

Is the child feeling safe?

Young children communicate their needs through behavior. When we can identify the needs behind their behaviors, we can find the most effective ways to support them with our responses. Too often, we mistake behavioral challenges as intentional misbehavior. Then we correct the behavior but don't attend to what's behind the behavior. When children do not feel a sense of safety, they move into a fight, flight or freeze state. When we help them to feel safe, we address the root of the problem.

How can we tell the difference between intentional misbehavior and a fight, flight or freeze state?

If the child is exhibiting several of the following signs, they may be experiencing a lack of felt safety either in the environment, with peers/caregiver, from other life experiences, or from physical needs or discomfort. The first step in helping a child to become self-regulated is to help them establish a sense of felt safety. Once established, behavioral challenges often decrease or resolve on their own.

Observe the child and consider the questions on the next page:

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questions to consider.

	yes	no	notes
Does the child's face appear angry? Is their jaw clenched?			
Does the child look worried or scared? Is their facial expression flat or startled?			
Are the child's eyebrows raised, forehead furrowed?			
Does the child have intense or avoidant eye contact?			
Are the child's eyes scanning/darting around?			
Are the child's movements repetitive?			
Is the child's body in motion?			
Are they hitting, kicking, spitting, pushing, making threatening gestures, trembling or clinging?			
Do the child's movements appear impulsive?			
Are they aware of their body in space?			
Do the child's movements appear slow moving?			
Is the child avoiding interaction?			
Is the child's voice loud, high pitched, soft, monotone?			
Does the child's affect match the situation? Ex. uncontrollable laughter; tantrums			
Is the child's heart rate fast?			

Content of this worksheet adapted from *Beyond Behaviors* by Mona Delahooke (2019).

The Early Years Project supports children, infants through preschool, and their families by working with the early childhood communities that care for them. You can reach us at eyp@riversidecc.org