

The Language of Behavior: Deciphering a Child's Emotions

There are many rewarding aspects to being a Master Food Volunteer, including the opportunity to work with children and teens. As with any job, there are challenges. One of these is knowing how to respond to kids' behavior when we feel it is getting "out of control".

Robert Kaplow, Director of Arlington Public School's Extended Day Program, in Arlington, Virginia, provided an enlightening and powerful seminar on May 10, 2017 entitled, "When Kids Act Like Kids" to convey a full spectrum of behavioral issues that may arise when dealing with this age group and, more importantly, the solutions to them.

As a seasoned professional who has worked with youth his entire career, and a father of four, Mr. Kaplow shared what he has found to be the key to learning the language of children: simply taking a vested interest to understand a child's heart. This is the source of all emotions that become the conduit for children's nonverbal communication expressed as behavior. Like a thermometer, adults can observe a child's activity to detect whether a situation is beginning to boil such as a child who distracts his friends instead of listening to your directions, or there is a cool sense of peace and harmony when smiling teens dig into their citrus salad.

Labeling behavior as "good" or "bad" doesn't do justice to what's happening within a child. Rather, Mr. Kaplow prefers to describe behavior as a construct that constantly changes as a response to the child's world around him/her, even changing from day to day and hour by hour. If one looks at challenging displays of emotion as a symptom of a root problem that needs to be addressed appropriately rather than an annoyance (usually a recurring one), tackling it becomes easier, for both child and volunteer.

Just as kids need help solving a science or math problem they're struggling with, they also need assistance in developing critical coping skills to learn how to process strong emotions so they can resolve them in healthy ways. As an adult volunteer, you hold a lot of potential power to give a child the tools to learn how to deal with their emotions constructively. Imagine the ripple this could make in our culture as children implement these skills into adulthood. In fact, the Search Institute, a research organization dedicated to helping children succeed in life, has studied this very topic. Their research has found that children need 5 core elements (expressed in 20 specific actions) from adults to help them develop successfully. Having caring people in their life is one of these. For a closer look at all 20 components you can read the following document, "The Developmental Relationships Framework", available at: http://www.search-institute.org/downloadable/DevRel_Framework-1-Page-04-26-2017.pdf

Since behavior is the manner in which people conduct themselves and communicate nonverbally we must understand that children act the way they do because it makes sense to them. Adults are expected to act like adults. We should expect children to act like children. Studies have found that the brain doesn't fully develop until 25-30 years of age. If we take the time to step into children's tennis shoes we'll gain a better understanding of the issues that affect them and, based on the timeline of childhood development, be able to take into consideration

their age for what is deemed as appropriate conduct. Since behavior that challenges us is what we're focusing on, let's take a look inside their world and some common reasons why their emotional thermometer may be turning "feverishly hot":

- **POWER/DEFIANCE** – Kids who struggle for power and push back usually do so because they have little control in their lives. Remember when you were in grade school and practically every minute of your school day was scheduled for you? In addition to this some kids are saddled with other issues such as divorced parents, the responsibility of caring for younger siblings, or for older teens, the need to work to help support the family. The key to helping this child is to give her choices- "Would you like to help slice the apples or set the table?" – to give her voice power and visibility.

According to Kaplow, these kids often make the best leaders because they push boundaries and aren't complacent. The key is to channel their energy into constructive roles and guide them to make positive decisions. To foster this leadership spirit, tell him/her that you need their help. Assign a leadership position to boost confidence then guide them in implementing delegation skills. Let them know their tenacity is valuable if used in a positive way.

Remember, when they're bursting with controlling behavior, "What would you choose?" is a simple yet powerful tool to put positive power in their hands. If you've tried everything you can but still can't get through to the child, ask for help (see **TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL CLASS** at the end of the article).

- **REVENGE/ANGER** – Anger is one of the most powerful emotions and can be the hardest to manage. It is often misplaced so it's important to hear a child's entire story in order to gather clues that may lead to the crux of the matter. It doesn't matter if she was truly hurt or that she *perceived* that she was – hurt is hurt to a child. If not dealt with in a healthy way anger can fester into bitter revenge as the stolen spot in line, a "misplaced" spatula that no one can find, or a disrespectful attitude.

When encountering a child who has reacted angrily, first help them calm down with a counting or breathing exercise if needed. Don't remind them of their bad deed, they already know they did something wrong. Instead, use grace to change the dynamic by building a relationship. Asking, "What can I do to help you?" or "Tell me what happened," demonstrates to the child that there are compassionate adults in the world. By listening to her feelings, you give her voice validation and value, and in turn she creates empathy for others.

Consistency builds a child's trust. Let them know they can count on you to help them if a situation develops or they need help calming down, instead of reaching a boiling point of no return. Invite her to use her critical thinking skills to list all the options in response to a situation and the possible outcomes of each.

At the end of class take the child aside and acknowledge the 10 minutes that went well and ignore the 50 minutes that were negative. Let him know what a great kid he is and that you look forward to the next class with him.

Your choice in language and approach can make the difference between continued bitterness and helping a child find a way to resolve anger and move on.

- **AVOIDANCE OF FAILURE** – Who wants to fail? No one, especially if it's in an environment one senses to be unsafe. Just as some adults unconsciously self-sabotage great plans some kids will do the same.

Does she sit at a desk and pull out a book to read instead of joining the group to cut the vegetables? Maybe she's always received criticism at home for anything she does and figures "what's the point?" Let her know that you're there to help. Encourage, but don't force participation. If she doesn't respond right away, let her observe that your class is a safe and welcoming place, and she'll hopefully be drawn in.

If you teach a multi-session class, do you notice a kid who goofs off toward the end of class and always misses the late bus home? Perhaps he's avoiding going home for a reason. Try to spot any patterns that can alert you to an activity/situation that could be a problem. Enlist the help of parents or others to solve the mystery.

Value the child even when they act up, knowing it's a symptom of a larger issue. Instead of focusing on the negative, recognize her talents and the time she was engaged in class. "I bet you'd make a great Chef someday by the way smiled at everyone while serving the French toast," or "Elise, the peppers you diced are the perfect size," reinforces positive behavior, shows them that they are not invisible, and that you're not upset with them.

- **ATTENTION SEEKERS**– Some kids vie for attention either directly from you or divert it towards themselves. This can be subconscious or it can be blatant. Either way, it needs to be appropriately handled so that others don't feel left out and you have control of the class.

When dealing with kids who don't want to pay attention, don't wait for complete silence or stillness – you'll never start your activity! Instead, experiment with these handy tricks of the trade: *Pay attention to the kids who are behaving appropriately; the talkers will slowly quiet down when they know you're not going to pay attention to their negative behavior; * Conversely, try slowly moving toward the disruptive kids as you give directions in a regular level voice; they will sense your close presence and you will soon have everyone's undivided attention; * If an entire group is inattentive, begin to talk softer. Some will soon notice and encourage others to listen so they can hear you; * Special signals or interactive claps can signify the commencement of important directions.

A quick search on the computer for “tricks to get kids’ attention” can be a source for help. Remember to make the actions age appropriate and switch them often. Enlist older kids to help younger ones stay focused and on task.

If you have a child who wants your undivided attention, create a special signal (for instance, touching the rim of your hat with the back of your wrist or rubbing your palms together) that only he will recognize. When his talking or questions become overactive, nonchalantly use the signal to curb his wonderful yet overactive participation. This signal will avoid embarrassment while teaching that others deserve a turn to comment or ask questions. Asking the child to invent questions of his own to ask the other students develops awareness of inclusiveness.

- **LACK OF SKILLS** – Sometimes adults take kitchen skills, such as proper knife use or measuring ingredients, for granted because we’ve been cooking for so long. Likewise some vocabulary for children may be too advanced or not part of their native tongue. When a child “doesn’t get it” and starts to act out because they’re either bored or feel inadequate, we adults need to adjust our expectations.

Like a pilot preparing her pre-flight checklist, MFV’s should pre-check that the skills and goals to be introduced are age appropriate. Activities should be challenging, but not stressful. Creating an open dialogue – asking kids questions and being open to theirs- can provide a safe space for shy or overly challenged students. Demonstrating a new skill before they attempt it can also ease anxiety. Periodic check-ins to see that everyone is progressing as planned and helping those that are having trouble can intervene frustration and lets them know you care.

In more densely ethnic communities, enlisting the assistance of an interpreter may be necessary and can break down barriers in communication. Taking into consideration typical or special foods of a certain population and incorporating them into recipes can build bridges by showing you’re interested in their culture.

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL CLASS

A Few Days Before Class

Conduct a brief review of the class material, time progression for each step, and division of work to help identify any potential issues and, if possible, confirm that you have all necessary equipment. If a wide span of ages will be participating, consider how the older kids could help the younger ones.

Even the best of plans can go awry, so have a Plan B and expect glitches and interruptions.

Brainstorm a catchy title/theme as a hook to keep interest throughout the class.

Before Class Begins

Introduce yourself to the school staff or community resource members on-hand. Most behavior can be ignored and the few exceptions should be able to be resolved. However, if the need arises, don't be shy about enlisting the help of the staff since they are the most familiar with the facility and children.

If you have time, organize equipment and food before children arrive. Consider precutting some ingredients.

Prepare mentally to be a positive influence. Set your long to-do list on the back burner and let the next hour be fun and engaging.

During Class

Consider presenting a completed product (or perhaps a picture) at the beginning of class to motivate kids to stay on track and give them something to look forward to for all their hard work (an example may be a potted tomato plant if creating a container garden or a picture of a finished dish if working on a recipe). If needed and/or appropriate, extend the session one more class so students can complete their project and feel a sense of accomplishment.

Discuss your expectations with the children from the start. Emphasize the goal of the class and skills they will achieve by the end. Remind them to raise their hand or to approach you if they need help.

Build rapport. Referring to each child by a special name that rhymes with their own or a unique handshake can make them feel special. Asking about their favorite foods or family recipes are great conversation starters.

Never use sarcasm, even if joking. Kids that young can't decipher the message between the lines. Instead they may take what you're saying literally and personally. "You're killing me!" said in jest to a child can be taken to heart as unnecessary guilt and dwelled on indefinitely. Asking, "Do I look like your mother?" when prompting lackadaisical kids to help clean up is confusing and degrading. Incidentally, sarcasm can, in some cases, be a form of passive anger which is another reason to process and resolve your own frustration before responding.

Avoid rhetorical questions that only back a child into a corner. "How many times do I have to tell you not to _____" not only makes the child feel bad but it doesn't do anything to solve the situation. Instead, assess the behavior and talk it out with the child, referring to the reasons above for any hint as to why they were behaving the way they were. Remember the 3 Second Rule. A positive or negative comment only takes three seconds to say but can be stowed in the back of a child's mind for a lifetime. Do you want to be remembered as "the worst" or "the best" teacher a student ever had?

Do not lose your temper in frustration. Do not threaten, intimidate or use punishment as tools to manage. These are authoritative in nature and instill fear instead of nurture. It shows

you're at your wits end in a no-win situation. It can also scar children deeply, even for a lifetime. Alternatively, as a mentor, teach them to see the natural consequences of their actions, "Because you ate all of Ben's chocolate chips he won't be able to finish his project and that made him sad. Tell me what's going on. It seems like you're upset about something." After you've listened and the problem has been resolved you can ask, "How can we help him finish his dessert? I bet he would appreciate that." If they don't learn how to deal with their behavior the "problem" will never truly go away, for you or them.

Timing is everything when responding to a child who's upset. When things calm down, take them aside and talk. Relax, offer support, and end on a good note, "That was a good conversation. Thank you for talking to me so we could work this out. You're a great kid."

For a multi-class session, a rewards chart can be a short term effective tool. Search the internet for creative and simple ideas.

Lastly, enjoy your time!

As Master Food Volunteers, we reach out into the community and impact residents in ways we may never know. Understanding a child's emotions through the language of behavior is important in developing vital skills and caring relationships that will hopefully impact them for a lifetime. By allowing space for children to grow and even guide us adults at times, we can in turn, impart our wisdom to help them on their journey towards achieving their dreams.

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