

Hold My Hand: Gentle Guiding for the Misguided

We have all seen the difficult behaviors that may encompass early childhood, such as crying, yelling, snatching, hitting, biting, and refusing to follow directions. Challenging behaviors will almost always show their face in our work, but with knowledge, deeper understanding, and heart, we can gently guide misguided behaviors.

Understanding behavior

Behaviors may look inappropriate to us as adults, but may carry a different meaning to the child. Often misguided behaviors are a consequence of something that is too difficult for the child or a message that we need to hear (“Hold my hand and help me, please!”).

Almost all behaviors are a form of communicating something. We must look at many factors that paint the whole picture before we can begin to guide. Do we really know why the behavior occurred? Do we know this child’s developmental abilities? Have we thought about the child’s background, culture, or even events that have happened that day? Or do we just know what the behavior was (and that we don’t like it!)? Consider the following:

Dillon is placed in time-out after hitting his friend, who wouldn’t give up a toy jeep. The behavior has been stopped, but do we know why Dillon hit? Has Dillon been shown or modeled appropriate choices? Does Dillon feel good about himself after sitting in time-out?

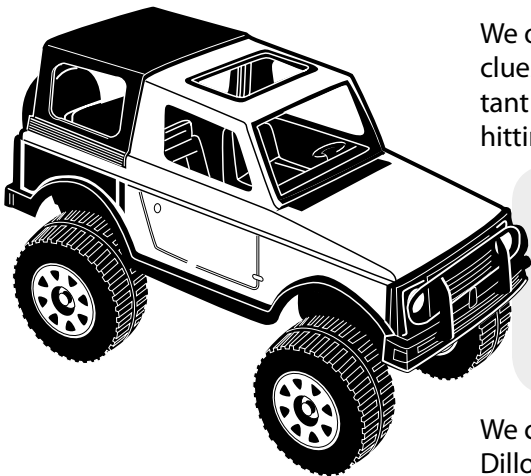
Search to Understand

We often jump ahead in trying to stop the immediate behavior, missing the clues to understanding and guiding the behavior. In this case, while it is important for the hitting to stop, it is equally important to figure out why the child is hitting and how to guide better choices and model appropriate behaviors.

After talking to Dillon, we realize he has the same jeep at home and he thought it was his. Dillon is a young three-year-old and is still working on self control, has been showing some signs of language delays, and has a new sibling at home. Also, a co-worker reported that he had a difficult separation with his mom this morning. With this information, we can begin to understand his actions as well as brainstorm positive ways to guide.

We can start by adding words to identify his feelings. Stooping down to Dillon’s eye level, we might say:

“You seemed mad when you thought Jill had your jeep.” We can provide encouragement and offer choices for positive conflict resolution. “Let’s go talk to Jill and see if this is your jeep from home or it’s the one from school. Would you like to tell her you want a turn when she is done with the jeep?” (The next week, the provider made sure to place extra jeeps in the car basket to help with taking turns.)



Hold my hand

Children exhibiting difficult behaviors need adults to help them learn new, appropriate ways to behave, not to be punished or to miss the opportunity to learn better choices.

Think of how wonderful it feels to gently hold hands with someone you care about and also take guidance from someone who is positive and who understands you. Think also what it feels like to be yelled at or made to feel bad.

It is difficult to not add our opinions when negative behaviors occur; however, it is crucial we do not. For example, Colin is telling everyone what to do in the blocks and also won't share. We could think he's bossy and mean. How does this help Colin learn to cooperate? How does this help the group learn to resolve problems? How does it help our relationship with Colin? It doesn't. Instead, we can see that Colin needs support socially. We may try holding Colin's hand and saying, "You have a lot of ideas you want to try in the blocks. How can we try your ideas as well as share the blocks?" Colin will not be judged for his social development limits, but will be guided to making better choices.

Gentle guiding

Some challenging behaviors completely take us by surprise, but often we are given clues to children's behaviors and behavior patterns. Knowing these clues will help us in meeting the child's needs and helping everyone stay calm.

Be alert to behaviors that seem out of place, factors in the environment that cause distress (too much noise, not enough materials), or times of the day problems occur (before lunch, circle time).

Consider the following guiding tips and most importantly, be ready each day to take the hand of children and gently guide.

Gentle Guides:

- Offer problem-solving choices and encourage children to be involved; their ideas are important
- Give children opportunities to be successful
- Be sure rules, environment, materials, and experiences match each child's abilities
- Accept that children have different temperaments and they may require different approaches and support
- Acknowledge that behavior takes time to change, but also know when to seek outside help and be sure to communicate and be in contact with the family and your co-workers



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