

## TIP SHEET

# Responding to Challenging Behaviors



### ***Why Managing Behaviors Matters***

Young children—especially those facing stress or trauma—are still learning to manage big emotions and tough transitions.

Your calm, supportive presence helps them feel safe and understood.

### ***What This Looks Like in the Playspace***

In a Playspace, you might see children:

- Crying or yelling when upset
- Grabbing toys or refusing to share
- Struggling with transitions between activities
- Needing extra reassurance or space

These behaviors are **normal ways for children to communicate** their needs. Volunteers can help children feel safe and supported as they work through them.

### ***Your Role as a PAL***

*You are not expected to be a therapist or manage behavior perfectly. Your role is to:*

- *Stay calm and create a safe, nurturing space*
- *Respond to big feelings with empathy and patience*
- *Use simple strategies to help children regulate and re-engage*



### *The ACT Method*

One easy way to respond to challenging behaviors is the *ACT Method* (developed by Dr. Gary Landreth), which helps children feel heard while also setting limits.

#### **A — Acknowledge the feeling**

*"You're feeling really frustrated right now."*

#### **C — Communicate the limit**

*"It's not okay to hit."*

#### **T — Target an alternative**

*"You can use your words or squeeze this pillow instead."*

This simple framework helps children feel seen while teaching appropriate ways to express big feelings.

## TRY IT YOURSELF!

# Responding to Challenging Behaviors



*Responding with calm, empathy, and clear strategies helps children feel safe and learn to manage emotions.*

*You don't have to be perfect—your kindness and presence matter most.*

WHAT YOU CAN DO	WHY IT HELPS
Stay calm & composed	Children take emotional cues from adults. Staying calm helps de-escalate situations.
Use the ACT method	Combines empathy with clear limits and teaches alternatives.
Reflect feelings	Helps children feel seen and heard; supports emotional awareness.
Offer choices	Supports autonomy and gives a sense of control.
Redirect attention to another activity	Helps shift focus away from the source of frustration
Use positive reinforcement	Encourages and builds positive behavior
Use visual supports	Helps children understand routines and transitions
Validate feelings even if the request can't be met	Acknowledged the child's emotions while setting boundaries
Seek support from staff if needed	Some situations may require help from supervisors or professionals. Don't hesitate to ask.