

Understanding Children's Behavior



It's how
I'm feeling



It's my
personality



It's this
environment

It's my age



I have a bigger feeling
or need and I don't know
what to do—I need your help



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<i>First Consider . . .</i>	<i>Then wonder if your child is . . .</i>	<i>Next steps . . .</i>
My child’s feelings	Hungry, tired, angry, or scared	Meet your child’s basic need. Your child will usually need your help to know what to do when hungry, tired, angry, or scared.
My child’s unique personality	Typically shy and nervous or often fearless and bold	All young children have different personalities. Sometimes their behavior is really just their personality shining through. You might need to act differently to accommodate your child’s personality. For instance, let your shy child use you to feel safe and secure, and then (when they are ready) encourage them to venture out. If your child is more fearless, you may need to provide extra guidance to keep your child safe and feeling secure.
The environment	Behaving differently in certain places, or because of changes in the environment.	Some places can be VERY challenging for young children. For example, a new child care or doctor’s office can feel scary, and a new place can seem overwhelming. Think about how different environments might affect your child, and introduce them slowly. Sometimes having a special ‘lovey’ or comfort item can help your child adjust to the new place. If a behavior is new, has there been a big change in their life (death or divorce; new preschool; illness; family conflict)? Often big changes can trigger acting out or withdrawing behavior. In this case it’s best to provide extra support and attention.
My child’s age	Having trouble managing their new big ideas and big emotions?	Young children often have BIG ideas and even BIGGER emotions about their ideas. This combination of big ideas and big emotions can lead to young children getting into things they shouldn’t. Meltdowns and tantrums are completely normal at this age. Your child may need many gentle reminders about the rules or limits and help with managing their upset feelings.
My child’s social or emotional needs	Telling you that there is an emotional need underneath your child’s behavior	If your typical ways of dealing with your child’s behavior aren’t working, consider your child’s social and emotional needs. Your child’s behavior is a way of letting you know your help is needed. This type of difficult behavior usually will not go away until the social or emotional need is met. Try to identify the unmet need (such as needing to feel noticed and receive attention or needing to feel safe and secure) and then act to meet the need. Respond to your child’s need with patience, gentle and firm limits, extra attention and reassurance of your love.

Social and Emotional Needs of Early Childhood

- To feel safe and secure
- To understand and be able to manage my upset feelings
- To feel worthy and loved
- To feel a sense of control
- To feel acknowledged and understood
- To feel safe and stimulated in my exploration
- To feel noticed and receive attention
- To feel competent
- To feel a sense of predictability
- To have mutually enjoyable relationships and feel a sense of belonging