

RESPONDING WITH COMPASSION

GOAL

To help you navigate challenging moments with your child using a compassionate care approach. By prioritizing safety, understanding the purpose behind behaviors, and teaching new skills, you can respond effectively while strengthening your bond with your child.

BACKGROUND

When your child is upset—crying, hitting, or screaming—it's easy to feel overwhelmed. Conflicting advice may rush through your mind, leaving you unsure of the best way to respond. But at the heart of every behavior is a need.

Challenging behaviors are your child's way of saying, "I need help, but I don't know how to ask for it."

Compassionate care helps you:

- Prioritize Safety
- Build Trust
- Teach Skills

EVERY BEHAVIOR HAS A PURPOSE

Behavior is your child's way of communicating. Even if your child has language, behavior might be easier or more effective. Whether they're seeking attention, relief, or connection, understanding why the behavior is happening helps you respond effectively.

Examples of behavior as communication:

- Crying might mean: "I'm overwhelmed."
- Hitting might mean: "I need space."
- Throwing objects might mean: "I don't know how to handle this frustration."
- Self-injury might mean: "I need your attention and I don't know how to ask for it."

THE RISKS OF IGNORING BEHAVIOR

Ignoring challenging behavior—also called extinction—can sometimes make things worse.

Risks of ignoring behavior:

EXTINCTION BURST

The behavior escalates before it improves.

When a behavior is no longer reinforced, it often gets worse before it gets better. This escalation, called an extinction burst, happens because your child is trying harder to make the behavior work.

While temporary, extinction bursts can make situations unsafe and more stressful.

- Behaviors like hitting or throwing can escalate to more intense actions.
- Escalation increases safety risks for your child and others.
- Stress levels rise for both you and your child, making it harder to stay calm.

EMOTIONAL HARM

Ignoring your child's distress can leave them feeling unheard or unsupported.

Challenging behaviors often communicate unmet needs. When those behaviors are ignored, your child may feel frustrated, abandoned, or invalidated.

Over time, this can harm their sense of security and trust in you.

- Ignoring distress signals can lead to feelings of rejection or abandonment.
- Your child may feel they have to manage overwhelming emotions on their own.
- A lack of acknowledgment can damage trust and connection.

INCONSISTENCY

If reinforcement is given after escalation, the behavior becomes even harder to manage.

For extinction to work, reinforcement must never be given—but maintaining this level of consistency is extremely difficult in real-world settings. When reinforcement happens inconsistently, behaviors become stronger and harder to change.

- Inconsistent reinforcement teaches your child to escalate behaviors to get what they want.
- It prolongs the behavior change process and makes extinction bursts more likely.
- Over time, it creates a cycle of escalating, harder-to-manage behaviors.

WHAT COMPASSIONATE CARE LOOKS LIKE

When your child engages in challenging behavior, how you respond in the moment can make a significant difference. By focusing on what to do—like staying calm, addressing their needs, and teaching new skills later—you can turn difficult situations into opportunities for growth. Equally important is knowing what not to do, as certain responses can unintentionally escalate the behavior or harm your child's sense of safety and trust. This section provides clear guidance on how to handle these moments with confidence and compassion.

Do this:

- ✓ **De-escalate First**
 - Use a calm voice and reassuring tone.
 - Minimize overwhelming stimuli (e.g., loud noises, bright lights).
 - Focus on creating a safe environment.
- ✓ **Address the Need**
 - Identify what your child is trying to communicate.
 - Meet the immediate need (e.g., offer a break, provide comfort).
- ✓ **Teach New Skills Later**
 - Once your child is calm, teach them how to communicate their needs appropriately.
 - Reinforce positive behaviors to replace the challenging ones.

Not this:

- ✗ **Respond with Frustration**
 - Avoid raising your voice or using harsh language.
 - Don't use threats or punishment, as they can escalate the behavior further.
- ✗ **Ignore the Behavior Entirely**
 - Ignoring the behavior without addressing your child's need can lead to more intense behaviors (extinction bursts).
 - Failing to acknowledge their feelings can make them feel unsupported or unheard.
- ✗ **Try to Teach in the Heat of the Moment**
 - Avoid attempting to correct or teach while your child is upset—it's unlikely to be effective.
 - Wait until your child is calm and regulated before introducing new skills or expectations.

EXAMPLE IN ACTION

Scenario: Your child is working on a puzzle but becomes frustrated when the pieces don't fit together. Suddenly, they throw the puzzle piece across the room.

Step 1: De-escalate and Stay Calm

- Respond with a calm voice: "I see you're frustrated. Let's take a break."
- Pick up the puzzle piece and place it out of reach to ensure safety.

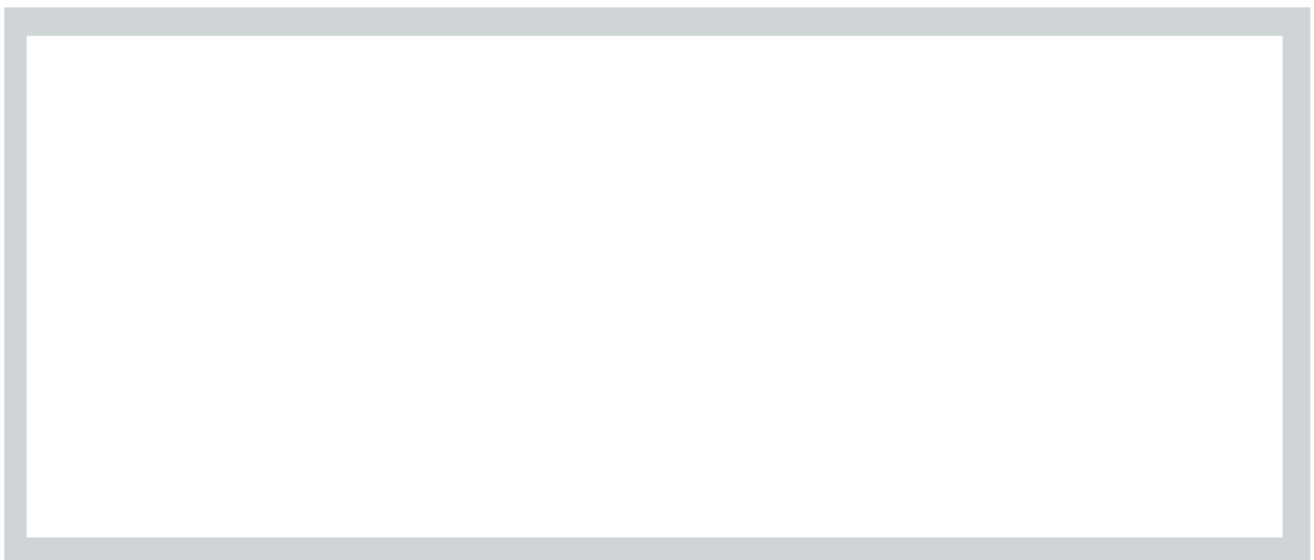
Step 2: Address Their Need

- Offer a short break to reduce stress.

Step 3: Teach Later

- Once they are calm, revisit the situation and model a replacement behavior:
- "Next time the puzzle feels hard, you can say, 'I need help.' Let's practice together!"
- Reinforce their attempt to use the replacement behavior in future situations: "Great job asking for help!"

STRATEGIES FOR YOUR CHILD



YOUR COMPASSIONATE CARE TOOLKIT

Compassionate care is easier to implement when you have the right tools at your fingertips. These strategies provide practical ways to de-escalate challenging moments, address your child's needs, and reinforce positive behaviors.

Phrases to Use in the Moment

When emotions run high, it's easy to feel unsure of what to say. The following phrases can help you stay calm, communicate your support, and guide your child toward a resolution:

"I see you're upset. Let's take a break."

- Acknowledge their emotions and offer a way to step back from the situation, reducing stress.

"It's okay to feel frustrated. I'm here to help."

- Validate their feelings and let them know they're not alone.

"Let's figure this out together."

- Shift the focus from the problem to collaboration, showing that you're on their side.

Visual Supports

For many children, especially those who struggle with verbal communication, visual aids can be powerful tools for reducing frustration and promoting understanding. Examples of effective visual supports include:

Break Cards

- A simple card with the word "Break" or a picture of a quiet space can give your child a quick, nonverbal way to ask for time away when they're overwhelmed.

Choice Boards

- Presenting visual options for activities, snacks, or other preferences can prevent frustration and help your child feel more in control.

First-Then Charts

- A visual chart showing "First (task), Then (reward)" helps your child understand what's expected and motivates them with a clear incentive.