



Exercise: What's beneath the behavior?

In order to determine the meaning behind a child's behaviors, you must first figure out why she or he behaves that way. The questions below are intended to guide you through the process of figuring out what's beneath the behavior. (Note: There are questions to which you may not know the answer. It's OK to guess! Use what you know about the child's history, previous care practices, and your intuition.)

Analyze your child's interactions based on early life experience, temperament, learning style, and development (emotional, cognitive, and physical).

What glasses does the child use to view the world? What is his or her background?

1. Did he or she experience... (circle all that apply)

- Prenatal stress (FAS, difficult birth, stressed birthmother)
- Loss (birth parents, siblings, belongings)
- Loved from one special caretaker
- Abuse (physical or sexual)
- Verbal abuse
- Nurturing
- Neglect
- Positive verbal affirmations
- Other _____

2. Select an experience from above. How do you think he or she felt during this experience? (circle all that apply; repeat process for each experience)

- Abandonment
- Confusion
- Grief
- Safety
- Anger
- Happiness
- Worry
- Fear
- Other _____

Why did he or she have this feeling? (Note: Anger is usually an emotion feeling that masks other feelings—strive to uncover what's underneath the anger.)

3. What belief do you think the child formed about himself, parents, and the world based on his or her life experiences?

I am _____

Parents are _____

Life is _____

4. Is the child's behavior complicated by learning difficulties and developmental delays? Which of the following contribute to how he or she views the world?

- Language delays
- Visual or auditory processing problems
- Poor coping skills
- Poor self regulations skills
- Doesn't learn from experience
- Attention problems
- Sensory sensitivity (light, sound, touch)
- Learning disabilities
- Impulsivity
- Other _____

Now that you have thought through what's behind the behavior, let's apply this to a specific behavior.

1. Describe a problematic behavior of the child.

2. What feelings or activities precede the onset of the child's problematic behavior? (Remember: Anger is often used to mask other feelings.)

3. What could be the child's thoughts before the onset of the behavior?
 - Does the behavior fit with the child's beliefs about self, others, and life?
 - What other factors might contribute to the behavior (language, processing attention, etc.)?
 - Is the behavior a coping strategy to avoid painful feelings and obtrusive thoughts? Is it a reaction to a disturbing event that the child had in his/her past (a trigger)? Is it to push you away—why? Is it a habit?

Conclusion about the behavior:

The behavior is _____.

The meaning of the behavior is _____.

The thoughts and feelings that produce the behavior is _____.

