


Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior

A Practical Guide to Parenting With
Positive Behavior Support



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With Positive Behavior Support

Second Edition

by

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About the Authors

This book was written by three women—Meme, Karen, and Jane. Each author is a parent as well as a professional with extensive experience working with children with behavioral difficulties and their families. They have children and, in some cases, grandchildren; supportive partners; networks of family and friends; and active community lives. Collectively, Meme, Karen, and Jane have more than 95 years of professional experience. Within each of their professional roles, they have taken research-based information and applied it in practical ways to improve the lives of children and families.

Meme, Karen, and Jane also have certain shared values that should be evident throughout this book. Although each author has a unique perspective derived from their own personal experiences, all three authors believe in enhancing support and structure in families' lives, being positive and encouraging, rather than reactive and punitive, and handling problems in respectful and effective ways.

Meme Hieneman, Ph.D., BCBA, Consultant with Positive Behavior Support Applications, Faculty Member at Purdue University Global, and President of the Home and Community Positive Behavior Support Network, Palm Harbor, Florida.

Meme was a consultant, researcher, educator, and advocate who worked with organizations that support children with significant behavioral challenges and provide information and resources through teaching and nonprofit work. She was married for more than 30 years and had two young adult sons. Meme had a doctorate in special education and was certified as a behavior analyst. She published a variety of articles, chapters, and three books. She developed a comprehensive video and training package on positive behavior support (PBS) for parents of children with autism and other developmental disabilities and was a regular contributor to *Parenting Special Needs Magazine*.

Meme worked with children with severe behavioral challenges and their families for more than 30 years. She was a residential program manager; behavior specialist for a school district; staff member for a program assisting families and professionals of children with autism; adjunct instructor at the University of South Florida (USF); director of a statewide PBS project helping schools implement proactive, evidence-based interventions; cotraining coordinator for the National Research and Training

Center on PBS; research director of the Positive Family Intervention Project at USF; director and developer of the applied behavior analysis (ABA) and autism programs at All Children's Hospital; and Co-Principal Investigator of a National Institutes of Health-research study focused on behavioral parent education. She taught masters'-level courses in ABA, consulted with agencies that provide family-focused behavioral support, and led a nonprofit organization called the Home and Community Positive Behavior Support Network (<https://hcpbs.org/>).

Karen Elfner, M.A., Research Associate Department of Child and Family Studies, University of South Florida, Tampa

Karen is the mother of two children, both married and beginning their own adventures in parenting. Karen is enjoying her new role as grandparent and looks forward to being part of this ever-expanding family group. Karen's professional career has evolved to focus on the development, use, and evaluation of schoolwide positive behavior interventions and supports systems. Throughout her career, Karen seeks opportunities to help teachers and families address challenging behavior. Outside of work, Karen enjoys supporting others in need, including family and friends, and brightening the lives of sick and elderly individuals with her therapy dog. Karen's professional experiences include teaching students who are severely emotionally disturbed, conducting research on PBS for children with challenging behavior, coordinating state centers on parent involvement, training educators to implement PBS in schools at the school-wide level and with individual students. Karen looks forward to helping others through sharing the valuable knowledge and lessons learned professionally and in her most important role—parent.

Jane Sergay, M.Ed., Department of Adult and Community Education, Comprehensive Family Literacy Services, School District of Hillsborough County, Tampa Bay, Florida

Jane Sergay raised three daughters with her husband Stephen: Amanda, Rebecca, and Samantha. After her children were grown, her time to reflect deepened her insight and broadened her perspectives on the importance of the quality of parenting and the extent of challenges families face as they try to parent effectively and well. Jane developed a parent education program when her children were young and then taught positive parenting skills to groups and individuals. She has continuously focused her work on enhancing the well-being of children and their families. Jane was involved in researching qualities of effective parenting and guiding parents in teaching basic skills to their children with exceptional needs at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She taught classes in child development at Lesley College and directed programs that emphasize parent involvement in the schools at the University of South Florida. Her dedications to raising children and supporting the efforts of others have been central themes for her and continue to be the most treasured and significant accomplishments of her life.

Foreword

Positive behavior support (PBS) emerged from its roots in applied behavior analysis in the late 1980s and early 1990s. PBS was developed in response to a need for effective procedures of behavior management (support) that could be used in typical environments by typical people. Initially, PBS was designed to help children and adults with histories of extreme challenging behavior and significant developmental and intellectual disabilities. However, applications of PBS were soon expanded for implementation with milder forms of behavior and with people experiencing a range of developmental, intellectual, and social characteristics.

PBS was inspired by two forces. The first was the insistence by civil and disability activists that aversive techniques for managing disruptive behavior be substituted with more humane, nonpunitive, and nonstigmatizing procedures. The second force was the escalating appreciation that challenging behaviors could be understood as functional and, in most cases, communicative. This led to the axiom that challenging behavior could be replaced by more desirable forms of communicative behavior, such as speech, if we could figure out what messages the challenging behavior was intending to communicate. In professional circles, this “figuring out” became known as functional assessment, or functional behavioral assessment (FBA), and FBA was immediately established as a foundational principle of PBS.

The PBS that was established by the early 1990s was a process that included functional assessment and individualized intervention plans that were informed by the results of the functional assessment. The intervention plans were comprised of strategies that had been documented as potentially effective in the research literature and included instruction on useful communication skills to replace the challenging behavior, manipulations of antecedent events in order to help prevent challenging behaviors and encourage desirable behaviors, and improved arrangements of consequences to reinforce desirable routines. In key definitional articles, Horner and colleagues (1990) and Carr and colleagues (2002) articulated key features of this new approach known as PBS. Among the key features were

- Using the term *support* rather than *management* because the emphasis should be on supporting desirable behavior and quality social-emotional-behavioral development rather than managing problematic behavior

- Focusing on the big picture of a person's lifestyle rather than simply the microscopic view of a person's challenges
- Ensuring that interventions and supports are valid for a person's real life rather than simply the person's behavior in a restricted clinic or special education classroom
- Basing plans of intervention and support on a thorough assessment and understanding (e.g., FBA) of the person's behavior
- Emphasizing teaching, antecedent arrangements, and prevention
- Including stakeholders (family, teachers, etc.) in setting goals, conducting assessments, and designing and implementing procedures of intervention and support

Starting in the late 1990s, hundreds of books and manuals on PBS were distributed by national publishers, universities, and state and local education agencies. These purported to describe the process and procedures of PBS, and most of them were very good. However, the vast majority of these products were concerned with behavior in schools. Despite widespread acknowledgment that families are the most important context for social and behavioral development, very few resources were available for information and guidance pertaining to behavior support in home and community settings.

OK, so why did I offer this little history and background of PBS? The answer is because it is all about this book that you are currently holding in your hands. This is the second edition of a PBS guidebook for parents that was published in 2006 and authored by Meme Hieneman, Karen Childs (Elfner), and Jane Sergay. At that time, there was a very small number of books *about* PBS and families (e.g., Lucyshyn et al., 2002), but there were *no* authoritative books about PBS that were actually *for* families to use in practice. *Parenting With Positive Behavior Support: A Practical Guide to Resolving Your Child's Difficult Behavior* (Hieneman et al., 2006) filled that void and, in doing so, provided a very meaningful contribution to the growing impact and legacy of PBS.

The 2006 edition was a remarkable achievement in many ways:

- The process, procedures, and recommendations were completely grounded in credible research and experience.
- The contents represented an optimal presentation of positive behavior support.
- The descriptions were free of jargon, such that even terms such as *functional behavioral assessment* were explained as “gathering and analyzing information.”
- The entire book was readable and practical while retaining the necessary precision and rigor of the science-based PBS strategies.
- The book included clear guidance and useful tools and graphics to help readers proceed easily through the PBS process.

And now we have this second edition, which elevates the first edition's subtitle to headline status: *Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior*. I am happy to report that the second edition preserves all of the valuable characteristics of the first edition and adds even more. In particular, the authors provide a complete workbook that can be downloaded. The workbook contains fillable forms and offers meaningful guidance

through all stages of the PBS process. The second edition is also strengthened by additional detail for vital practices as well as access to videos that depict actual implementation of key strategies. These are all beneficial revisions that will make the second edition even more of a contribution than the first edition realized. And that is quite an accomplishment.

I do not want to close this foreword without acknowledging my connection to this authorship team. Meme Hieneman, Karen Elfner, and I worked closely together in the 1990s as part of an active research team at the University of South Florida. Our group, in concert with several others, conducted research in schools, homes, and communities in the formative years of PBS, and we developed and implemented training curricula intended to disseminate the process of PBS as widely as possible. Meme and Karen were valuable contributors to these efforts, and it has been gratifying to observe the continuing and expanding influence that their efforts have yielded. It has been a privilege to be their colleague and their friend.

And, so, it was with great sadness that we noted the passing of Meme Hieneman in August of 2021, following a long and courageous struggle with cancer. I had known Meme for several decades, and she was a close and treasured friend. I had the honor of serving as her doctoral adviser at the University of South Florida and we associated subsequently as colleagues and frequent collaborators. We will miss Meme greatly.

Glen Dunlap, Ph.D.
University of Nevada, Reno

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Note to the Reader

This book is written especially for you, the parent or caregiver of a child with behavior you would like to see improve. By reading *Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior: A Practical Guide to Parenting With Positive Behavior Support* and applying its concepts to the examples in the book and your real life, you will learn to use an effective problem-solving process called *positive behavior support (PBS)* to resolve your child's challenging behavior and improve your family life in general. Prior to launching into the content of the book, we thought it would be beneficial to share our reasons for writing the book and explain the book's uses and special features as well as updates to this edition.

OUR REASONS FOR WRITING THE BOOK

For as long as we have been parents and involved in professional careers utilizing PBS, writing a book on PBS specifically for parents has been a goal of ours. The reasons we felt this was important were that 1) we knew firsthand the benefits PBS could offer families and 2) there were no comprehensive, user-friendly materials for parents and/or nonprofessional caregivers on this topic.

Over the years, we have found that raising children can be extremely difficult, even with our experience and professional training. At times, each of us has been challenged, frustrated, and exhausted by our children's seemingly normal behavior. Through our professional experiences, we knew how effective PBS could be for structuring settings and resolving behavioral challenges. As a result of the challenges we faced raising children and our backgrounds in PBS, we have each made efforts to integrate PBS into our own child-rearing practices—and experienced the positive results. Employing the principles of PBS with our children and families allowed us to be more proactive, creative, and loving with our children and address behavioral challenges more effectively and efficiently.

Although PBS has been consistently demonstrated to be effective with children and in schools, few materials have been developed for families on this topic and, of those available, we are not aware of any written in a way that would allow most parents to easily absorb the materials and put the approach into action. Although many books, videos, and training programs on parenting and discipline are available to the general public through the mass media, none of these materials have fully described

the principles or processes of PBS. These public-oriented materials offer good ideas and strategies, but they do not provide an integrated framework for teaching parents and other caregivers to solve their own behavioral challenges and choose appropriate behavioral intervention options for their children and families. Through *Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior*, we were able to combine our professional and personal experiences to create a user-friendly workbook on PBS specifically for parents and other caregivers.

FOR WHOM THE BOOK IS INTENDED

This book is intended for parents and other caregivers of children experiencing typical challenges with behavior and possibly more significant difficulties. It also may be beneficial for other adults who are involved regularly in the lives of the children or families, including people such as teachers, baby sitters, grandparents, coaches, and therapists.

In addition to parents and caregivers, parent educators and other professionals working with families may find this book to be a practical resource. The book's organization, examples, and activities are well suited for training seminars and other instructional formats.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE WRITING STYLE

There are certain special features in how this book is written. First, given that this book was written for parents and by parents, we wanted it to speak directly to you. Given that we are parents ourselves, faced with many of the same issues and challenges you experience, we chose to write the book from a collective *we* voice. When we say *we* throughout the book, we mean both you and us and also all other people involved in the life of your child and family.

Second, we have made every effort to avoid unnecessary jargon. Although we have tried to be as precise as possible, in many cases, we have substituted lay terms or even slang to get our point across.

Third, we avoid being directive (e.g., saying, "You should") and instead give options or present considerations to guide your personal decision making. PBS is not a set of methods but rather an individualized, problem-solving process in which the strategies are chosen by you based on your own needs and circumstances.

UPDATES TO THIS EDITION

The first edition of this book was published in 2006 as *Parenting With Positive Behavior Support: A Practical Guide to Resolving Your Child's Difficult Behavior*. Yet, families can use PBS not only to address acute behavioral challenges but also to enhance family life in general so all family members can thrive. This idea inspired Meme Hieneman to expand what was a single chapter in the original book to another book on PBS, *Helping Your Family Thrive: A Practical Guide to Parenting With Positive Behavior Support* (2022).

Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior and *Helping Your Family Thrive* are complementary. One book helps families use PBS to address specific challenges; the other helps families apply PBS holistically to improve family life overall. *Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior* is about responding when challenging

behaviors occur, whereas the other book is about prevention and focuses on the whole family and home environment. Both books guide readers through a PBS process that involves identifying goals, analyzing behavior patterns, designing strategies, using your plan, and monitoring progress—a continuing cycle as your child grows and changes (see Figure I.1.) Each book stands alone; however, readers are also encouraged to use them together, starting with the book that aligns with their immediate needs.

Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior is divided into four sections. Section I provides an overview and introduction to PBS and its role in raising and supporting children in their everyday lives. Section II offers a step-by-step process for addressing problems. Section III shares stories of the PBS process for three specific children. Section IV discusses how parents can integrate PBS into their lives and families and overcome barriers to successfully implement PBS. Each section includes a variety of examples and practice activities to reinforce the information provided.

This second edition is accompanied by online resources to support families in using PBS. The *Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior* workbook is available on the Brookes Download Hub, along with an Excel spreadsheet for monitoring progress. The workbook consists of fillable PDF forms for gathering information, developing a Child Behavior Support Plan, and building additional behavioral supports into family life. You may choose to download the full workbook or download each form individually when you need it. See the Downloadable Resources lists throughout the book to identify what you will need for a given chapter.

Finally, several chapters provide links to videos Meme Hieneman has created explaining PBS strategies and showing them in action. View the videos to enhance your understanding of PBS.

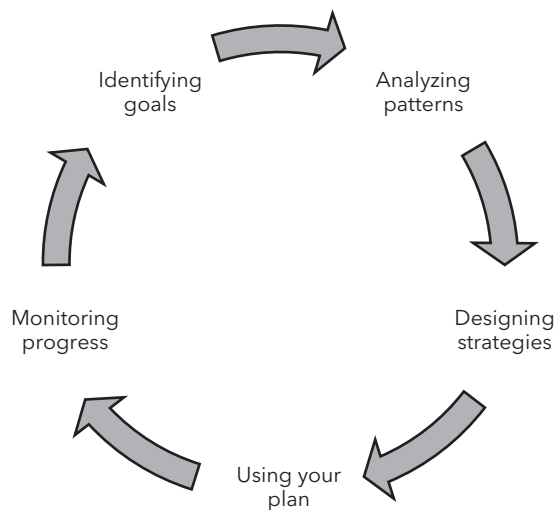


Figure I.1. The cycle of the positive behavior support process. (From Hieneman, M., Raulston, T., and Strobel, L. [2017]. *Special issue: Positive behavior support in family routines* [six-article series]. *Parenting Special Needs* magazine [online]. <https://magazine.parentingspecialneeds.org/publication/?m=13847&i=461820&p=1&ver=html5>)

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THE BOOK

Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior is intended to be a practical guide for parents and caregivers to use when faced with their children's behavioral challenges. It also creates a framework they can use to maximize positive interactions among all family members. To get the most benefit out of this resource, we recommend that you do the following:

- *Apply what you learn.* Read for understanding and think deeply about how the principles, framework, and process of PBS relate to your child and family and applying what you learn through the case examples and exercises. The ultimate value of PBS is being able to internalize its principles and process. The activities, Before You Move On reminders, and What Do You Think? exercises throughout the chapters prompt you to apply PBS to the case examples as well as to your own family. Record your thoughts directly in the book, in a separate notebook or file, and/or in the downloadable forms. (Access to those supporting resources is available through the Brookes Download Hub; see the About the Downloads page.) There is no one correct way to work through the book, as long as you are actively doing so.
- *Be creative about strategies.* Avoid limiting yourself to the ideas presented within this book; they may or may not work for your child and family. PBS is a problem-solving process, not a cookbook of intervention options. You should generate solutions based on your unique circumstances, resources, and needs.
- *Work with other people.* Make every effort to engage the people who know your child and family best, interact with you on a regular basis, and may influence the outcome of your effort to change behavior. The people in your life have the ability to either reinforce or interfere with the PBS process.
- *Integrate other approaches.* If appropriate and necessary, combine PBS with other ideas, approaches, or services (e.g., counseling, medical interventions) that may benefit your child or family. PBS is not intended to be exclusive of other methods that may help your child and family.
- *Track progress.* Monitor how your child is doing and make periodic adjustments when needed to ensure that the plan is doable and beneficial.

Thank you for picking up this book. We hope PBS is as helpful for you as it has been for us.

Acknowledgments

This book is based not only on our own personal and professional experiences but also on our colleagues and friends. We have benefited from amazing research in both PBS and parenting (see the Resources list at the end of the book). We have learned the most from the families with whom we have interacted over the years. They have shared their challenges and triumphs, and their stories have helped shape the contents of this book. Thank you to all of our teachers.

We are thankful for the competent and supportive staff at Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., who kept our vision for the complementary two-book concept alive and helped to make it a reality.

And finally, we would like to thank our families and friends for their continued encouragement and support.

In Memoriam

MARY ELLEN (MEME) HIENEMAN (1965-2021)

Our inspiring friend and colleague, Dr. Meme Hieneman, lost her long, courageous struggle with cancer before the second edition of *Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior* was published. Thankfully, and somewhat astonishingly, given her diminishing physical condition, she was able to orchestrate the revisions to the original text and to realize her vision of publishing a companion book, *Helping Your Family Thrive*, before she passed. Meme was determined to share her passion for family-based positive behavior supports with the world, and she set her sights on completing both texts as one of her final missions.

Meme left a devoted family, colleagues, students, and countless individuals who were recipients of her commitment to individuals with significant behavioral challenges and their families. Meme's contributions to the field of positive behavior support (PBS) were numerous and wide ranging. She embodied the principles of PBS in everything that she did and worked with many collaborators to ensure that her influence on the field will persist. Her legacy includes many articles for *Parenting Special Needs* magazine, creation of the Home and Community Positive Behavior Support Network, development of the *Practiced Routines* curriculum, numerous innovative and influential research projects, and much more.

Whether conducting research and writing, consulting, teaching, or advocating, Meme was tireless in her resolve to extend the effective use of positive behavior support technologies in home and community settings. She was brilliant, bold, and tenacious, just the kind of supporter you would want in your corner. You will see this spirit throughout both *Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior* and *Helping Your Family Thrive*. Meme's legacy lives on in the individuals who continue to be influenced by the organizations she originated, the influential mentoring and coaching provided, and the valuable resources left for all to access.



Introduction and Overview

The Basics of Positive Behavior Support

Raising children may be the most important and challenging job we will ever have. This statement has been made many times and may sound clichéd, but it is true that we are charged with shaping our children into responsible, caring, and productive adults—a seemingly overwhelming task. Over the years, we worry about our children developing healthy habits, having positive relationships, and learning the skills they will need to be successful. At times, we may feel confident in our ability to guide and support our children while also juggling everything else we need to do. At other times, we may feel confused or frustrated in our role as parents.

Our children's behavior is one thing that is likely to challenge us the most. We become exasperated when our children do not do what they are told, say mean or inappropriate things, or hurt other people. In response, we may try various tactics to get our children's behavior under control—sometimes with successful results, sometimes with detrimental effects, and sometimes without any change at all. While engaged in this search for solutions, we may be concerned that the way our children are behaving and the way we are responding to those behaviors will establish patterns that will last a lifetime. Given all of this, we seek a consistent and effective approach to encouraging positive behavior and dealing with problems that will help our children to become happy, fulfilled, and competent adults.

Resolving Your Child's Challenging Behavior: A Practical Guide to Parenting With Positive Behavior Support describes an approach called *positive behavior support* (PBS) that has been demonstrated to be effective in schools and community programs and can be extremely helpful in family settings. PBS helps us change how we structure our homes and lives and alter the ways in which we respond to our children so that we can deal more confidently and

effectively with our children's behavior. This approach involves a problem-solving process that helps us understand why our children behave the way they do and develop solutions to encourage the behaviors we want and prevent or discourage the behaviors that we do not want.

The value of PBS in addressing challenging behavior has been repeatedly demonstrated in research and real life (including with the children and families of the authors of this book). Although initially designed for people with the most severe disabilities and behavior, the principles and practices are now used effectively with a broader range of people and situations. Children with severe and long-standing behaviors such as tantrums, defiance, and aggression have experienced life-changing results, including a significant reduction or even elimination of these behaviors (see the Bibliography at the end of the book for citations on research). In addition, PBS has had a broader effect in the lives of children and families, allowing them to participate in more activities, frequent new places, spend more time with people, and simply function more effectively. The degree to which PBS fits and offers benefits for families becomes apparent throughout this book.

Section I is divided into two chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on what types of behavior can present a challenge, why it is necessary to address challenging behavior, and how this behavior might be addressed. Chapter 2 provides an overview of PBS, including its underlying assumptions and features, as well as why PBS is important for parents and others involved in raising children.

1

Understanding and Addressing Behavior

Your 2-year-old whines, clings to your leg, and repeatedly asks to be picked up, making it nearly impossible to make dinner, talk on the telephone, or even read your mail.

Your 9-year-old yells, refuses to share their things, and calls their sister names until she cries. If she tries to fight back, then they become physically aggressive. Even punishing them does not seem to make a difference.

Your 14-year-old is extremely limited in the topics they are willing to discuss and activities in which they will participate. You feel that this is interfering with their ability to make friends and become more independent.

As parents, what should we do to address such problems? When our children behave in ways that concern us, we are faced with difficult decisions regarding which behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable, whether it makes sense to intervene, and how we could go about addressing the behavior. These decisions are value judgments and require us to think carefully about our beliefs and the unique characteristics, needs, and priorities of our children and families. This chapter explores these issues, including what constitutes challenging behavior and when, how, and why we choose to intervene.

WHAT CONSTITUTES CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR?

Because this book is about how to deal with behavior in positive and effective ways, it is necessary to first explain what behavior is and what types of behavior may constitute a problem or challenge. The term *behavior* refers to everything that people say or do, including talking, walking, touching, and moving. Behavior, in itself, is not a problem. It is simply how people negotiate their way through life. Yet, there are some behaviors that people typically consider problematic, such as having temper tantrums (e.g., screaming, throwing things), hurting other people, talking back or arguing with people in authority,

or refusing to comply with directions. Throughout this book, we refer to these behaviors as *challenging behaviors*.

Behaviors are seen as challenging because of the effects they have on the children engaging in the behavior, other people, or the surroundings—or because the behaviors simply do not fit within routines or homes. Table 1.1 lists the Big Ds—some categories of behavior that people often associate with challenging behavior.

Whether we see behavior as needing intervention depends on a number of things. One is the severity of the behavior. Dangerous or destructive behaviors usually require us to act immediately to make sure that our families, friends, and surroundings stay safe. Other behaviors (disruptive, disgusting, or developmentally inappropriate) may be irritating or disturbing but are not really damaging. We decide to address these behaviors when they become especially bothersome or interfere with our children’s or families’ success and happiness.

Another consideration is whether a challenging behavior happens just once or twice or has become a long-standing pattern. Patterns are ongoing behaviors or ingrained reactions to circumstances. They can become unproductive and entrenched and have a negative impact on the lives of our children and families. Although individual incidents of what we consider bad behavior are perfectly normal (for everyone, not just children), challenging behaviors that happen frequently or for extended periods of time usually signal that the behavior needs to be addressed.

Individual and family values form a final and very important consideration in deciding if a particular behavior is an issue that requires intervention. Everyone is different, and these differences affect whether we perceive certain behaviors as unacceptable (as well as what kinds of responses we see as acceptable). Our ideas about the acceptability of behavior may have been shaped by a variety of things, including what our parents expected of us as children and our personal experiences with behavior and formal education (e.g., participation in

Table 1.1. The Big Ds

Dangerous: The behavior could hurt the child or someone else. <i>Example:</i> Jasmine bites other children when she is angry.
Destructive: The behavior may result in destruction of property. <i>Example:</i> Miguel bends and breaks his father’s DVDs.
Disruptive: The behavior upsets or interferes with the overall harmony of the home or other places (e.g., restaurant, park). <i>Example:</i> Alissa argues loudly when she is told no.
Disgusting: The behavior leads to disapproval or avoidance. <i>Example:</i> David picks his nose and eats the boogers or wipes them on things.
Developmentally inappropriate: The behavior is typical of a younger child but not considered normal for a child at that age. <i>Example:</i> Tyrone cries several times each day. (If he were 6 months old, then crying would be normal—it is an infant’s primary way of communicating needs. If Tyrone is 8 years old, however, then he should have other, more age-appropriate ways to express his needs.)

teacher preparation or management training). These ideas may also be influenced by what is considered to be acceptable in our culture and community, among a host of other factors.

In summary, what constitutes a challenging behavior should be determined based on our individual values and circumstances and the degree to which the behavior affects our children, families, and communities. Prior to making a decision to intervene with our children's behavior, we should think carefully about our preferences and priorities—choosing our battles based on the issues described in this section.

■ ACTIVITY ■ Prioritizing Behaviors

List each of your child's behaviors of concern, ranking them from 1 to 5 (in order of greatest to least concern). Decide if each behavior is worthy of addressing and cross off those that are not. Consider the Big Ds and the other criteria described in this section in making your decisions.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ADDRESSING BEHAVIOR

As previously mentioned, periodic issues with behavior may be just a typical part of growing up (e.g., terrible twos, adolescent rebellion). Challenging behaviors can have lasting effects on our children, our families, and other people in our lives, however, when they are allowed to continue over a period of time, get more serious, and then become long-standing patterns. In this case, we have not only the right, but also the responsibility, to intervene.

Impact of Behavior Challenges

Challenging behavior can affect our children and families in a variety of ways. Some of the effects of challenging behavior (and therefore reasons why we might choose to address our children's behavior) are described in this section.

Delay of Learning and Development The time children spend engaged in challenging behavior may actually detract from their involvement in other, more positive activities. Children with challenging behaviors may be less cooperative in situations in which they could be learning new skills. For example, they might have trouble sitting still to read, participating in team sports, or playing nicely with kids their age. They may miss out on important experiences because they are so disruptive or resistant. As a result, challenging behavior may stunt our children's social, intellectual, and even physical growth.

Disruption of Family and Community Life Challenging behavior not only bothers the person engaging in the behavior, but it can also affect everyone around that person. Children's challenging behaviors can create stress in marriages, disrupt family routines, and interfere with overall family harmony. Challenging behavior can also have a domino effect; one family member acts out and pretty soon the whole house is in an uproar. Ultimately, family members and other people caring for children with challenging behaviors may find that they have given up potentially valuable experiences, such as eating dinner or playing games together, because of the chaos that ensues.

Alienation of Children and Families Sometimes families of children with challenging behavior feel isolated from their community because the parents or caregivers worry about how other people will react to their children's misbehavior. They may find it hard to go places such as restaurants, stores, and community events. Parents may find that they are turning down invitations, avoiding outings, and limiting the people with whom they interact because they are anticipating problems. Challenging behavior that is particularly bad can result in children being suspended from school or asked to leave child care centers, public establishments, or events.

Damage to Relationships Having to deal with challenging behavior on an ongoing basis can damage parents' relationships with their children and other family members. It is often exhausting and emotionally draining, particularly if parents believe that they are doling out discipline (especially punishment) constantly—rather than spending that valuable time snuggling, playing with, or simply enjoying their children. Parents may come to view and approach their children negatively. They might find themselves arguing with their spouses over “what to do with that kid” or making accommodations that are unfair to other family members. This can cause parents to feel detached from their children and families.

Relationship problems can also occur outside the home. Children with challenging behaviors may have difficulty making and keeping friends as well as interacting with other adults. As a result, they may be left out of important childhood activities such as birthday parties, sleepovers, or hanging out in the neighborhood.

These are some, but certainly not all, of the reasons why addressing challenging behavior may be important for children and families. Failure to

intervene effectively and change these patterns may mean that little problems become big problems that have long-term negative outcomes.

Intervention Considerations

Evaluating the acceptability of our children's behavior and determining whether to intervene is difficult. We must recognize that deliberately trying to change another person's behavior can be intrusive. Although it is certainly our role as parents to guide and shape our children's behavior, we must weigh our concerns and plans for influencing their behavior against any potential cost to our children, families, or ourselves.

We might consider the impact of intervention on our parent-child relationships and our children's self-confidence. It may be a good idea to ask questions such as, "Will my child see me as a tyrant?" or "Will my child feel that they are losing control?" We also might want to consider the timing. For example, it may be worth asking, "Does it make sense to address this behavior now while my child is getting used to a new school?" Finally, we might want to evaluate how much time and energy we would have to expend to put strategies in place that address our children's behavior. If their behavior is not terribly troublesome, we are overwhelmed with other priorities at the time, and/or the effort to change the behavior would be great, then we may want to put the intervention on hold until the timing is better.

HOW TO RESPOND TO CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

Once we decide that intervention is necessary, we often wonder what we should do next. Should we ignore the behavior, try to reason with our children, impose consequences, or just get through this one instance and plan better for next time? That depends, at least in part, on our individual values, personal experiences, and beliefs about our children's behavior.

We might draw from our history, especially the way in which we were disciplined as children. We might ask advice from friends, family, or neighbors. We might seek input from medical professionals, teachers, counselors, or others who work with children. We might just wait and see, hoping that our children will grow out of it. We might consult one of the many valuable books or programs on discipline (see the Parenting Resources section in the Bibliography at the end of the book) and select strategies that sound good or appeal to us. Regardless of where we turn, it is important that we examine our logic in deciding how we will respond to our children's behavior so that we can determine which approaches will be beneficial for our children and families.

Assumptions About Behavior

It is important for us to recognize that the way we understand and deal with our children's behavior is based on attitudes, feelings, and personal assumptions regarding behavior—all of which are derived from our personal experience.

Sometimes ideas about why behavior happens or how to address it are based on misconceptions or myths that have been handed down from family members, friends, or the media. Sometimes our reactions tend to be emotional, rather than rational.

We may feel responsible for absolutely everything that our children do and feel that our children's behavior is a reflection of us. We may believe that other people are evaluating us based on our children's behavior. We might be embarrassed, worrying about what other people will think; frustrated because our children's behavior is interfering with our plans; worried that their behavior is going to scar the rest of the family for life; or just plain angry or sad that our children would choose to behave so badly. We may find ourselves focusing on these challenging behaviors, overlooking the good choices and positive attributes of our child. Those positive behaviors are strengths that we could capitalize on if only we were not so focused on the behaviors that challenge us.

Although most of the strong emotions we experience during episodes of challenging behavior fade rather quickly after the behavior stops, there can still be lasting effects. We may carry traces of those feelings with us, which can change the way we see our children and prompt us to react to our children's behavior simply out of habit. Sometimes our reactions are based on certain beliefs that are not productive (e.g., discipline means punishing children; childhood should be a time for fun, not for limits; parents must be in control of their children at all times). As a result, we may respond to behavior impulsively (e.g., yelling when our children make a mistake), even though we know that those reactions are unlikely to change the behavior.

Sometimes the way that we react to a particular behavior (e.g., giving in) makes it more likely that the behavior will happen again. Because we have come to expect behavioral challenges, we may accidentally provoke or encourage our children's challenging behavior, creating a self-perpetuating cycle. Understanding what perceptions underlie our reactions is essential to looking more objectively at behavior and developing effective solutions.

Looking at Behavior Objectively

Understanding our children's behavior requires us to look objectively at situations and interactions, paying attention to what actually happens without becoming emotionally engaged in our children's behavior. (This understanding is a basic feature of PBS; see Chapter 2.) This realistic appraisal may challenge our old assumptions and make us question our typical responses to challenging behavior. Objectivity does not come naturally, particularly when we are facing behavioral challenges that have plagued us for a while. If, however, faulty assumptions are at the forefront of our minds while we are trying to observe and address our children's behavior, then those ideas may skew our understanding of our children's behavior and therefore how we address it.

We need to examine our assumptions prior to using PBS and set aside any emotions or attitudes that might interfere with the process (e.g., “He’s just pulling my chain”), including learning to ignore other people’s judgments that could undermine our efforts. We also need to replace any negative self-talk with more productive, realistic perspectives. In essence, we need to find a way to get rid of our emotional baggage and open ourselves up to new beliefs about behavior.

■ ACTIVITY ■ Assumptions About Behavior

Consider situations in which your child’s behavior is particularly troublesome. Write down what you think and feel about your child’s behavior and how those thoughts and feelings affect what you do in response to their behavior. Make a list of assumptions that may interfere with your objectivity. (Use a separate sheet of paper, if necessary.)

When we come to terms with why we understand and address behavior the way we do, we can open ourselves up to fresh perspectives and more effective ways of working with our children. We can also avoid taking situations involving challenging behavior personally and therefore gain confidence and pride in how we handle such situations and ourselves.

FINDING A BETTER WAY

In our search for solutions to our children’s behavioral challenges, we may very well find something that works or at least makes things seem better for a while. Conversely, we may find that the improvements are temporary or cause new challenges to emerge that force us to go right back to the drawing board. This hit-and-miss approach can result in a lot of frustration for our children, our families, and ourselves. What we search for is real, long-term solutions to our children’s behavioral challenges. Such an approach requires that solutions be matched to the problems and their causes—rather than focusing on getting challenging behavior to stop for the time being and only in our presence, then finding out that the behavior emerges again in another situation. PBS provides a framework for understanding and addressing behavior. It guides families and members of their support network to restructure their lives and address behavior in a way that prevents problems, teaches skills, and helps children to

help themselves. It does not replace all of the other wonderful parenting strategies that have emerged over the years, but instead helps us choose the right methods for our children and families.

SUMMARY: WHEN SHOULD WE ADDRESS CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR?

Whether behavior is considered to be an issue needing our intervention depends on its impact, the circumstances in which it occurs, and the values of the people dealing with it. Addressing behavior involves careful consideration of perspectives, needs, and priorities. It is also necessary to decide whether the potential cost of addressing the behavior is worth the benefits for our children and families. When we do decide to intervene, we must try to be as objective as possible, dismissing assumptions that may interfere with the creative problem-solving that is characteristic of PBS.

BEFORE MOVING ON

- **Have you identified your child's behaviors of concern and considered whether they are worthy of your attention (i.e., based on the Big Ds and other issues)?**
- **Have you considered your assumptions about behavior and their impact on your responses so that you can look more objectively at your child's behavior?**