Co-Regulating with Caregivers: Practitioners help caregivers manage emotions by modeling calm, supportive responses during challenging moments. This document shares strategies to co-regulate with caregivers, promote emotional balance, and help them develop regulation skills to use with their children.

Common Factors That Influence Child Behavior: Children’s behavior is influenced by many factors. This document highlights key considerations (sensory needs, preferences, language delays, temperament, etc.) and offers strategies to help practitioners support caregivers in understanding and responding to behavior cues.

Guidance For Writing IFSP Outcomes For Social-Emotional Learning: Writing effective IFSP outcomes involves focusing on learning priorities within meaningful family routines. This document provides guidance for creating functional outcomes that support children’s growth and includes tips for writing parent support outcomes.

Vignette Illustrating a H-U-G-S Conversation with a Caregiver: This vignette shows how a practitioner can support a caregiver using the *H-U-G-S Interaction Style* during everyday routines and highlights how coaching conversations help caregivers respond to their child’s needs.

Common Misconceptions About Children’s Social-Emotional Development: This document addresses common misunderstandings about children’s social-emotional development, explains their impact, and offers guidance for more accurate and supportive approaches.

Helpful Reflective Questions: Reflective questions are valuable tools in coaching conversations. This document provides examples practitioners can use to guide caregivers in thoughtful reflection and decision-making.

Caregiver Resources: These resources support consistent use of the *H-U-G-S Interaction Style* throughout the day and can be shared directly with caregivers to strengthen their interactions with their children.

Visit the [H-U-G-S Interaction Style webpage](#) for more information and additional resources specific for practitioners.

Webpage: <https://fipp.ncdhhs.gov/prof-development/certifications-and-trainings/h-u-g-s-interaction-style/>





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