



Becoming a Better Behavior Detective

Applying a Developmental and Contextual Lens on Behavior to Promote Social and Emotional Development

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Ms. Carrie notices 24-month-old Riley run over to Casey, an 18-month-old who is playing quietly in the soft toys area, covering the baby dolls with blankets. Riley reaches for one of the dolls, and Casey scratches Riley's arm, drawing blood. Riley shoves Casey, grabs the doll, then runs away, taking the doll to another part of the classroom. Casey watches Riley run away with the doll, then starts to cry loudly. This is the third time today that Riley has taken a toy from another child, and the second time today that Casey has drawn blood. Ms. Carrie must decide how to appropriately respond to their behaviors.

This scene is familiar to any early childhood educator who has spent time with infants and toddlers in group settings. The abilities to regulate emotions and behavior develop slowly over time, beginning in infancy. Infants and toddlers experience a growing range of intense emotions, but they cannot understand and regulate these feelings on their own; they need trusted adults to help organize their feelings by responding to their needs quickly, appropriately, and compassionately (Beeghly & Tronick 2011). This support guides very young children on how to calm their bodies and to express their emotions in healthy ways using newfound behaviors (such as resting in a cozy spot) and using emerging verbal and cognitive abilities (such as recognizing and naming feelings).

No matter how well we use preventative strategies to avoid altercations such as the one between Riley and Casey, they are bound to occur. How we interpret

and how we respond to young children’s behavior are part of the daily work of infant and toddler teachers. In a situation such as the opening vignette, early childhood educators can draw on knowledge of child development and reflection skills to detect what is underlying the child’s behavior and to determine a response. Sharpening our “behavior detective” skills requires us to use reflective practices to apply our knowledge of development in service of understanding the individual infant or toddler.

This article presents ways to systematically apply a developmental and contextual lens to understand young children’s behavior. We describe a 5-Step Reflective Cycle (see below) for implementing and reflecting on relationship-based guidance strategies to foster infants’ and toddlers’ social and emotional development. We will outline each step and describe how early childhood educators can enact them.



Step 1: What Is the Child Doing? What Are They Feeling?

For early education professionals, scaffolding emotion regulation is as critical as any academic skill. To best support development, reflective practices such as “observe, listen, wonder, and respond” (Weatherston 2013, 62) enhance a teacher’s ability to see and feel the world from the child’s perspective. Our relationships with children form the basis for how we respond to their behaviors; at the same time, our knowledge of children’s families, temperament, and other characteristics may interfere with our ability to see the child clearly. Thus, our reflective cycle starts by carefully observing a child’s behaviors and facial expressions, by listening to their voices and words, and by systematically asking ourselves a set of questions to help us consider, and reconsider, the child’s perspective:

- › What is the child doing?
- › What is the child feeling?
- › What is the child trying to communicate?
- › Is this behavior developmentally appropriate for the child’s age (Copple & Bredekamp 2009; NAEYC 2020)?
- › What is the child’s body posture and facial expression?
- › What is the child’s tone of voice?
- › Does the child need a caregiver?

While some situations may demand a response right away, many situations would benefit from pausing to consider the underlying reasons for behavior before responding. Even if you must respond right away, taking time to think about the children’s behavior shortly afterward may give you new insights and will help you respond in the most supportive way in the future.

Step 2: What Is the Child Responding To?

Having observed and pondered what a child is doing and feeling, an educator using a developmental and contextual lens next considers the internal and/or external factors that may be influencing an infant’s or toddler’s behavior. It is crucial to think about a

young child’s experiences both in and outside the early learning setting and to ensure that we seek insights about each child through trusting, reciprocal relationships with their family.

When a concerning behavior arises, there are seven possible factors that—on their own or in combination—may be influencing the child at a particular time (see “Behavior Influences and Self-Reflection Questions,” on page 23). Following an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner 1992), we start by examining what is most proximal to the child, in time and space, then move out from there, applying our behavior detective lens to all of these factors, including

- › the child’s immediate or proximal experiences (physical well-being, immediate contexts, and day-to-day experiences)
- › who the child is (their developmental stage and temperament)
- › the child’s relationships to others (secure relationships, home and community cultures)
- › the role that adverse experiences may be playing in the child’s behavior

Physical First!

We must consider physical states and needs first because they are the baseline for child behavior. Infants and toddlers often do not have the words to express their feelings and needs, so our detective work begins there. Is she hungry or tired? Could he be teething or sick? Only after ruling out these types of possibilities do we consider the next six influences.

Context

The safety, stimulation, and security of the child’s immediate context affect behavior, whether at home or in an early childhood setting (Rijlaardsam et al. 2013). Safety is created when environments and routines are predictable, reasonably calm, and children can explore without danger. In an unsafe or unsecure environment, children may have difficulty concentrating and may easily become overstimulated and distressed. Environments should offer playful, engaging learning opportunities with regular breaks. When children are not appropriately engaged, they seek out their own opportunities, which can lead to challenging and inappropriate behavior.

Therefore, a key question in Step 2 asks whether a child is sufficiently engaged and appropriately stimulated by the environment. What is going on in the child’s immediate context right now? Are there enough interesting materials and activities available? Are the teachers actively engaging with the children?

Developmental Progressions and Waves

Development proceeds in a series of bursts and regressions, like waves, rather than as a smooth line (Brazelton Touchpoints Center 2008; NAEYC 2020),

which can mean our expectations of children may become misaligned if we do not take into account when they are experiencing a shift. We must always ask whether our expectations of children’s behavior are aligned with the current developmental skills we have seen from them across all domains. Frustrations arise when children’s desires outpace their current capabilities. Toddlers often understand more than they can say and may become distressed when they cannot express their wants to others. In addition, regressions, which are temporary periods when a child’s nervous system is reorganizing as they gain new skills, often

Behavior Influences and Self-Reflection Questions

Step 2: Become a Behavior Detective! What Is the Child Responding To?		
Influence		Sample Questions to Ask Yourself and Families
1	Physical first!	Is the child hungry, tired, cold/hot, uncomfortable, or in pain? Were the child’s care routines disrupted today or yesterday? Is the child teething, sick, or constipated? Are the child’s senses overwhelmed by the social or physical environment?
2	Context	What is going on in the classroom/immediate context right now? Is the current environment overstimulating—too noisy, too bright, too unpredictable? Are there too many people in the room? Has there been a change in the physical or social environment, or daily routines in the classroom? What is going on at home right now? Has the family moved or made another big change?
3	Developmental progressions and waves	What developmental shifts is the child making that could influence this behavior? Are they in a new phase of attachment to educators? Is the child just learning to sit, crawl, or walk independently? Are they starting to develop and assert their autonomy or independence?
4	Temperament	How adaptable is this child to changes in general? Is this child highly reactive or easily overwhelmed, showing quick and strong reactions to changes in activities or in the environment?
5	Secure relationships	Does the child have at least one caregiver in the classroom who is a safe haven and secure base? Is that trusted person present and available? Has there been a disruption in the child’s family relationships (through divorce or separation, death, arrival of a new sibling, or a new parent)?
6	Culture	How does the child’s family culture value and socialize this behavior? Is there consistency between how educators respond to this behavior at home and in school? Could a mismatch between home and school in practices or communication behaviors affect this behavior?
7	Stress and trauma	Has there been a recent increase in stress or chaos in the child’s life? Did the child experience or witness violence, disaster, or physical harm? Is the child able to seek comfort and safety from educators?

This table is adapted from Vallotton et al. 2021.

come with increased fussiness and disruptions in sleep, feeding, and self-regulation (Scher & Cohen 2015). For children with delays or disabilities, these uneven profiles may be more pronounced and developmental transitions prolonged, leading to more extended periods of disorganization. Framed by a developmental and contextual lens, teachers can more accurately identify, interpret, and support infants and toddlers as they experience significant developmental shifts (Singer 2007; Sparrow 2018).

Temperament

All children differ in temperament, the biological set point that influences behavioral style. Displays of temperaments range from easy-going, adaptable, and predictable to reactive, fussy, and irregular. A young child with a less-adaptive temperament stands to gain the most developmentally when caregivers truly understand their behavior and how it affects a child's experiences, and the adults respond in supportive ways (Pluess & Belsky 2010).

Secure Relationships

Attachment is the special bond that develops between young children and important caregivers and is foundational for learning and behavior. A child with secure attachments uses their caregivers as a secure base for exploration and as a safe haven in times of distress. Both are key in helping infants organize and regulate their feelings.



Infants and toddlers are affected by the absence or loss of a familiar early childhood educator in a group setting, and family changes can disrupt a child's sense of security. When presented with challenging behaviors, we should consider whether any changes or disruptions have occurred in attachment relationships at home and/or in the early childhood setting.

Culture

Infant and toddler behavior is influenced by the cultural beliefs and values of both their families and early childhood professionals. These influences can manifest in subtle ways, such as in how physical and social environments are shaped, in beliefs about childrearing including sleeping and feeding practices (Rogoff 2018), and in communication styles. For example, in some cultures, it is not respectful for a child to make eye contact with an adult; in other cultures, it is disrespectful for adults to put a hand on the top of a child's head.

When presented with behavior that elicits surprise, concern, or disapproval on the part of the educator, consider whether this behavior might reflect a child's cultural contexts at home and in the community. This is not something a teacher can decipher alone; the best way to learn about each child's culture is through strong and ongoing connections with their family and community. This includes asking about the family's hopes and priorities for their child and about what they would like to share about their culture or home life (Rogoff 2018). Also, an early childhood educator must recognize and continually reflect on how their own culture and identity influence their thinking and practices (NAEYC 2019).

Stress and Trauma

Our understanding of stress and trauma, and their effects on brain development, social and emotional development, and behavior, is growing rapidly. Predictable and moderate amounts of stress (e.g., mild family conflict, a sibling's birth) are a typical part of growing up and can help build resilience (Perry 2007; Beeghly & Tronick 2011). Unpredictable, unrelenting stress (e.g., neglect, physical harm, long-term caregiver separation), also known as toxic stress, with little caregiver support can adversely affect brain development and prompt intense reactions and behaviors, such as unpredictable expressions of anger

and frustration or regressions that do not self-correct in a short period of time (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2005/2017; Perry 2007). For these children especially, teachers must be consistent, predictable, and maintain safe, affectionate relationships (Perry 2014). Indeed, a child’s ability to manage stress is dependent on the quality of relationships with caregivers (Lally & Mangione 2017). (For more information about working with children experiencing trauma, read “How Are You Feeling? Strategies for Helping Children Understand and Manage Emotions,” by Vonda Jump Norman et al. on page 63 of this issue.)

Most infants and toddlers do not experience toxic stress. Thus, most challenging behaviors in the classroom will be better understood in light of the other listed influences, which is why stress and trauma are listed last here. Although toxic stress and trauma can influence a child’s social and emotional development, there can be a tendency to attribute any intense

emotion or dysregulated behavior (such as intense aggression) exclusively to these adverse experiences. Above all, early childhood educators should take care to avoid blaming or labeling children and instead take a comprehensive view of the social and emotional expressions that children demonstrate.

Step 3: What Is the Child’s Emotion and Underlying Need?

Most negative expressions of emotion are typical for a very young child who is just figuring out the world with limited language, with uncontrollable feelings, and while navigating shared spaces with peers (Gross 2015). Step 3 involves integrating our observation of the child’s behavior and emotions (Step 1) and our interpretation of what the child is responding to (Step 2)—rooted in knowledge of the child and family—to determine what the child needs in a particular situation.

Linking Emotions, Expressions, and Needs

Step 3: What is the Child’s Underlying Need?		
What the Child Feels	What the Child Needs	What the Teacher Can Do
Frustration	I need to feel capable of accomplishing my goal.	Acknowledge my feelings. Help me find a solution to the problem so I can reach my goal.
Anger	I need to feel understood and validated.	Tell me it’s okay to feel this way. Help me find safe ways to express my feelings. If possible, help me find a solution to the problem.
Overwhelmed	I need to feel held and contained.	Help me find spaces that calm me. Spend one-on-one time with me.
Sadness and grief	I need to feel connected and loved.	Comfort me. Invite me to interact. Help me find ways to soothe myself, but let me feel sad for as long as I need to.
Fear and anxiety	I need to feel safe.	Let me know you will protect me. Make my environment, routines, and adult behavior calm and predictable.

At this step, it is helpful to remind ourselves how we might act if we were feeling this way and did not have adult perspective or coping skills; sometimes *we* act out, even *with* adult coping skills and perspective! “Linking Emotions, Expressions, and Needs” (on page 25) connects children’s emotional experiences with what they need from us, such as a need to feel safe or connected and loved.

Step 4: How Can I Respond to Meet the Child’s Underlying Needs?

Early childhood educators are critical attachment figures for young children, and this relationship offers the young child safety and security, a place to express

emotions and to learn about appropriate behaviors (Mortensen & Barnett 2015). Using developmentally appropriate strategies, teachers can promote infants’ and toddlers’ social and emotional development through three relationship-based strategies: touch, togetherness talk, and “time in.” (See “Strategies to Build Relationships Through Guidance while Promoting Child Compliance” below.) For example, in the opening vignette, after attending to Riley’s wound and returning the doll to Casey, their teacher Ms. Carrie might sit down with Riley and read a favorite book together. Another teacher might position himself close to Casey and gently stroke Casey’s arm, talking about the use of gentle hands.

Strategies to Build Relationships Through Guidance while Promoting Child Compliance

Step 4: How Can I Respond?		
Do This	Not This	Because . . .
<p>Touch: Move close to the child and use gentle, respectful, affectionate touch to get the child’s attention and connect.</p>	<p>Talking/yelling across a room</p> <p>Sudden or rough touch</p>	<p>Gentle, affectionate touch is calming, it reinforces the child’s trust in your relationship, and it helps the child feel connected, which promotes willingness to comply. Some children may react negatively to touch when they are very upset; teachers should use knowledge of individual children in making this choice.</p>
<p>Togetherness talk: Refer to the child’s connection to you or the classroom/community, such as “<i>Let’s clean up together.</i>” “<i>We use gentle touches with our classmates.</i>”</p>	<p>Talking about the child’s behavior to others</p> <p>Directing the child to do things on their own</p>	<p>Togetherness talk expresses guidance as a common goal. Children are more likely to go along with what we ask when they are working with us on a goal, rather than forced to comply with an adult’s goal.</p>
<p>Time in: When children experience and act on strong emotions, spend time with them one-on-one if possible, making yourself physically and emotionally available. If you must stay with other children, move close to the child who is upset, while giving them some space if they need it.</p>	<p>Time out in any form, such as sitting in a corner, going to another room, being sent away from a desired activity</p>	<p>“Time in” provides children time with a trusted caregiver for connection and comfort. It supports the child to move from a highly aroused negative emotional state (angry tantrum) to a calm, connected state so that they can change their behavior. Time out isolates children, which is less effective in helping to calm them, and can produce feelings of shame.</p>

Step 5: Was My Response What the Child Needed?

As educators, we learn not only from our experiences in the moments of teaching but also from reflection. Reflecting on our interactions with children is a foundational part of professional development and continuous growth. In earlier steps, we described several reflective practices: observing behavior (Step 1), pausing to integrate knowledge before responding (Steps 2 and 3), and implementing our response thoughtfully (Step 4). Step 5 asks us to reflect on the effects of our responses on the child's well-being and in meeting their needs. This use of reflective practice, using a developmental and contextual lens, can strengthen the educator-child relationship overall.

Through reflection we gain insights into the ways we influence children's behaviors, which can be used to plan ahead to prevent future challenges and to ensure that we intervene in consistent and responsive ways over time. To do so, we can ask ourselves: Was the child's need met? How did the child's behavior influence me? How have I responded in the past? What did I learn about the child and myself in this interaction? How can I connect with the child's family to gain their insights about how their child's needs may have been met differently during the interaction?

Clearing Our View

We all come to our work with infants and toddlers with different experiences, values, and beliefs, including biases, that may cloud our lenses, making the process of becoming a behavior detective more challenging. Sometimes biases are visible to us, but most often they lurk outside of our awareness or direct attention. For example, thinking back to the opening scene, what did you think about the gender of Riley and Casey or their other social identities related to race, ethnicity, economic class, or different abilities?

We all make certain automatic assumptions about children and their behavior. Recent evidence suggests that when teachers find explanations for behavior that are outside the child's classroom experiences—particularly when they do not feel qualified or prepared to respond to challenging behavior or needs—they are more likely to recommend expulsion and other exclusionary practices (Martin et al. 2018). A

child's race and gender, among other social identities, can directly play into these decisions: for example, preservice and in-service early care practitioners are more likely to look at the behavior of children of color (Gillam et al. 2016) and attribute their behavior as problematic (Okonofua & Eberhardt 2015). In our experiences training preservice early childhood educators, when posed with vignettes about children's behavior, they also are more likely to attribute negative behaviors to factors involving a child's home and traumatic experiences when featuring a child of color.

Thus, even when we are thoughtful about the potential reasons underlying children's behavior, we are all vulnerable to applying our developmental and contextual lenses unevenly and inaccurately across children and families. Early childhood educators should reflect on their relationships with each family, and put concerted effort into building relationships that help them to more clearly connect with and understand each child's family. Clearing our lenses helps us to be present and effective for all children.

Moving Ahead: Using a Detective Lens to Plan, Prevent, and Respond

Riley is huddled in the book area of the classroom, softly crying while holding the captured doll. Her arm has stopped bleeding. Ms. Carrie gently touches her shoulder and says, "Oh, you have a scratch on your arm! I'm sorry that happened. Let's go clean it up and get a bandage." Riley drops the doll and turns to Ms. Carrie with outstretched arms.

After tending to the wound, they walk hand-in-hand back to the book area and pick up the doll. "Let's go deliver this back to Casey," Ms. Carrie says. "She was playing with this one." Riley reluctantly follows to where Casey is seated, now covering the toy cars with blankets. Ms. Carrie offers the doll to Casey, and she adds it to the line of cars waiting to be covered. Ms. Carrie finds a similar doll and hands it to Riley. "Here's one for you!" With the two girls watching Ms. Carrie, she points to Riley's

bandage, gently strokes her arm, and says, “Look, Casey, Riley needed a bandage for her arm. We need to be gentle with our classmates. Now that you both have dolls, do you want to play together?” Ms. Carrie offers Riley a blanket from a nearby bin, in case she’d like to engage in the play Casey has begun. The two children smile as they cover their dolls.

Ms. Carrie makes a note to change the dramatic play area so that all the dolls are displayed rather than stored in a closed bin. She also wants to ask Casey’s parent if anything is happening at home that might be influencing Casey’s reactive scratching.

Reflecting and Planning Ahead

No matter how confident the teacher was in her response to Riley and Casey, it is always worthwhile to revisit the interaction. Looking back, we see that Ms. Carrie observed Riley’s behavior and the emotions (huddling, crying) and what she was responding to (the scratch on her arm from Casey), but she did not label these out loud for Riley in order to help build Riley’s understanding of her own feelings. Ms. Carrie identified Riley’s underlying need to be comforted physically and emotionally, and responded warmly with touch (holding hands), togetherness talk (“Let’s go...”), and time together (caring for Riley’s wound, taking the doll to Casey and talking afterward).

But what was Casey experiencing that caused her to scratch Riley? And what can be done to prevent this type of incident in the future? Ms. Carrie made a plan to change the dramatic play area to eliminate the

Questions to Guide Personal Reflection

Moving Forward: Using Your Reflections to Prevent Behaviors and Plan Ahead	
Context	Questions
Examine a recent event in the classroom together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What could have been a different interpretation of the child’s behaviors, responses, or needs? • What might have influenced my interpretation or response? Could my interpretation of the child’s behavior be related to the child’s characteristics such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic class, or culture? • What information about this event should I share with the child’s family? Is there more information I may want to gather from them that may help me understand the child’s behaviors, responses, strengths, or needs? • What other types of responses could I have considered using with this child?
Examine the supports that are available or that may be needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How am I using the support I currently have (specialists, coteachers, supervisors, administrators)? • Is there someone else I can lean into to share the responsibility or for guidance and support? • What types of supports would help me have the kinds of interactions I want with children (collegial, supervisory, professional development experiences and materials)? • Am I getting the support I need?
Examine ways in which you may need to advocate for yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What actions can I take to advocate for myself? • How can I take care of myself right now?

competition over the dolls and to ask Casey's family about any similar behavior they might have noticed at home. What information might be shared with each child's family, and what questions may help Ms. Carrie better understand each child? While Ms. Carrie could ask herself these questions in a time of self-reflection, talking them over with others could provide additional insights. Reflecting with co-workers and supervisors is a final component of becoming a better behavior detective, turning the lens on ourselves so that we understand not just the children's behavior, but our own as well.

Conclusion

As early education practitioners, we prioritize the needs of children. Yet, we must also reflect on our own experiences and needs to support both personal well-being and professional development. This type of reflection allows us to become more self-aware, which makes us more comfortable exploring what guides our responses to children, asking for support from others, and advocating for our own needs.

Educators who regularly engage in reflective practices may learn to recognize how their own emotional reactions influence interactions with children; this self-reflection in relation to children helps us bring our real selves to the classroom, and be truly emotionally present. To learn more, see "Cultivating Self-Awareness in our Work with Infants, Toddlers, and Their Families: Caring for Ourselves as We Care for Others" on page 30. Knowledge of both self and others develops over time as a result of regular reflective practice.

Reflective practices are intended to be cyclical with early childhood educators observing, reflecting, responding, then cycling back to observing (Vallotton et al. 2021). Reflective practices are more effective and easier to maintain over time when supported by other professionals, including supervisors or coaches (Bernstein & Edwards 2012), coteachers, or a professional learning community. Given the high level of stress faced by early education practitioners (Smith & Lawrence 2019), reflective practices can play an important part in supporting educators' own mental health (Jennings et al. 2013) and abilities to respond to

children in developmentally supportive ways (Weigland 2007; Virmani & Ontain 2010; Jennings et al. 2017; Brophy-Herb et al. 2019). "Questions to Guide Personal Reflection" on page 28 can be used on your own, or with colleagues or a supervisor, to turn your behavior detective lens on yourself and to support your continued growth as an early childhood education professional.

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