

Common Sources of Behavior Problems in Children

By Brenna Hicks, MA, LMHC

I love “people-watching”. I go to malls, grocery stores, parks, etc. and watch how people think, behave and speak. This is often enlightening for me, as I am able to observe patterns of interaction. I suppose because I am trained in recognizing patterns and behaviors in children, I frequently observe children acting out and have identified what I believe to be three common threads.

I stress with the parents that I work with in therapy to hone in on the specific issues and reasons for problem behaviors, rather than just respond to such behaviors. There is always a reason why a child acts out, positive or negative. Discovering the root of the behaviors can be a way to understand and prevent them.

In working with children and families, I hear a common belief that children try to be disruptive, test boundaries, or seek attention. While at times that may be true, I would disagree that it is an overarching commonality among children. When children are content, they tend to be well-behaved. When they are discontent, they typically show their distress by acting out.

I am not implying that the goal of parenthood should be to keep your child happy and entertained at all times to solve your problems. However, children live in the “here and now”, and are focused on current needs and wants. If you can learn to distinguish between physical, emotional and environmental sources of behavioral issues, it can help you to be proactive in addressing those situations. The three most common physical sources that I have identified are hunger, fatigue and boredom, so let’s look at each one.

Hunger

One of the things that I have observed, especially around meal times, is that children act out when they are hungry. Parents need to eat less frequently than children, since age slows down metabolism in the body. Children also burn more calories than most adults as their activity levels are typically higher. This can often be overlooked if parents are busy and are not hungry themselves.

This is a significant topic for me, as I have low blood sugar. I need to eat something every few hours. Children should be on the same schedule throughout the day, with small healthy snacks in between the three main meals. One of the things that I notice is I often hear children crying, screaming or throwing tantrums when families first come into restaurants, but rarely at the end of the meal after the children have been fed.

This type of issue seems to be a relatively easy fix. It can quickly become a habit to make sure that you have quality snacks with you when you leave the house. Carrot sticks, blueberries, whole grain mini pita or nuts are travel-friendly and easy to throw into a bag. Try to avoid sodas and sweet snacks. This will give a rush of energy from the sugar and then cause a blood sugar crash, which puts you back at square one. It can also be helpful to make eating times fairly consistent each day. If a set schedule does not work for your family, you can think of it in terms of frequency. Every three hours is a good guide for when a child should be offered something to eat, even if it is small.

Fatigue

Another issue that I observe when children are acting out in public is that they are tired and need to sleep. Children, until the age of about four, should have solid nap or rest times during the day. Each child will require different amounts of rest, but a good guideline is ten to twelve hours of sleep in a twenty-four hour period until a child reaches adolescence.

I observed this a few weeks ago on vacation. Our flight from Detroit into Traverse City, Michigan left at 10:35pm. There were two mothers with children under the age of five, and both children were screaming and crying, inconsolable and defiant during boarding. One mother recognized her son was exhausted and tried to be understanding by holding him. The other kept insisting her child behave and punished him for acting out, which made the tantrum worse. Both boys were exhausted and up far too late. Once the boys slept on the plane, de-boarding went off without a hitch.

It is not always feasible or convenient to offer a daily rest period or enforce an appropriate bedtime, but it is important for the child's development. It is easy to think that a child can sleep anywhere, including in the car, but sleep outside of the home can prevent recuperative and restorative sleep. Of course, there will need to be exceptions to the rule, but it is always best for a child to get good rest at home.

Be aware of body language in children. If they are rubbing their eyes, dropping their heads, become more clingy, stop being as active, be more sensitive to their needs, and recognize that they need to rest. Overstimulation is often overlooked but provides one of the most common issues in children. Be ready to take them home and let them rest, even if it means changing your plans.

Boredom

The final common thread I observe in negative behaviors in children is boredom. Most children are not able to sit still without stimulation until age 10, some later. I

often observe parents at a restaurant or store carrying on with adult conversations or responsibilities and the child is ignored. Bored children will create something to keep themselves occupied!

Parents cannot expect young children to keep themselves interested in adult things. This can be seen most often in restaurants. After the child finishes eating, the parents continue talking and finishing their meals. The child starts getting fussy, playing with silverware, straws, spilling drinks, throwing things on the floor, etc. They have nothing to do, so they “act out”.

Children can be stimulated and kept occupied in most settings. Some locations will be more difficult to provide activities, but keeping crayons, paper, books, games, etc. with you will give you a break and the child something to do at a dinner table, church service, waiting room, and other places where acting out behaviors can be frustrating and challenging to control.

Identifying and understanding the source of behavior problems can be helpful in planning your day and proactively making accommodations that will prevent common issues. The more prepared you are, the better for you and your child!

About the Author

Brenna Hicks, MA, LMHC, is a licensed mental health counselor in Tampa Bay, Florida. She works with children providing Play Therapy, Filial Therapy and Sand Play. She has been featured in the New York Times, Family Style Magazine, on NBC's iVillage and CNN. She is currently a doctoral student at the University of South Florida in Counselor Education.