

Mental Health: Module 2

Module 2 - Where does Mental Health come from?

Outcomes As a result of completing this module, participants will be able to:

- ✘ Apply a framework to understand the meaning and possible explanations for children's behavior and use that information to plan effective responses to that behavior; and
- ✘ Plan and support activities that improve the fit between temperament and environment by anticipating challenges and planning to meet them successfully.

Key Concepts Children's relationship with their primary family caregivers can be the single most powerful protective factor to buffer the stress of life events.

In order to help children benefit from the relationship and experiences that Head Start offers, we ask families to be our guides in understanding the child's emotional and social history.

Children's capacity to form warm, trusting relationships with adults can be developed or enhanced through Head Start staff members' behaviors and practices. Staff have the potential, through their relationship with parents and children, to make a critical difference.

All behavior has meaning - and the same behavior can mean many different things. Working toward understanding the meaning of a child's behavior will help us choose the most effective response.

Every person has a unique, inborn temperament or style of responding to the world. Understanding temperament (child and adult) can help a caregiver think about how to structure the environment to better fit individual children's unique styles.

Background Information

A. First things first: Children's Primary Relationships

Of all the factors that support resiliency in children and help promote mentally healthy development, the most powerful is a close positive bond

with at least one person who provides stable care and adequate and appropriate attention in childhood, especially in the first years of life. Caring and supportive family relationships remain the most critical factor predicting resiliency throughout childhood and adolescence.

Even in troubled home environments, a consistent, nurturing relationship with at least one parent provides a substantial buffer against stress. For this reason, working with family caregivers to support the strengths in their relationships with children can have a tremendous impact.

Relationships that the child forms with caring adults in Head Start also have the potential to provide very powerful benefits. These relationships may be especially important for those children who, for whatever reason, have not had opportunities to form such relationships within the family.

B. Understanding Children's Behavior

Warm responsive relationships are built on understanding. All behavior has meaning, and we can most effectively respond to behavior if we can understand where it is coming from and what it is trying to communicate. As an example, think about parents and new babies. When things go well, the relationship builds in intimacy and strength as they learn to understand each others' communications.

When mom and dad learn how baby behaves when he is hungry, they respond with food rather than with a clean diaper or a change of scenery. Understanding the explanation for the behavior allows the parent to respond effectively. Until mom and dad know what the hunger cry means, they try the wrong responses and frustration results for both adult and child.

Over time, missed cues and feeling ineffective jeopardize the relationship. A framework for understanding behavior that is puzzling or causes concern can contribute to effective response and relationships where the adult and child feel understood and effective. When the partners in a relationship feel understood and effective, the relationship grows in strength.

Making sense of behavior always involves thoughtful assessment with the individual child and family. The same behavior can have very different explanations and meanings. For example, biting is developmentally predictable in an 18 month-old but raises concern when it is a frequent behavior for a four-year-old. One "shy" and withdrawn child may be expressing a normal aspect of his temperament, but in another child, such behavior may signal her distress with something at home or school. In

addition, no human behavior has a single or "pure" cause. The art of responding effectively is taking many factors into consideration.

Understanding the Young Child's Behavior

- ✦ ***The Developmental State:*** Each developmental stage has predictable behavior that accompanies it. The behavior is the child's way of practicing the important tasks of that stage. Just as a child practices tasks in physical development, such as standing and walking, until he becomes proficient, he must practice (over and over) behaviors that serve to rehearse developmental gains in the cognitive, emotional, and social spheres.
- ✦ ***Individual Differences:*** Every child is born with unique characteristics, including temperament. Temperament influences how the child experiences and responds to her environment. Determining if behaviors are explained by temperament requires working with parents to learn about the child's infancy to find consistent patterns in the child's responses to her environment. Other differences that contribute to behavior include any congenital health or developmental conditions, organic deficits, and similar factors.
- ✦ ***The Head Start Environment:*** Physical environment, structure of activities, experiences, and relationships offered in the Head Start setting obviously contribute to children's behavior. Troubling behavior that is explained by factors in the environment will be improved by intervening with the environment rather than the child. The teachers' behavior is also an important part of the environment.
- ✦ ***The Home Environment:*** Children carry experiences and relationships from home with them into Head Start as their unique constellation of expectations and behavior. While Head Start can not and should not control the home environment, understanding the way that it shapes a child's behavior allows staff to modify the Head Start environment to accommodate the child's needs. The home environment includes all the factors, such as language and culture as well as events, that the child experiences in his daily life.
- ✦ ***Skills and Knowledge:*** Some behavior occurs because the child simply doesn't know the skill or have the knowledge - but is ready to learn. We must remember that young children are learning everything for the very first time and need many, many opportunities to have things explained and to practice new skills.
- ✦ ***Emotional Needs:*** All children have fundamental emotional needs, including the needs for protection and safety, consistency and predictability, trusting relationships, and feeling as though they have an effect on the world. When these needs are not met, children miss out on something critically important for emotional development. Until the need is satisfied, the child is driven by a

hunger for it. Troubling behaviors can be children's way to get what they need. The "solution" that the child is exhibiting is usually not successful, but it won't go away until the need is understood and met.

Individual Differences or Temperament

Anyone who has spend time with infants and young children knows that, from birth, each one is unique. Each has her own style and way of responding to the world. Some babies love being free to kick and feel the air on their skin; others are frantic unless they are tightly swaddled. Some preschoolers can sit and work with Legos for an hour; others need to be constantly on the move.

Researchers have observed children from birth on and have identified nine temperament traits that can be useful in describing a child's temperament profile.

| Temperament Characteristics | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| Intensity | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Deep and powerful emotion reactions - laughs and cries loudly and energetically. | | Quiet and reserved responses - rarely gets upset. | | |
| Persistence | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Finds it difficult to stop an activity or let go of feelings - can stay with at task for a long time. | | Finds it easy to move on to new activities or to let go of feelings - transitions easily. | | |
| Sensitivity | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very sensitive to noise, emotion, temperature, taste, texture. Exceptionally tuned in to others' feelings. | | Can wear any kind of fabric, doesn't mind a lot of noise or activity. Not bothered by odors or new foods. Not too tuned in to others' stress. | | |

| Perceptive | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Very aware of people, colors, noises, etc., easily distracted. Notices things most people miss. | | | | Not extremely aware of surroundings. Can remember and complete multiple directions. Sometimes misses details. |
| Adaptability | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Slow to adjust to changes in schedule or routine - does not easily adapt to new settings, new foods, etc. | | | | Quick to adapt to changes in schedule and routine. Flexible with meals, sleep times - not upset by surprises. |
| Regularity | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Rarely sleeps at the same time. Hungry at different times, no pattern to bowel movements. | | | | Very regular about need for times to sleep, regular meal times, predictable times for bowel movements. |
| Energy | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Always on the move and busy. Finds it difficult to sit still for too long. Needs a lot of physical activity. | | | | Content being quiet and still. Can sit and play or work for extended periods of time. |
| First Reaction | | | | |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| First reaction to a new idea, activity, place or person is to reject it. Watches and waits before engaging in something new. | | | | Jumps right in, engages with new activities, situations and people quickly. Doesn't hesitate in new situations. |

| Mood | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| Serious and often discontent. Tends to see the drawbacks and downside of situations. | | | Usually in a good mood with a positive attitude toward things. Optimistic and content. | |

The reason for observing and describing children's individual temperaments is to improve the fit between caregivers, the care giving environment and the child. A good fit between the caregiver and a child is achieved when the child's behavior is guided and demands are made in a manner that help the child respond successfully. By understanding temperament, we can improve the fit between temperament and expectations, and therefore plan for success.

Temperament characteristics are not things we choose to be; they are inborn characteristics that influence us throughout life. We learn over time how to modify our temperament to social expectations and change the way that we express it, but generally temperament is a consistent style of interacting with the world. The normal range of behavior can include extremes on either end. Often a child whose behavior is different from the "average" is considered to have a behavior problem when he is simply displaying his temperament.

There is no such thing as a "good" or "bad" temperament. Some temperament characteristics, however, tend to be difficult for parents and caregivers. Understanding them as issues of temperament rather than deliberate misbehavior can help adults cope with the behavior and work with it.

Identify the source or explanation of a child's behavior that matches the behavioral examples listed in column one.

Insert the number that corresponds to the correct source or explanation.

1. *Developmental Stage*, 2. *Individual Differences*, 3. *Head Start Environment*, 4. *Home Environment*, 5. *Skills & Knowledge*, 6. *Emotional Needs*

- 1. **The teacher's behavior is part of ...**
- 2. **A teacher explaining something to a child ...**
- 3. **The need for predictability and trusting relationships ...**
- 4. **Temperament ...**
- 5. **Predictable behaviors ...**
- 6. **Language and culture ...**

7. A child expecting the teacher to respond as their mother does ...

8. Health or physical condition of the child ...

Identify the temperament that matches the descriptor mother does ...

Insert the number that corresponds to the correct descriptor.

1. *Intensity*, 2. *Persistence*, 3. *Sensitive*, 4. *Perceptive*, 5. *Adaptability*, 6. *Regularity*, 7. *Energy*, 8. *First Reaction*, 9. *Mood*

9. Not tuned in to others' stress ...

10. Usually optimistic and content ...

11. Always on the move and busy ...

12. Quiet and reserved ...

13. Slow to adjust to changes ...

14. Laughs and cries loudly and energetically ...

15. Very aware of others and easily distracted ...

16. Rarely sleeps at the same time ...

17. Doesn't hesitate in new situations, jumps right in ...

18. Can sit quietly and play for extended periods of time ...

1-3, 2-5, 3-6, 4-2, 5-1, 6-4, 7-6, 8-2, 9-4, 10-9, 11-7, 12-1, 13-8, 14-1, 15-4, 16-6, 17-8, 18-7