



FORM & FUNCTION

Children let us know their wants and needs through their behaviors long before they have words or verbally express their feelings. They give us cues to help us understand what they are trying to communicate.

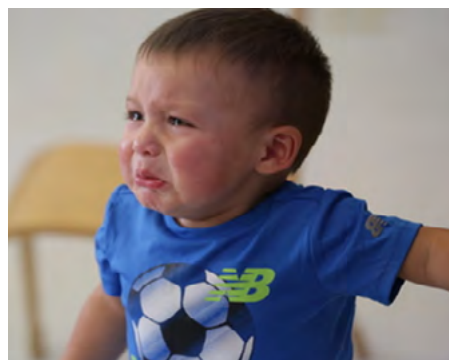
Each behavior has a reason or purpose and it is up to adults to figure out what the child is trying to communicate.

Each behavior has a:

FORM = the behavior the child is using to communicate

AND A

FUNCTION = the meaning of the behavior



Here are some examples of common forms and functions.

- Your infant cries about 30 minutes after she has had her bottle. The **FORM** is crying and the **FUNCTION** could be that she is tired and ready for a nap or is wet and needs a new diaper.
- You announce that dinner is ready, but instead of coming to the table, your preschooler runs around the living room. The **FORM** in this example is running around the room and the **FUNCTION** could be that he is excited that you made his favorite meal.

As you interact with your child, look for different behaviors that your child shows you and try to figure out the meaning of the behavior. When you respond to your child's efforts to tell you what they want or need, they feel valued and important. They learn that you will "hang in there" and try to understand what they are communicating through their behavior.

Below is a list of common behaviors and their possible meanings to better help you figure out what your child is trying to communicate with their behaviors.

CHILD'S AGE	FORM	POSSIBLE FUNCTION	
Infant	Crying	■ I'm hungry ■ I'm tired ■ I'm wet	■ I want you to hold me ■ I'm awake—come get me ■ It is too noisy in here
Toddler	Biting	■ I want the toy another child has ■ I'm teething	■ I am really frustrated ■ You just told me "no" and I don't like it
Preschooler	Hitting	■ I feel mad or frustrated ■ I want you to stop talking on the phone and play with me	■ I don't want to share my favorite toy ■ You told me to stop doing something but I don't want to stop



PAUSE, ASK, RESPOND

PARENTS: BECOME A “BEHAVIOR HAS MEANING” DETECTIVE IN THREE STEPS

It takes time and effort to understand the intent of your child’s communication—but the payoff is worth it! Here are three steps that you can use to identify the possible meaning of your child’s behaviors.

1. PAUSE:

Before you respond or react to your child’s behavior, pause to think about the possible meaning of the child’s behavior. Think about what happened before the behavior.

2. ASK:

Use your detective skills by asking:

- What do I think my child is trying to tell me through this behavior? Do they want something? Do they need something?
- What do I know about my child that might help me figure out the reason that led to the behavior?

3. RESPOND:

Figure out the meaning of the behavior to meet the wants or needs that your child is trying to express. This response helps your child feel listened to, understood, and safe. Also, label your child’s behaviors, emotions, and expressions to support vocabulary development and promote children’s confidence in expressing themselves.

Children who are dual language learners may try to express themselves in both their home language and in English, and especially benefit from parents and teachers observing their behaviors, emotions, and expressions. Label your child’s behaviors in your home language to support their growing vocabularies and promote confidence in expressing themselves.