Understanding the Message Behind Behavior

In focusing only on stopping a behavior, we miss its message entirely. Our behavior is often a reflection of what we need, feel, are uncomfortable with, or want. **When we take our attention off the behavior, we come to better understand and support the individual displaying it.**

"We must shift from viewing misbehavior as disrespect to seeing it as a form of communication and a call for help" (Bailey, 2025).



Reframing the Question

The questions we ask affect how we see others and interact with them. We are better able to understand and support others when we replace judgment with curiosity.

INSTEAD OF ASKING...	TRY ASKING...
"How do I stop this behavior?"	"What is this person trying to tell me?"
"Why aren't they listening?"	"What need might not be met?"
"How can I make them behave?"	"How can I offer them support?"
"What is wrong with them?"	"What is making this situation difficult?"

(McCluskey, 2023; Prizant & Fields-Meyer, 2016)

Recognizing Early Signs of Distress

Challenging behaviors rarely happen without any warning signs first. Recognizing these early signs can help us find ways to offer support before a situation escalates (McCluskey, 2023):

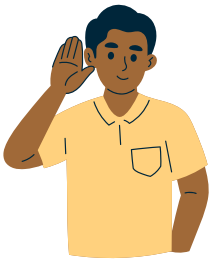
- Social isolation or withdrawal
- Muscle tightness/stiffness
- Increased irritability/moodiness
- Dissociating/spacing out
- Constant body aches/pains (e.g., headaches)
- Hypersensitivity to surroundings

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How to Help as a Support Person:

1 Listen



Tune in to social dynamics and both verbal and nonverbal cues. Acknowledge the individual's attempts to communicate and validate their feelings and experiences. Try to understand rather than correct. Always listen with empathy and compassion.

Observe 2



Observe how they communicate and how the environment is impacting them. Sudden shifts in behavior, mood, or energy are common indicators of dysregulation. When this happens, remain calm, give them space, and remember that less is more.

3 Ask Why



Before responding, ask yourself why this person may be acting that way. Identify needs, stressors, or barriers affecting them. Prioritize safety and connection by sharing control, giving options, and establishing trust through consistency and kindness.

Key Takeaway

Behavior doesn't just happen out of nowhere. Every behavior is communicating something. If we see behavior as communication and try to understand, we can build relationships based on trust, compassion, and learning (Grandin, 2020).

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