

# Challenging Behavior

*“They are notoriously willful and unpredictable, and their behavior can be difficult to understand and strenuous to handle.” ~ Alicia F. Lieberman, Ph.D, [The Emotional Life of a Toddler](#)*

Challenging behaviors in young children can vary greatly. They range from sleeping or eating issues to hitting, biting, whining, tantrums, and clingy behavior. Challenging behaviors, in one form or another, are common in all children.

Because every child has their own unique personality, it is hard to offer one approach or response that will work for all children. Identifying appropriate ways for caregivers to respond will help support the child's social and emotional development. This can also help caregivers understand the reasons for the behavior.

## Common Reasons for Challenging Behavior

### **Stages 1-3 (birth to around 12 months)**

***I am:***

- learning how to calm myself.
- trying to develop a regular sleep, waking, and eating pattern.
- maybe teething.
- learning about my routines.
- learning to let you know what I want or need.



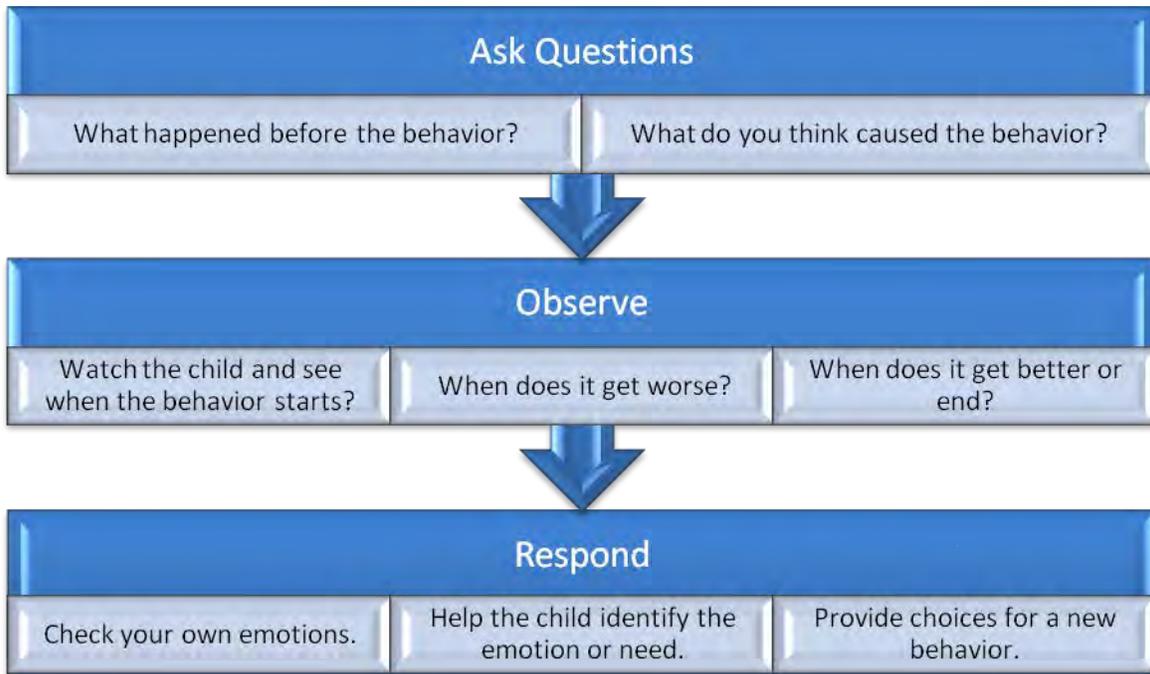
### **Stages 4 and 5 (12 to around 36 months)**

***I am:***

- learning that I'm my own person, separate from my parents and caregivers.
- learning to recognize and express my emotions.
- learning how to communicate frustrations. At this age, I can get frustrated easily.
- maybe needing to satisfy my need to chew, bite, or suck.
- just starting to learn and practice self-control.
- learning about cause and effect. I might try out new behaviors to see how they work.
- trying to be independent. I will assert myself as much as I can.
- working on following simple directions.
- eager to try things that may still be challenging for me.
- practicing seeking your help when I need it.
- Interested in playing with other children, but I don't quite know how to yet.

### **My caregivers can support me by:**

- asking yourself some questions about the behavior.
- observing my behavior.
- responding to my behavior.



### **Other ways to support me when I show challenging behaviors:**

- Respond to me with care. Give me your full attention.
- Set up regular routines so I know what to expect.
- Understand and acknowledge that I cry to express a range of feelings.
- Stay with me when I am upset.
- Learn techniques to calm and comfort me.
- Support the use of a comfort object like my blanket or favorite toy.
- Talk with me about feelings using books and songs. Offer ideas on how to express emotions.
- Help me talk about when I was mad, sad, or angry. For instance, say “You were really sad when Sean took your toy.”
- Consider and support my family’s values about emotional expression.



- Model a range of appropriate ways to express feelings.
- Talk with me when I am calm about how to manage my emotions.
- Offer real choices that are okay from your point of view. For example, ask “Do you want to put on this shoe first or this shoe?”
- Recognize and respect that I may not be able to express feelings with words. I may need to find healthy ways to express myself physically.
- Set simple limits and talk to me about them. Respond consistently to my behavior.
- If you can’t stop feeling angry or upset, make sure I am in a safe, comfortable place and call someone to talk about your frustration.

## Three steps for setting appropriate limits for toddlers:

### Step 1

#### *Tell me what I can do...*

Tell me what I **can** do when I am doing something I shouldn't be doing. For instance, if a child is throwing a book, say “Jenny, books are for reading, not throwing.” Then offer to look at the book with the child or give the child a ball to throw instead.

### Step 2

#### *Remind me...*

Remind me of the rules and give me a choice. Say “Remember, Jenny, books are for reading. You can read the book, not throw it. If you keep throwing it, we'll have to put the book away.”

### Step 3

#### *Follow through!*

Always follow through with the child. Say something like “Jenny, I'm worried about the book getting ripped. Would you like to put it back on the shelf, or should I help you?” Remember, it takes time.

To learn more about challenging behaviors in infants and toddlers, view the Resources and References found at the end of these materials. You can also visit ZERO TO THREE at <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior> or visit The Center on the Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning at [www.Vanderbilt.edu/csefel](http://www.Vanderbilt.edu/csefel).