



Responding to Challenging Behavior

INTRODUCTIONS

Today's Facilitators



PAL Participants

Please introduce yourself in the **chat**:

- Your **NAME**
- **Shelter** where you volunteer

GOALS FOR THIS TRAINING

We hope you'll leave this session prepared to ...

- Understand behavior as a form of communication
- What responding to behavior looks like in the Playspace
- Your role as a volunteer in supporting challenging behaviors
- How to use the ACT method
- Strategies to try in the Playspace

Safety First

- *We create spaces where children feel physically and emotionally safe.*

Consistency & Predictability

- *We offer consistent schedules, clear communication, and stable relationships.*

Collaboration & Shared Ownership

- *Shelter staff, Horizons staff, and PALs work together to build and maintain healing environments.*

Empathy & Understanding

- *We approach children & families with empathy, recognizing that behaviors often reflect traumatic experiences.*

Empowerment & Voice

- *We respect the voices and choices of children & families whenever possible to promote autonomy and self-confidence. This is critical for children impacted by trauma.*

Cultural Humility & Respect

- *We honor the diverse backgrounds & strengths of the children & families we serve.*

Why Responding to Behavior 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



- 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 Volunteer



You are not expected to be a therapist or manage behavior perfectly.

- 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 These Strategies



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

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
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.

Scenario: Toy Conflict Hitting



Age: *3 years old*

What Happens:

Two children are fighting over a toy car, one starts hitting the other.

What Not to Do:

"No hitting! Give me the car."

Why This Doesn't Help:

Stops the conflict but doesn't teach alternative behavior or address feelings.

A Better Way:

"You're both wanting the car. It's not okay to hit. Let's find another car so you each have one, or we can take turns."

Why This Works: Acknowledges both children's needs, communicates limits, and models problem-solving.

Skills Supported:

Turn-taking
conflict resolution
empathy.

Scenario: Throwing Toys



Age: 3 years old

What Happens:

During free play, a child starts throwing blocks across the room.

What Not to Do:

“Stop throwing! You’re going to hurt someone.”

Why This Doesn’t Help:

Focuses only on stopping the behavior without helping the child understand or manage their feelings.

Better Way:

“You’re throwing the blocks. Blocks are for building. If you want to throw, let’s use these soft balls instead into this bucket.”

Why This Works:

Clearly communicates the limit, offers a safe alternative, and redirects energy to an appropriate activity.

Skills Supported:

Self-regulation
safe play
problem-solving.

Scenario: Tantrum over a Block Tower



Age: 4 years old

What Happens:

A child builds a tall block tower. When it accidentally gets knocked over, they scream, cry, and kick at the blocks.

What Not to Do:

“Calm down, it’s just blocks. Stop making such a big deal.”

Why This Doesn’t Help:

Minimizes the child’s feelings, misses the chance to teach coping strategies, and may increase distress.

A Better Way:

“You worked so hard on that tower, and now it fell. That’s really disappointing. It’s not okay to kick, but we can rebuild it together or take a break.”

Why This Works:

Validates the child’s frustration, sets a clear limit on unsafe behavior, and offers a choice that helps them re-engage.

Skills Supported:

emotional regulation
problem-solving
resilience

Tip Sheet



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

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TIP SHEET Responding to Challenging Behaviors



The ACT Method

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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
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Final Thoughts



Every challenging behavior is an opportunity to connect, teach, and support a child's growth.

Your calm presence, clear limits, and willingness to offer safe alternatives help children learn how to manage big feelings in a safe way.

Small moments of connection during challenges can have a lasting impact. When children feel understood and supported even in tough moments, they learn that they are safe, capable, and valued.