

# Behavior IS communication



## *What is the behavior saying?*

If your child is crying, having a temper tantrum or is throwing things, perhaps question what he/she is trying to tell you. Is he/she trying to say “I’m .....tired, hungry, scared or don’t like what is being offered & I want something else”.

Could the behavior be from over-stimulation from lights, loud noises, smells, temperature or texture,(i.e., ‘the feel’), of something?

Is this a “bottom up” behavior” or a “top down” behavior?

**Bottom-up behaviors do not respond to rewards, consequences or punishments.** Bottom-up behaviors are *brain-based stress responses* that require understanding, compassion and actively helping an individual feel safe, *based on that individual’s unique neurology*. When we punish a bottom-up behavior, we can easily make matters worse and this is why so many of our treatments fall short, or even deepen a child or teen’s emotional and behavioral challenges. As a point of reference, almost all toddler tantrums are bottom-up because children don’t begin to develop the ability to reliably control emotions and behaviors until the middle to upper preschool years.

**Top-down behaviors** are deliberate and intentional. **Top-down** thinking and **behaviors** develop over many years through connections to the prefrontal cortex of the brain and start to occur typically between 3 and a half and four years of age until the process is fully developed in adulthood. They are called **top-down** because they are literally driven by the **top** part of our bodies, the “executive function” center of our brain.

## *How do I respond?*

We must match our responses to what the behavior is “*saying*” as well as with “*where*” it’s coming from, such as if it’s a bottom up or a top-down behavior? Is it coming from a response to sensory input, is your child tired, hungry or want something different?

As mentioned previously, if it appears to be bottom-up behavior, which is a brainstem response, then we need to help a child feel safe and respond with compassion using a comforting, calm voice and asking questions about what just happened. Many preschool behaviors are bottom up and need to be dealt with in caring & compassionate ways to help the child feel safe rather than with giving punishments.

If the behavior looks like a response to a sensory dislike such as a loud noise, lights, temperature or texture, (feel), then we can help the child feel safe and model a response such as “Stop.”, “All done”, or “ I don’t like that”, using verbal words or pointing to symbols on a core vocabulary board.

If we determine that a child has the ability to use executive functions and the behavior is *intentional*, then we can respond with consequences to prevent it from happening again or rewards & replacement behaviors to extinguish it.

Mood meters and emotion wheels are often used to help children express how they are feeling. Professionals claim that if “**If you can name it, then you can tame it**”. Children are taught to point to an emotion on the chart and an adult will verbalize the name for that feeling. Together the adult and child will “talk through” the feeling, such as “Oh, you’re pointing to the red zone which means that you’re mad. What made you angry & mad? Let’s talk about it.”

# MOOD METER

How are you feeling?

