

Understanding & Managing Challenging Behaviors in Pediatric Therapy

A Therapist's and Student Guide to Supporting Regulation and
Participation



Behavior Is Communication

Key Concept: Behavior communicates a child's thoughts, emotions, needs, and sensory experiences.

Examples: Avoidance | Crying | Refusal | Fidgeting | Aggression | Withdrawal | Elopement

Clinical Question: "What is this child trying to communicate?"

Instead of: "They're being difficult."
Think: "What need is being expressed?"

Why Behavior Management Matters

Therapists Are NOT:

- ~Disciplinarians
- ~Punishment providers

Therapists ARE:

- ~Co-regulators
- ~Facilitators of participation
- ~Supporters of self-regulation
- ~Problem-solvers

Important Principle: A regulated child can learn, engage, and participate.
Self-regulation is a lifelong developmental skill that must be supported and practiced.

The Therapist as the Role Model

Children often mirror adult emotional states.

Model Calm Through:

- Tone of voice, Volume, and Pitch
- Facial expressions
- Body language and Posture

Remember: Your regulation directly impacts the child's regulation.



Use Curiosity, Not Assumptions

Ask:

~Why is this behavior occurring?
~What happened before the behavior?
~What sensory factors are present?

~Is the task too challenging?
~Is the child overwhelmed?

Examples:

Looking away → Visual overload? Covering ears → Auditory sensitivity?
Constant movement → Sensory seeking? Refusal → Task difficulty or anxiety?

Prepare for Success

Before Each Session:

- ✓ Establish expectations
- ✓ Create a clear beginning and end
- ✓ Have backup plans (Plan A-Z)
- ✓ Consider the child's current emotional state
- ✓ Prepare regulation supports

Remember: Every child and every therapy session is different.

Support Communication

Communication reduces frustration and challenging behaviors.

Communication Supports:

AAC devices | Core boards | PECS | Yes/No choices | Visual choices | First/Then language

Goal: Provide opportunities for autonomy and self-advocacy.

Helpful Behavior Management Tools

Visual Schedules

Help children:

- Understand expectations
- Anticipate transitions
- Reduce uncertainty

Timers

Provide:

- Clear beginnings
- Clear endings
- Predictability

First-Then Statements

Examples:

- First puzzle, then swing.
- First writing, then bubbles.

Clear Directions

Use:

- Short, concrete, and specific instructions

*Avoid lengthy explanations that may overwhelm children.



Tip: Combine tools! Use a visual schedule WITH a timer AND first-then language for maximum support.

Sensory Regulation Strategies

Start Sessions with Regulation

Examples: Trampoline | Bear walks | Tug-of-war | Heavy work activities | Deep breathing

Goal: Achieve the "just-right" level of arousal for participation.

Understanding Sensory Responses

Hyperresponsive

Child receives too much sensory input.

Examples:

- Covers ears
- Avoids lights
- Distressed by touch

Hyporesponsive

Child receives too little sensory input.

Examples:

- Appears unaware
- Reduced response to stimuli

Sensory Seeking

Child actively seeks sensory experiences.

Examples:

- Running, Jumping
- Crashing, Pushing

Sensory Avoiding

Child actively avoids sensory experiences.

Examples:

- Withdrawal
- Escape behaviors
- Refusal



Remember: Sensory needs vary daily. Always reassess before and during sessions.

Sensory Systems

Sensory Systems to Consider

System	Examples
Tactile	Touch, textures
Vestibular	Movement, balance
Proprioceptive	Joint and muscle input
Visual	Light, clutter
Auditory	Sound
Olfactory	Smell
Gustatory/Oral	Chewing, mouthing
Thermal	Temperature

Prioritize Proprioceptive Input

Examples:

- Pushing
- Pulling
- Carrying
- Tug-of-war
- Animal walks

Benefits:

- Organizing
- Calming
- Difficult to overdo

Caution: Use greater caution with vestibular input (swinging, spinning) as it can be overstimulating for some children.

