

# Understanding Behavior and Communication in Young Autistic Children

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**VANDERBILT KENNEDY CENTER**

TREATMENT & RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

# Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)



- University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD)
- Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND)
- Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center (IDDRC)
- **TRIAD, the autism institute at VKC**

*Our mission is to improve services for autistic individuals and their families while advancing knowledge and training.*



### **FOR FAMILIES**

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TRIAD clinical and outreach teams offer diagnostic assessment, parent workshops, and other services to families with children who have or are suspected of having an autism spectrum disorder



### **FOR EDUCATORS AND SERVICE PROVIDERS**

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Training and consultation in behavioral and educational assessment and intervention strategies for school personnel, community professionals, and pediatric care providers.



### **FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

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Partnering with community organizations to build capacity for inclusion of individuals with autism spectrum disorder or related disorders.

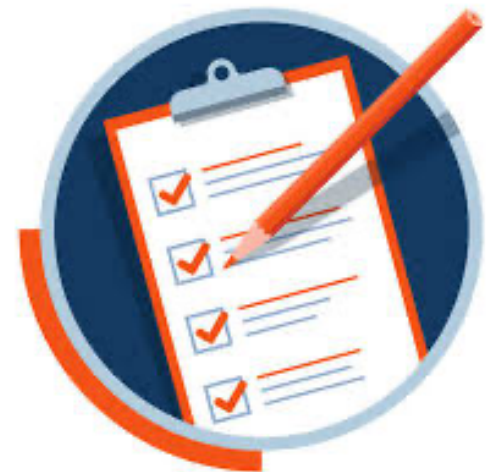






# TODAY'S OBJECTIVES

- Understand how autism may impact a child's communication and behavior
- Understand why a young autistic child may engage in challenging behavior
- Share strategies and lots of resources to support these students



Autism is a developmental disability that impacts social-communication skills and involves the presence of repetitive movements, actions, or language patterns.

<b>Traditional Medical Model</b>	<b>Neurodiversity affirming paradigm</b>
Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction	Differences in perceptions, values, and approaches to social and communicative interaction
Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities	Preference for structure, order, and predictability. Differences in intensity and function of some sensory stimulation.
Deficits in nonverbal communication	Differences in use of and understanding others' use of nonspeaking communicative behaviors
Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity	Differences in practices of expressing social-emotional connection

Adapted from Mathur SK, Renz E, Tarbox J. Affirming Neurodiversity within Applied Behavior Analysis. Behav Anal Pract. 2024 Jan 25;17(2):471-485. doi: 10.1007/s40617-024-00907-3. PMID: 38966275; PMCID: PMC11219658.

In addition to these differences in social communication and interaction, many autistic students are delayed or may not develop spoken communication and so need support to develop safe symbolic ways to communicate wants, needs, and preferences.



The logo consists of the letters 'IRL' in a bold, sans-serif font, colored in a reddish-pink hue. The letters are positioned within a light orange rectangular background.

A student may become upset when presented with a planned classroom activity that involves messy materials (e.g. shaving cream). This might cause the student to elope from the activity.

A student may have learned the structure of their preschool day and thrive on the routine. When unexpected changes occur- like going to the gym vs. playground due to the heat, the student may not understand what is happening or why and fall to the ground and cry when the class heads away from the hallway to outside

A student may become upset because they cannot open something they want, but do not have a way to ask for help. This may cause the student to become upset and engage in unsafe behaviors like throwing the item at a teacher.

# RESOURCE FOR MORE INFORMATION




triad.vklearning.org/DesktopModules/Interzic.AccordLMS/SCOLoader.aspx?LEID=7b0e0e24-fda1-4a93-901f-2cb5ebf6508b&Fid=442c80db-f01a-4e5a-9c07-d3586f887ec9&Mid=1597&PortalId=0&Tbid=...



## Neurodiversity in Early Childhood: A Toolkit for Early Intervention and Early Childhood Providers

22% COMPLETE

- How to Use this Toolkit
- What is Neurodiversity?
- Why is Neurodiversity Important to Focus on From a Young...
- How to Consider Neurodiversity at Eligibility and Diagnosis
- How to Consider Neurodiversity within Goal-Setting and Im...
- How to Talk to Others about Neurodiversity



Here is a goal planning form you can use to identify which goals to pursue first and decide how you will go about achieving those goals.

 **Goal Planning Handout.pdf**  
97.6 KB 

The student does not follow directions

The student hits his head on the floor when his computer time is up

The student hums while teacher is reading book during circle time

The child gets up from snack without eating

The student won't stay on his mat during nap time

The student screams and falls to the ground when it's time to come inside

# WHAT MAKE A BEHAVIOR CHALLENGING?

The student will only play in one center

The student fusses loudly during music time



IS IT WORTH ADDRESSING THESE SITUATIONS IN THE  
EARLY CHILDHOOD ROOM?

Yes, if there is a  
PATTERN of  
behavior.

UNDERSTANDING

He knows better

He is just pushing  
my buttons

He can't just  
get away with  
that

He is just trying to  
get attention

Rather, children behave in a way that reflects how well their needs are being met, how connected they feel, and how adequately their brains are able to manage their particular circumstances.

*Peace I Give Blog*

5

<https://peaceigive.com/2021/12/07/kids-do-well-if-they-can/>



# WHY MIGHT YOUNG AUTISTIC CHILDREN ENGAGE IN CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS?

- They are still learning to communicate effectively, safely, and symbolically and others don't honor

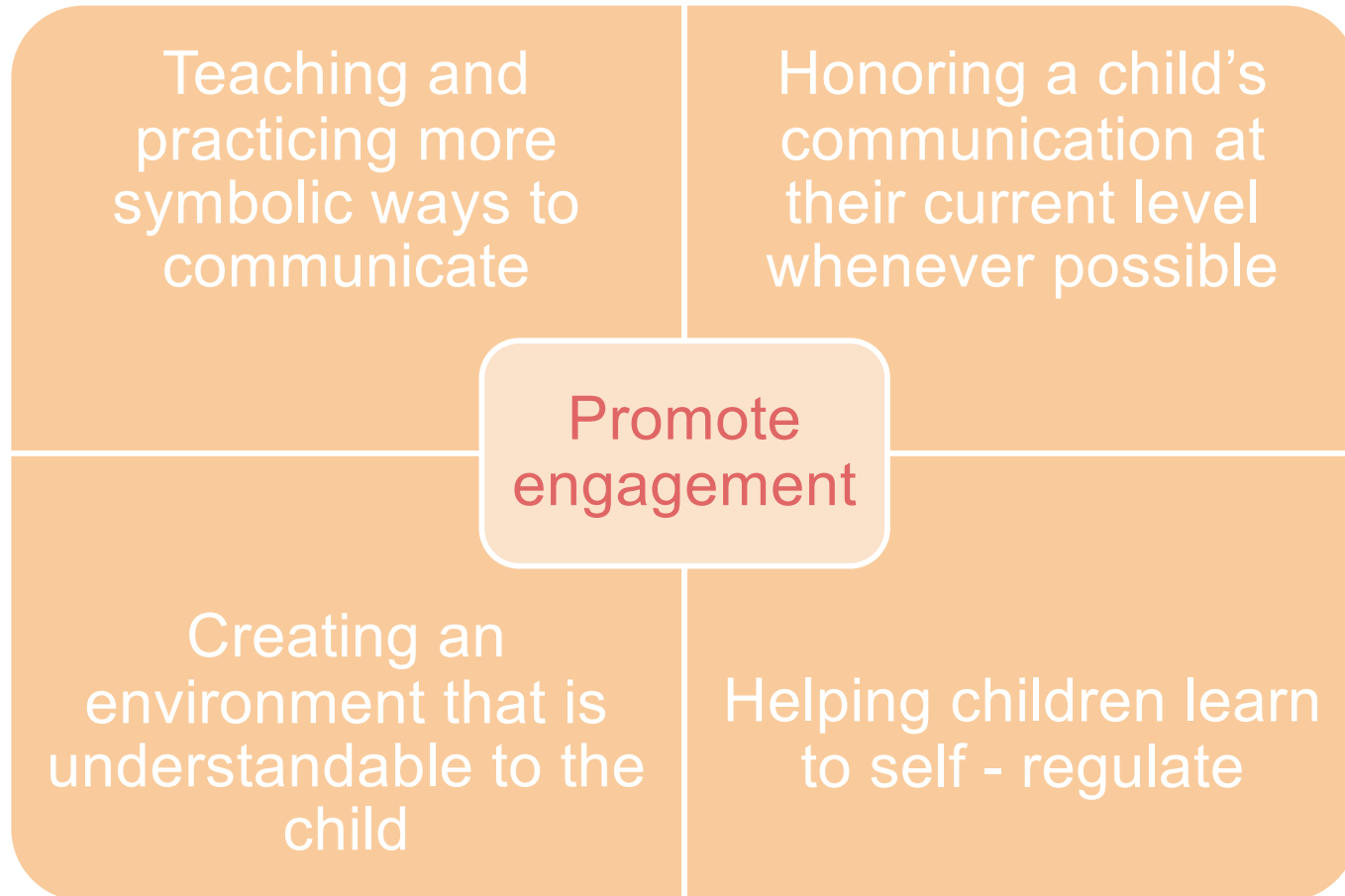
**\* We always want to rule out any possible medical or physical reason for unsafe behaviors (e.g. ear infection, sore throat, poor sleep, GI issues)**

- They may need more support to engage and connect with others

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# HOW... WE CAN SUPPORT OUR AUTISTIC STUDENTS?



Teaching and practicing  
more symbolic ways to  
communicate



## Work with a speech/ language pathologist to develop safe communication skills that can be reinforced across settings

If the child is engaging in unsafe and frequent challenging behaviors focusing on safe communication that matches the function of those behaviors should be a high priority goal.

Teach and model symbolic and multi- modal communication - focus on what child is trying to communicate through challenging behavior at first and practice at times the child is happy and relaxed.

# Autism and Communication

## UNDERSTANDING MY CHILD'S COMMUNICATION



### STEP 1: WHAT IS COMMUNICATION?

Communication involves exchanging information between people.

The ability to **communicate** is different from the ability to **talk**.



### What does it mean to communicate?

For communication to take place, there must be at least two people: a sender and a receiver. Communication is a process, or a series of steps, carried out to achieve a goal. The process of communication starts with a desire to communicate or a need to be met.

### Everyone communicates.

We all use many ways to communicate our wants/needs/feelings/thoughts to others. Your child may communicate differently than his or her siblings or peers, but he or she is still communicating in their own unique way. It is important to recognize how and why your child currently communicates so you can work with your child's team to determine the best next step in their communication development.

#### YOUR CHILD MIGHT COMMUNICATE USING

- Spoken words and phrases
- Gestures such as reaching or pointing
- Sounds or vocalizations
- Facial expressions and eye gaze
- Pictures or line drawing
- Written words
- Physical behaviors such as leading you by the hand, giving you an object, or turning away
- Emotional behaviors such as crying or melting down
- Unsafe behaviors such as pushing or hitting
- Echolalia such as repeating back your words
- Augmentative or Alternative communication such as using an iPad or voice output device

In addition to helping others understand your child's communication you will be an important part of your child's team to help determine the best next steps to teach your child new communication skills that are safe and meaningful.

#### STEP 2: COMMUNICATION AND AUTISM?

The two main traits of autism include difficulties with social-communication and repetitive behaviors/focused interests. These traits may impact how your child communicates.

**Do all children with autism communicate the same?**  
A common quote you may have heard is—"When you've met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism." The meaning of this quote is that all autistic people are unique and may present their skills differently.

#### YOUR CHILD MIGHT COMMUNICATE TO LET YOU KNOW

- What they want (e.g., a snack or to go outside)
- What they need (e.g., help)
- What they like (e.g., a favorite show or song)
- What they do not like (e.g., doing homework or putting on shoes)
- How they are feeling (e.g., sad, sick, frustrated)
- What they want to know (e.g., where is mom?)

**Understanding your child's communication is the first step to helping them expand their ability to express themselves in ways that are understandable to others.**

#### YOUR CHILD'S COMMUNICATION MAY PRESENT IN A VARIETY OF WAYS, INCLUDING:

- Limited or no vocal speech
- Difficulty using and/or understanding nonverbal communication (e.g., body language, eye contact, etc.)
- Struggling with initiating and/or maintaining conversations
- Talking about a particular topic a lot with little to no interest talking about other things
- Scripting (or repeating sentences that they heard from an outside source)
- Having meltdowns when others do not understand what they are trying to communicate

#### What if my child does not ever communicate with me?

Even if your child does not engage in full conversations with you, they are still communicating their wants and needs. You may even have your own "translation" of your child's behavior!

As the expert of your child, you know better than others what they are trying to say when they act in a certain way. For example, if your child expresses joy through making loud noises, you may have to explain to others that your child is happy!

**What if my child can talk but it seems like they choose not to communicate?**  
Sometimes autistic children may not know how to communicate their wants/needs in the right words. It is likely that your child is not intentionally withholding information, but rather may have difficulty expressing their thoughts OR assume that something does not need to be said aloud.

#### WHY DOES MY CHILD COMMUNICATE DIFFERENTLY?

Why autistic children communicate differently could be for several reasons.

It could be because they need explicit instructions rather than relying on a lot of our unspoken rules

It could be because how they are currently communicating works for them and changing may be seen as too difficult or not worth it

Or it could be because they feel they are communicating fine; it is others who are having difficulty understanding them!

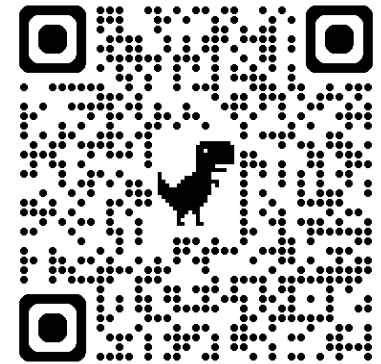
Once we recognize that communication can look different for everybody, you will start to recognize more of the ways your child communicates with you and others!

#### Reflection

Think of the last time your child had a difficult day and you found out that it was because of something in their environment that they did not tell you about, like a cut on their finger. Was this a big deal to them? Did you notice right away, or did it take time? Sometimes when changes happen in the environment, it can be hard to concentrate on anything else. When that change is so noticeable to the child, they may not communicate this because they either 1) do not realize you do not see the change too and/or 2) are trying hard to regulate their reaction to this change. If your child does not tell you right away, it is not because they are keeping it a secret or not telling you on purpose. Instead, it is more likely because it may be hard to 1) say what is wrong, 2) concentrate on communicating, and/or 3) realize that others may not be aware of what they are currently experiencing.

Understanding My Child's Communication | 2
Understanding My Child's Communication | 3

[https://vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/triad/tips/Understanding\\_Child\\_Comm.pdf](https://vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/triad/tips/Understanding_Child_Comm.pdf)



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# MEET JAKE



Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Playing during gym time and on playground	Hits a peer and runs away	Peer gets upset Teachers says “no” Teacher tries time out
Some version of this sequence has occurred daily since winter break. WHY?		



# HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THIS BEHAVIOR?

- ***They are still learning to communicate effectively, safely, and symbolically and others don't honor their current communicative modality***
- They may be overwhelmed by their environment
- They may not understand what is expected of them
- They want something they can't access (outside in the rain, more cookies, attention)
- They don't want to do something they need to do (e.g. diaper change, get in car seat)
- ***They may need more support to engage and connect with others***

# AFTER UNDERSTANDING WE CAN TEACH A “SAFER WAY”

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Availability of a “chase” picture card	Jake approaches to hit	Mom redirects to the picture card
Mom redirects to the picture card	Jake gives mom the picture for “chase”	Mom chases Jake

With consistent practice, Jake learned to initiate a game of chase by exchanging a picture and was soon able to generalize the skill to school.





## MEET CHARLIE

HOW CAN WE  
UNDERSTAND  
THIS 'BEHAVIOR'?

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Ch  
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blocks/  
peer  
approach to  
join in

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- ***They are still learning to communicate effectively, safely, and symbolically and others don't honor their current communicative behavior***
- They may be overwhelmed by their environment
- They may not understand what is expected of them
- They want something they can't access (outside in the rain, more cookies, attention)
- ***They don't want to do something they need to do (e.g. diaper change, get in car seat)***
- They may need more support to engage and connect with others

## NOW WHAT?

**Step 1. Teach Charlie to effectively, so and symbolic communicate 'move' at a time that he is  
regular**

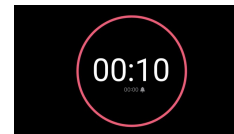
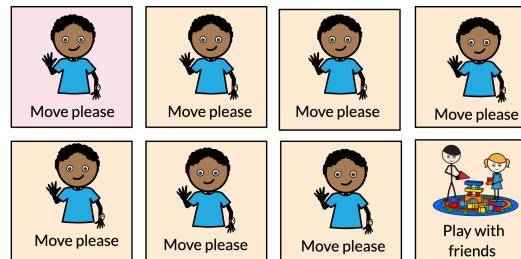
Frequently adults want the child to stop engaging in the challenging behavior AND to stop wanting what they are trying to achieve through that behavior. It's almost impossible to address both at once. First step almost always must be teaching and honoring the safe communication and THEN helping the child cope with situations in which the communication cannot be honored.

# CHARLIE'S PLAN STEP 2: COPING WITH ADVERSITY (A.K.A. LETTING PEERS PLAY NEXT TO HIM)

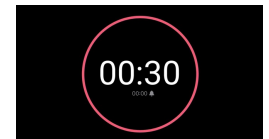
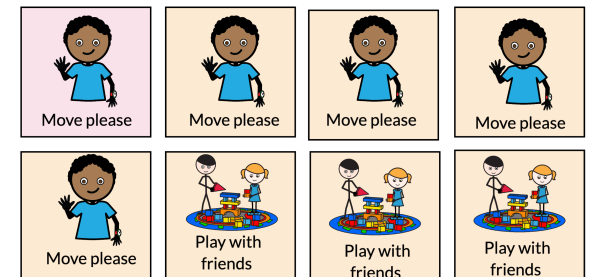
Step 1: safe  
symbolic protest  
that is honored



Step 2: calmly  
allow brief  
moments of play  
with peers



Step 3: gradually increase  
time of play with peers or  
maybe reduce number of  
protests honored



Honoring a child's communication at their current level whenever possible

**Old view: But then I am reinforcing challenging behavior!**

**New view: I am teaching the child to safely self advocate and THEN will teach them to cope with adversity.**



### Visual Supports

Clarify the expectations.  
Don't expect your child to immediately understand-we have to teach them what the visuals mean!

#### First-Then Board

- Use for one step work-reward tasks
- First "work" then FUN!
- The "then" must happen immediately after the "first" is complete, even if it requires a little help



#### Choice Board



- Use to show your child what is available and for them to communicate what they want
- Start with two choices at a time and gradually add as your child is ready
- Can use actual objects instead of pictures
- Child can point to choice or remove the picture/item and hand it to you

#### Visual Timer



- Use to help your child understand how long something will last
- Use for both preferred and non-preferred tasks (i.e. how much longer I get to play outside, how long I have to keep sitting at the table, etc.)



#### Visual Schedule



- Use for longer sequences of activities (i.e. bedtime, toileting, morning routine)
- Shows progression and what comes next
- Child should manipulate pictures when steps are complete

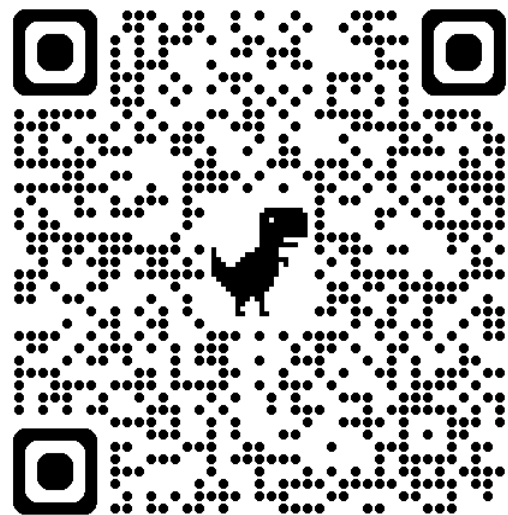
#### Not Available or Stop Sign



- Use to signify when certain things are not a choice right now (i.e. going outside or watching TV)
- Make sure to provide alternate choices for what they can do instead!

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Creating an environment that is understandable to the student



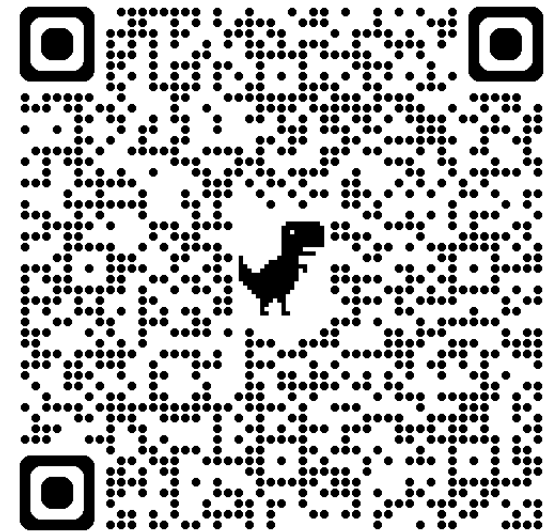
<https://vkc.vumc.org/assets/files/resources/visualsupports.pdf>

# WHAT NEEDED CLARIFICATION FOR THE CHILD/ STUDENT?

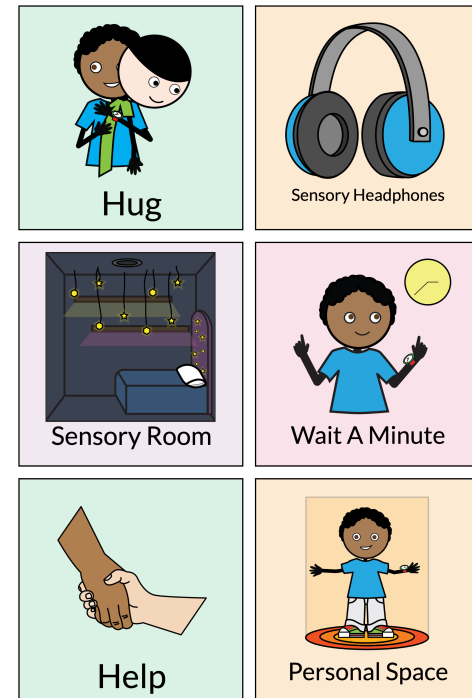
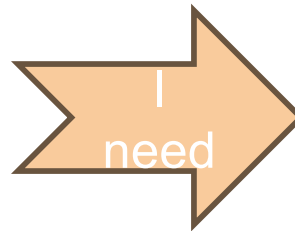
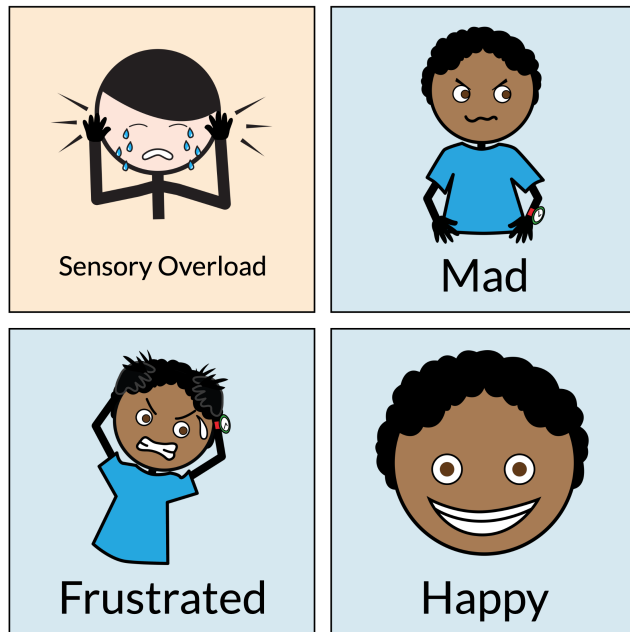


Helping children  
learn to self  
regulate

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the URL <https://triad.vkclearning.org/en-us/My-Courses/LrnTab1597/myplan/LrnCtr1597/myplan/LrnKC1597/true/FID1597/20001c5e-82df-45a1-9122-729591a4356e>. The page is for the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center, featuring a course titled "Active Calming Strategies: A Guide for EC Teachers". The course description states: "This module will teach educators to build their students' self-regulation and calming skills. There will be a focus on using techniques to teach children to better manage their emotions and behaviors." The page includes a "START COURSE" button and a "DETAILS" dropdown menu. A sidebar on the left lists navigation options: Home, My Courses, Resources, Transcript, Community, Podcasts, In-Person Trainings, FAQ, Printables, and Self-Guided PD. The browser's address bar and various extension icons are visible at the top.

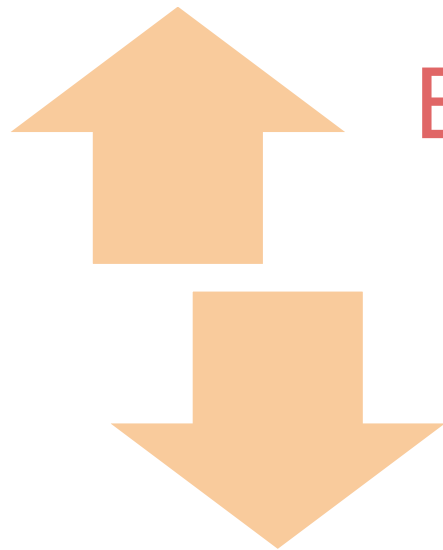


# Self regulation and communication: how to communicate what you need to be to cope with adversity



Promote  
engagement

Teaching young children to engage with others and their environment is the foundation for teaching any other skills and can reduce many challenging behaviors



Engagement

Challenging  
Behavior

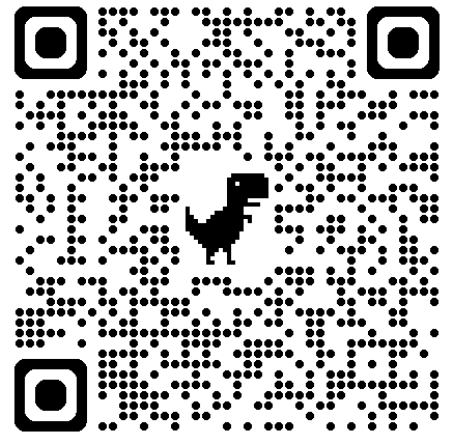
Increased engagement with others and the environment is a preventative strategy that can reduce a student's need to engage in challenging behaviors

This is a great area to include parents!



## Strategies to build engagement

- Get face to face
- Join in without demands (e.g. questions, directions)
- Imitate
- Be fun
- Make activity more fun with you then without you



<https://triad.vkclearning.org/en-us/My-Courses/LrnTab1597/myplan/LrnCtrl1597/myplan/LrnKC1597/true/FID1597/d250fd84-ac9a-4f32-af4c-57fe240b6b02>



CSEFEL - Module 3a, Video 1: Challenging Behaviors

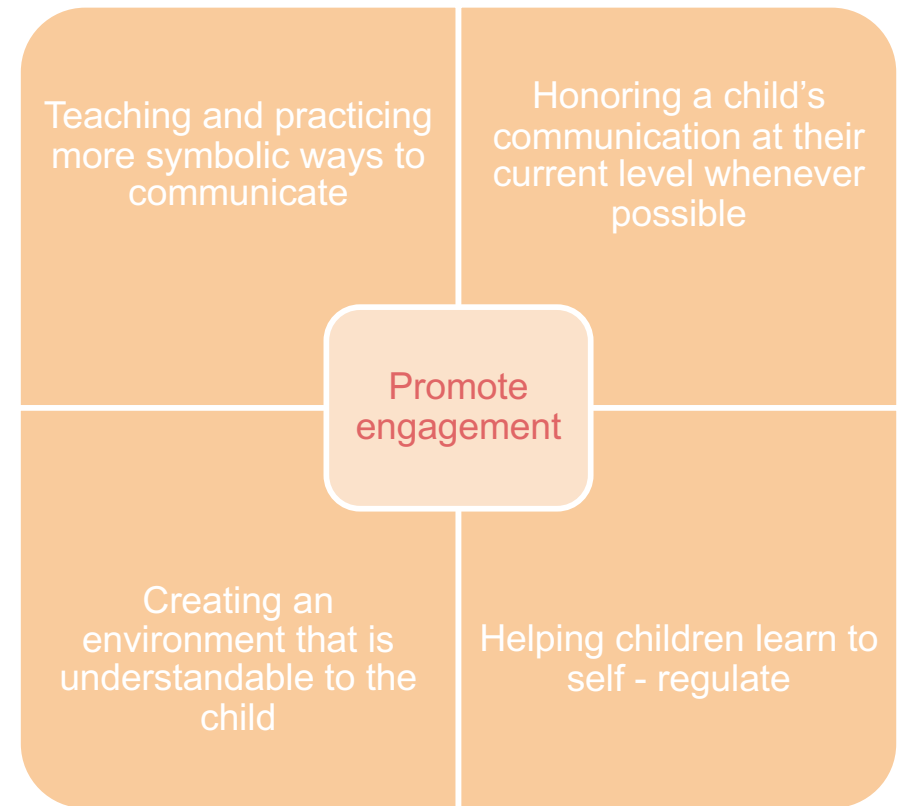
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ec7x\\_AWW71Q&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ec7x_AWW71Q&t=2s)

# TURN AND TALK



- They are still learning to communicate effectively, safely, and symbolically and others don't honor their current communicative modality
- They may be overwhelmed by their environment
- They may not understand what is expected of them
- They want something they can't access (outside in the rain, more cookies)
- They don't want to do something they need to do (e.g. diaper change, get in car seat)
- They may need more support to engage and connect with others

How would you understand this behavior?  
What would you try to support the student if this is a pattern of behavior?





vkclearning.org

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning**

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) is focused on promoting the social emotional development and school readiness of young children birth to age 5. CSEFEL is a national resource center funded by the Office of Head Start and Child Care Bureau for disseminating research and evidence-based practices to early childhood programs across the country.

**The Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children.** We have developed extensive, user-friendly training materials, videos, and print resources which are available directly from this website to help early care, health and education providers implement this model.

**State Partnerships**  
Visit our states page to find more information about any of our state partners or new resources and information for all states.

State Partners: California, Colorado, Hawaii, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, North Carolina, Tennessee, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

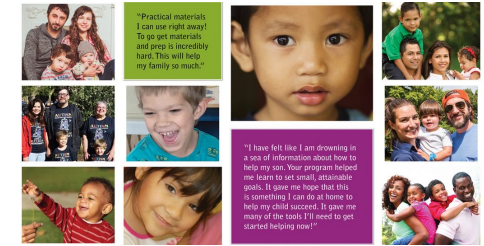
Stay Connected to CSEFEL: sign up for our electronic updates

Resources by Type:  
 • Chat Sessions  
 • Decision Making Guidelines  
 • En Español  
 • Family Tools  
 • Research Syntheses  
 • Practical Strategies  
 • State Planning  
 • Training Kits  
 • Training Modules  
 • Infant/Toddler  
 • Preschool  
 • Pre-K Parent Modules  
 • Infant/Toddler Parent Modules (PTM)  
 • Videos  
 • What Works Briefs

Resources by Group:  
 • For States  
 • For Trainers/Coaches  
 • For Families  
 • For Teachers/Caregivers

Order Materials (pdf)  
 For States  
 For Families  
 En Español  
 For Trainers/Coaches  
 For Teachers/Caregivers

**Pyramid Model**  
 Promoting Social and Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children  
 Enlarged Image | View Presentation  
 Spanish Image | Spanish Presentation



**TRIAID FAMILIES FIRST**

**QUICK TIPS**

**ABC's of Behavior**

**A = Antecedent**  
Anything that happens before a behavior. This can be changed to increase or decrease the future occurrence of the behavior.

**B = Behavior**  
This is what you can see (i.e., pointing, reaching, giving, throwing, waving).

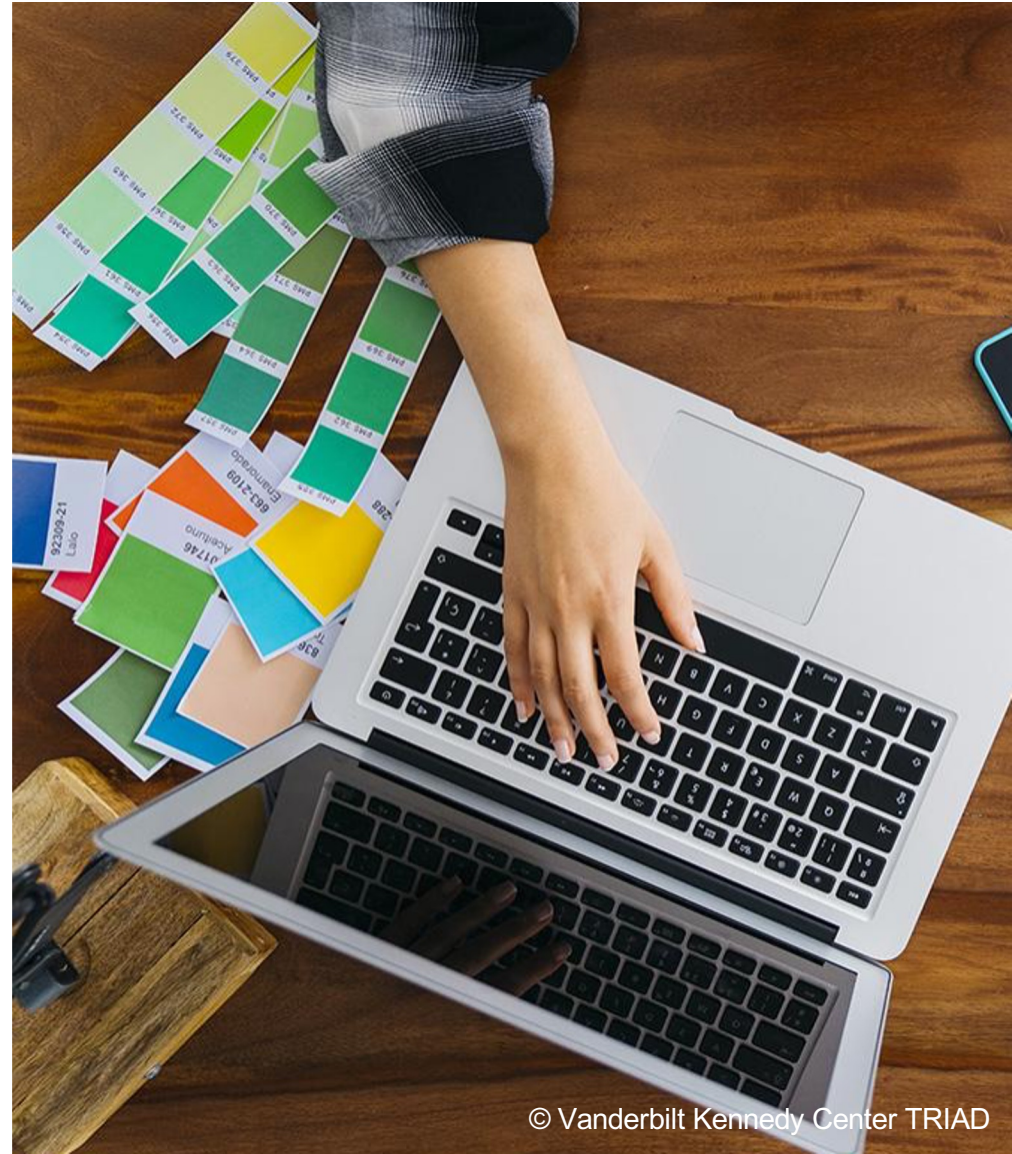
**C = Consequence**  
This is what happens after a behavior and can increase or decrease whether you see that behavior happen again in the future.

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Child can't open fruit crates	throws fruit crates, yells to dad	Dad opens fruit crates

[vk.vumc.org/vkc/triad/fam/](http://vk.vumc.org/vkc/triad/fam/)

# DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

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