

Understanding Behavior as Communication

A compassionate, practical parent guide to understanding what a child may be telling us through their behavior.

Behavior is information, not a measure of a child's worth.

When children struggle, it can be tempting to focus only on stopping a behavior. But asking "What is making this hard right now?" can help us respond more effectively.

Behavior may be connected to unmet needs, big feelings, communication differences, sensory experiences, a difficult task, uncertainty, or a desire for connection. There is not always one simple explanation.

Inside this guide

- What behavior might be communicating
- How to look for patterns without making assumptions
- Practical, non-punitive responses families can try
- A reflection worksheet and simple support plan

Free parent resource | kindmindeval.com

1. Get curious about the "why"

A behavior tells us that something is happening; it does not always tell us exactly what. Consider several possibilities and check them against what you know about your child.

What you notice	What it might mean
Leaving the table during homework	The task is difficult, the child needs movement, or the instructions are unclear.
Crying when plans change	The transition feels unpredictable, disappointing, or overwhelming.
Pushing away during a noisy activity	The environment feels uncomfortable, or the child needs more space.
Repeatedly calling for you	The child may need connection, reassurance, help, or attention.

Look for patterns

Before: What was happening just before? Think about expectations, transitions, noise, hunger, fatigue, and social demands.

During: What did your child do? Describe observable actions rather than labels such as "manipulative" or "bad."

After: What happened next? Did the child get a break, receive help, gain access to something, or connect with someone?

A hypothesis is a starting point, not a fact. Ask, observe, and adjust.

2. Respond with connection and support

Start with safety and regulation

Stay calm when possible. Reduce demands, provide space, lower sensory input, and prioritize immediate safety. A dysregulated child may not be ready for a long explanation.

Validate without giving up boundaries

Try: "You really wanted more time. It's hard to stop." You can acknowledge feelings while maintaining a necessary, respectful limit.

Make communication easier

Offer simple choices, visual supports, gestures, communication devices, or phrases such as "help," "break," and "not yet." Honor appropriate requests whenever feasible.

Adapt the environment or expectation

Break tasks into smaller parts, give advance notice, offer movement or sensory supports, and build predictable routines.

Teach when everyone is calm

Practice coping, flexibility, problem solving, asking for help, and repair during low-stress moments. Notice and reinforce attempts to communicate.

Repair and reconnect

If a hard moment happened, return to connection. You can say, "That was tough. We'll figure out a different way together."

Instead of... → Try...

- "Stop being difficult." → "What part feels hard?"
- "Use your words!" → "You can say, point, or show me."
- "Calm down right now." → "I'm here. Would space or help feel better?"

Important: Supporting communication does not mean ignoring dangerous behavior. For immediate safety risks, use your child's individualized safety plan and seek qualified professional guidance.

3. My child's behavior reflection

Choose one recurring situation. Complete this after everyone is calm; it is not meant to be filled out during a crisis.

What happened? Describe the behavior without judgment.

What happened beforehand? (task, transition, people, setting, sensory demands)

What might my child have been communicating? List more than one possibility.

What strengths or communication attempts did I notice?

Our small support plan

Next time, I can change one thing in the environment or routine:

One communication or coping skill we can practice when calm:

How I will know the support is helping:

Remember: Progress can look like asking for a break, recovering more quickly, accepting help, or feeling safer - not simply fewer visible behaviors.

This guide is educational and does not replace individualized psychological or behavioral assessment. If behavior involves injury, significant safety risks, or a sudden change in functioning, consult a qualified professional.