

# What Lies Beneath Behavior?

<https://www.echoparenting.org/what-lies-beneath-behavior/>

Every novelist, psychologist, anthropologist and your Aunt Jane have wanted to know this. What motivates people and what's going on when their behavior is irritating or just plain doesn't make sense?

At Echo, we encourage adults to look beneath the behavior of children and to understand 'behavior as communication.' It may be that the child is choosing a way of communicating that is hard for you to deal with but that doesn't diminish the fact that the behavior is driven by some deep need or physiological response. These behaviors are often punished and then we wonder why the child is "always getting into trouble" or "never learns!" when we haven't dealt with the root cause of the behavior.

This is never more true than in the classroom where – teachers often tell us – they don't have the luxury of getting to know each child and their needs when trying to wrangle 30 children, meet common core standards, and deal with whatever new mandate the school district has handed down. (And too bad if you have a personal life that needs attention.)

So we have come up with a handy-dandy infographic to help adults – and teachers in particular – go through a process of elimination to figure out what's going on with a child whose behavior is causing concern, starting with basic human needs and graduating to the more serious impacts of trauma. A little time spent in this kind of reflection can help us develop more compassion and support children who are struggling to tell us just how overwhelming it can be in their world.

What lies beneath behavior?

Underlying *basic human need*?

*Developmental stage*?

Current state of the *nervous system*?

Survival response: *fight? flight? freeze? appease?*

*Coping strategy* that no longer works?

Structural changes in the *brain*?



How is this “problem” the child’s *solution*?

Trauma-induced *thinking & conditioning*?

Let's go through the questions in the infographic:

- 1) Is this child communicating some **basic human need**? Perhaps David is wriggling around and disturbing his classmate because he needs the restroom. Could it be that Sandra is not able to concentrate the period before lunch because she's hungry? These needs are all in the present and can be met in real time.
- 2) Does this behavior reflect the **developmental stage** of the child? Maybe Alex is putting his head on the desk because he's a teenager and he's not getting the copious amounts of sleep young people need at this age. Does Nicole space out and forget to bring home all her homework books because she is only eleven and her brain hasn't developed yet to do the advanced planning we are asking of her? These behaviors should resolve themselves as the child develops.
- 3) What is the current state of the **nervous system**? When we are excited or freaked out about something we cannot concentrate, much less remember and learn. We all respond to stress and a perceived threat in this way. Maybe the students have seen a famous person on campus. (If it's George Clooney, I certainly would not be able to concentrate!) Maybe there's been a fire drill. The nervous system can be under-activated too. Friday afternoon during a heat wave. Lots of abstract math equations right after lunch. We can stimulate or calm down the nervous system and help students get back into 'the zone' – when we talk about nervous system regulation, we call it the Resilient Zone.
- 4) Is the student stressed into a **survival response (fight, flight, freeze)**? This is a primal physical response to perceived danger. The stress response gears up to battle stations and that thumping heart sending blood to your arms and legs results in a child who throws a chair or runs out of the class. We are programmed to respond this way and if our survival instincts detect no opportunity to fight or flee, we will instead shut down. (That is the child who seems to have left his body behind in your class while his mind orbits another planet.) If an attacker came into the classroom, we would consider it a smart response for the student to throw a chair, run away, or check out to protect themselves against an overwhelming situation. There is nothing wrong with the survival response – it is in fact life serving – the problem is when this response is the child's default way of reacting to the smallest of stressors because they live in a constant state of high alert.
- 5) Is the student using a **coping strategy** that no longer serves? Any child who has lived through danger and trauma is a brilliant tactical survivalist – they had to be to survive. However, perhaps the strategies that kept them alive are now showing up in your classroom where they are getting in the way of creating relationships and learning. A hostile stare can get a child suspended in school, but maybe keeps them alive on the violent streets in their neighborhood where it's important not to look like a victim. Staying quiet maybe kept a child safe in a household where it was dangerous to draw attention to oneself, but maybe now the teacher interprets this as non-comprehension or lack of motivation to learn.

6) Have there been **structural changes in the brain**? Long-term exposure to toxic stress or trauma can have lasting effects on the architecture of the brain. The areas responsible for emotional control, memory and learning are often affected. It is also possible for there to be damage to other areas that can result in depression, less nuanced ('black and white') thinking, and difficulties with concentration. We often see difficulties in interpreting and responding to social cues as well as a lack of emotional development. All these changes are reversible. However, in many cases these changes are interpreted as symptoms of ADHD or fall under other popular diagnoses and labels, when in fact the science points to a safe, stable nurturing relationship with a caring adult as being the number one way for a child to recover from trauma.

7) Are we witnessing **trauma-induced thinking or conditioning**? Trauma shapes how we see the world and provides a narrative about what we can expect. It informs the stories we tell ourselves about whether the world is safe and people are basically good, or whether the world is full of hidden dangers and people are out to get us. Sometimes a child will react according to their interior monologue about how trustworthy you are and what is needed to stay safe. Sometimes they reenact a scenario just so that 'the other shoe will drop.' For example, if children have been placed in foster care and experienced that as abandonment, they will push every adult they come in contact with to the point that the adult gives up, thus proving that their world view and the provisions they have made to survive in it are correct. If they believe that they will ultimately be abandoned, better to get it over with rather than live with the suspense. We all have stories we tell ourselves but we can change our perceptions with positive self-talk and challenging our negative beliefs. So can children.

8) Finally, let's ask ourselves the question "**How is this 'problem' the child's solution?**" No one acts against their own self-interests. Even if this behavior is a problem to you, in some way it represents a solution to the child. If we take this view, it is easier to put ourselves into the child's shoes and rather than fight the behavior, understand the value it brings so that we are better positioned to offer safer alternatives.

Our goal at Echo is simple: Let's stay open and curious to what lies beneath behavior and most importantly of all, ensure that no more children are punished for a failed attempt to communicate just how very much they have already been punished by life.

# Trauma-Informed Support for Children

<https://www.echotraining.org/trauma-informed-support-for-children/>

You've worked through the questions in our infographic "[What Lies Beneath Behavior?](#)" and instead of judging or punishing you've figured out the child is just trying to do the best they can to communicate whatever pain or distress lives inside of them... "So now what do I do?" you ask. As promised, we have produced a second infographic to provide you with a step-by-step guide to a trauma-informed response.

The bad news is that there is no manualized program, no one-size fits all solution, no magic wand we can wave. Childhood trauma usually comes as the result of a breach in relationship and trust, and the best way to heal it is to rebuild those things, slowly, painstakingly and with a lot of patience.

As we say at Echo, "50% of any interaction is you." This means unless we are willing to look at ourselves and our reactions, no tools or skills are going to work in the classroom or in any other situation where we are having challenges with a child. Let me be the first to give you some empathy around this. No one asks to be abused, ignored, accused unjustly, reviled, not given any consideration, or whatever it is that may have caused stress hormones to race around your body and possibly bring you to tears. It is quite natural to feel sadness or anger. You matter. You do. And here's where you take a deep breath, because in an adult/child relationship there's only one grown up, and as much as you want to lash out or run away, by definition it's got to be you.

So having given yourself some empathy and practiced some self-soothing, now you're ready to engage. Follow the steps in the infographic to work out a trauma-informed response, that is to say, how your heart would like you to respond when you are free of stress and your own trauma triggers. Maybe the adults around you didn't have these tools when you were a child. It is our good fortune that we do, and our responsibility to make sure that any painful history does not repeat itself.

# “What do I do?”

## Trauma-Informed Support for Children

### 1 Create safety

If the child is overwhelmed, perhaps guide them to a quiet corner or allow them to decompress by visiting the restroom. If you are in a classroom, maybe you have a peace corner that you've outfitted with blankets or a screen so that it feels like a safe place.

### 2 Regulate the nervous system

Stress brings a predictable pattern of physiological responses and anyone who has suffered toxic stress or trauma is going to be quickly stressed into hyperarousal (explosive, jittery, irritable) or hypoarousal (depressed, withdrawn, zombie-like). No matter how ingenious our regulation strategies, how artsy-crafty we get with tools, the child has to find what works for them.

### 3 Build a connected relationship

This is the number one way to regulate the nervous system. When we are around people we care about, our bodies produce oxytocin, which is the hormone responsible for calming our nervous system after stress. If we stay connected, then eventually the calm discussion of each person's feelings and needs can take place.

### 4 Support development of coherent narrative

Creating predictability through structure, routines and the presence of reliable adults helps reduce the chaos a child may feel and allows them to start creating the kind of logical sequential connections that not only help them understand their own narrative, but are also the fundamental requirement of many types of learning.

### 5 Practice 'power-with' strategies

One of the hallmarks of trauma is a loss of power and control. When someone is wielding power over you with no regard to your thoughts or feelings, the toxic shame of the original trauma may come flooding back. As adults, we should use our power well. If we model a 'power-with' relationship with children it's our best chance of creating adults who will treat others with dignity and respect.

### 6 Build social emotional and resiliency skills

Trauma robs us of time spent developing social and emotional skills. The brain is too occupied with survival to devote much of its energy to learning how to build relationships and it's a good chance we didn't see those skills modeled for us. Learning to care for one another is the most important job we have growing up.

### 7 Foster post-traumatic growth

We know that there are qualities and skills that allow people to overcome the most devastating trauma and not just survive but find new purpose and meaning in their lives. Problem solving, planning, maintaining focus despite discomfort, self-control and seeking support are all known to lead to post-traumatic growth and are skills we can foster in children.

1) **Create safety**. Frankly, nothing is going to get resolved while the child still feels physically or emotionally unsafe. In the midst of the fight, flight or freeze survival response, the upper brain is not taking in your well-chosen words, nor is it capable of understanding bargaining, reason, or promise. It is not able to absorb your point-of-view or that of anyone else, so making James say he's sorry and explain his actions, or telling Sandra that there's no need to get upset is going to be received as just so much white noise. If the child is overwhelmed, guide them to a quiet corner or allow them to decompress by visiting the restroom. If you are in a classroom, you may have a **peace corner** that you've outfitted with blankets or a screen so that it feels like a safe place. Pulling up their hoodie and putting their head on the desk is something students do all the time to feel safe. And yet how many schools have outlawed hoodies? Let's think about that. If a student wears a hoodie to disappear and feel safe, why would we want to make that a reason for further punishment? It's like refusing someone water to dampen a fuse.

2) **Regulate the nervous system**. Stress brings a predictable pattern of physiological responses and anyone who has suffered toxic stress or trauma is going to be quickly stressed into hyperarousal (explosive, jittery, irritable) or hypoarousal (depressed, withdrawn, zombie-like). A large portion of our trainings are devoted to giving examples of regulation strategies for the nervous system but the truth of the matter is that no matter how ingenious our solves, how artsy-crafty we get with tools, the child has to find what works for them. Sometimes it's as simple as a squeeze ball or being sent on an errand to the kindly lady in the office.

3) **Build a connected relationship**. This is the number one way to regulate the nervous system. When we are around people we care about, our bodies produce oxytocin, which is the hormone responsible for calming our nervous system after stress. As a parent, we learn that staying connected to our child is much more important than getting them to acknowledge fault or determining who bears the greater grievance. If we stay connected, then eventually the calm discussion of each person's feelings and needs can take place. It is also true for teachers and their students, only teachers may have a lot more work to do to convince their students that they care. Perhaps there has never been a trustworthy adult in this child's life. Perhaps the student doesn't want to bond with you because then they will feel the hurt of separation at the end of the year. However, most children have an uncanny ability to look into your eyes and know if you're 'for real.' If you cultivate loving kindness it will show.

4) **Support development of coherent narrative**. When we have experienced trauma, the left and right hemispheres of the brain have a hard time communicating with each other. A sense of yourself in time and images (right hemisphere) become disconnected from logical sequential thought and language (left hemisphere). The end result is that there are a lot of powerful, chaotic images in your head and no ability to make sense of them. If a child can make sense of his or her history, then it can be integrated and eventually put to bed. Creating predictability through structure, routines and the presence of reliable adults helps reduce the chaos a child may feel and allows them to start creating the kind of logical sequential connections that not only help them understand their own narrative, but

are also the fundamental requirement of many types of learning. Imagine doing algebra or constructing a sentence when drunk. That's what it's like for a child whose brain has been affected by complex trauma..

5) **Practice 'power-with' strategies** (empowerment, collaboration, choice and voice). In addition to getting hurt, emotionally or physically, one of the hallmarks of trauma is that you were unable to defend yourself – that is, you suffered a loss of power and control. Any situation where you find yourself back in that place of helplessness or on the receiving end of someone wielding power with no regard to your thoughts or feelings in the matter, you may become activated and the toxic shame of the original trauma may come flooding back. Adolescents are often so sensitized to any perceived 'disrespect' it occupies their whole consciousness. If we have power (and as adults invariably we do) then it is our job to use it well. How would you like to be treated by your boss? Would you like to be consulted about decisions that affect you? Have input into shaping the environment you work in? Would you like a boss who is compassionate and gives you the benefit of the doubt? Of course you would! And if you don't have this it's because your boss never experienced it growing up. If we model 'power-with' relationships with children it's our best chance of creating adults who will treat others with dignity and respect.

6) **Build social emotional and resiliency skills**. Trauma robs us of time spent developing social and emotional skills. The brain is too occupied with survival to devote much of its energy to learning how to build relationships and it's a good chance we didn't see those skills modeled for us. Learning to care for one another is the most important job we have growing up and yet there are many children who are living in a bunker built for their protection and have not the faintest idea how to get out. Resiliency is often equated with hope – the kind of hope you have when someone somewhere made you feel worthy of love. As we are confronted with challenging behaviors in the classroom, it can be overwhelming to realize that our level of compassion, our willingness to see the good in a child, our modeling of a safe, stable nurturing relationship, may be all the difference between a child who hopes and knows love and the child who goes on to hate himself and the world he lives in.

7) **Foster post-traumatic growth**. We know that there are qualities and skills that allow people to overcome the most devastating trauma and not just survive but find new meaning and purpose in their lives. We have classes full of these people if we can help students tap into their latent strengths. Problem solving, planning, maintaining focus despite discomfort, self-control and seeking support are all known to lead to post-traumatic growth and these are skills teachers are in a very good place to impart. The saddest situation is when we send a child back to a difficult home life at the end of each day. Even then we can help them build a perception of secondary control – if a child cannot control the circumstances of her life, then she can at least have some control over her reaction to them. Telling the story through art or journaling is taking control over your own story; it also helps lessen the confusion (establishes coherent narrative) and can begin to take away some of the sting. We can offer stories of how other people have come to terms with trauma, in the knowledge that positive



reinterpretation and acceptance are important predictors of post-traumatic growth. Optimism is the best coat of armor a child can wear into the future and we can build that through our 'positive regard,' which maintains a steadfast belief that the child is doing their very best despite overwhelming circumstances and that they deserve a bright and expansive life, no matter how dark and constricted their past.

Responding to a child's behavior in a trauma-informed way takes lots of empathy for yourself and the child, much biting of the tongue, and patience that borders on sainthood. The process is wonderfully human and defies the kind of tidy codification we've attempted here. The best expert is the compassionate heart – all the rest will follow.