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Hearing Behavioral Messages: Avoiding Misinterpretation to Make Effective, Inclusive Decisions

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Abstract

Behavior is a form of communication. For many young children, they may engage in certain behaviors to consciously or subconsciously communicate a need to access something, such as a desired adult or peer, sensory stimulation, or a tangible item. Other times, children may engage in a behavior to escape or avoid something, such as a particular environment. Sometimes the behaviors in which young children engage can be interpreted as challenging, based on the perceptions of those who work with the child, including the child's early childhood teacher. These interpretations of challenging behavior derive from one's own cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and biases. Such interpretations can lead to discriminatory discipline practices, particularly against children from marginalized and minoritized backgrounds. Instead, teachers can consider the behavioral messages expressed by the children they work with from an unbiased perspective, identify if the behavior in which the child is engaging is truly challenging, and implement appropriate intervention if necessary. The purpose of this paper is to present a plan for hearing behavioral messages of marginalized and minoritized children in a way that systematically addresses their needs while also considering the potential mismatch between teacher and child identities.

Keywords Behavior · Bias · Communication · Equitable · Inclusion · Interpretation

Mrs. Thompson is a first grade, general education teacher. She is very pleased with the progress her children are making in class; however, Jake, an autistic child in her class, does not appear to engage in learning centers with his peers. Mrs. Thompson notices Jake frequently looking out the window and playing with his school supplies instead of completing activities during centers. She wants to be proactive in supporting Jake, so she has provided him with an activity schedule, which will remind him of his required activities to complete during centers. After a week, she notices he does not appear to be completing his required activities, but now is using the laminated activity schedule as a ramp for his school supplies to "drive" off when playing with them. Clearly, the activity schedule was not working. Mrs. Thompson does not understand why Jake is engaging in this behavior.*

*We have chosen to use identity-first language to affirm the value and worth of autistic people and to align with American Psychological Association, Seventh Edition guidelines, which recommends the use of language that honors community preferences (American Psychological Association, 2020). Some assert that using person-first language separates the person from their autism, implying there is something inherently wrong with being autistic (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2021).

The Role Bias Can Play in Behavior Interpretation and Response

Many early childhood (EC) teachers feel as Mrs. Thompson did in the vignette above. They see their young children engaging in a behavior they perceive to be challenging and want to support them so they can be academically, behaviorally, and socially successful. The teacher provides them with an intervention or support and expects the behavior to

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change. Sometimes, the intervention is effective, but often there is no change in the behavior. The EC teacher then reaches out to others (e.g., special education teacher, behavior specialist, social worker) for help, or gives up, believing the child is incapable of engaging in a perceived "appropriate" behavior. Instead, EC teachers can listen to their young child's behavioral messages in a way that recognizes their strengths and diversity. The purpose of this paper is to outline a plan for hearing behavioral messages displayed by young children in EC settings and use that information to respond in culturally and neurodiversity-affirming ways. The plan outlined in this paper is rooted in applied behavior analysis, neurodiversity-affirming principles, and culturally relevant practices (Cooper et al., 2020; Gay, 2002; Hartman et al., 2023). Practitioners in EC settings can use the information presented in this paper with minoritized and marginalized children in EC settings.

A behavior is any interaction between a person and their environment (Cooper et al., 2020). The Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) notes that what makes a behavior challenging is defined by one's own culture, background, race/ethnicity, and bias (DEC, 2017). Similarly, a child's development, temperament, environment, and sociocultural factors can impact the way their behavior is viewed by adults in their life (DEC, 2017). When EC teachers observe the behavior their young children engage in, the perception of the behavior can be influenced by the teacher's racial, gender, and disability biases. Sometimes a teacher misinterprets behaviors that are developmentally appropriate as being problematic when the child is exploring the context of their environment, learning to verbally communicate needs, or simply unable to express themselves in the same way an older child or adult can (Kelly et al., 2024). Misinterpretations of child behavior may result in EC teachers perceiving behavior as problematic, such as viewing a child's behavior as disrespectful and noncompliant (Blacher & Eisenhower, 2023; Morris & Perry, 2017). Black children, boys, and children with disabilities are subjected to disproportionate and exclusionary discipline practices at higher rates than their peers, particularly in EC settings (Alexander et al., 2023; Blacher & Eisenhower, 2023; US Department of Education, 2022). Researchers have found that EC teachers monitor Black children and boys in EC settings for potential challenging behavior more often than they do White children and girls (Gilliam et al., 2016). Similarly, researchers found that nearly 16% of autistic children were expelled from EC programs because of perceived challenging behavior or difficulty in addressing social and developmental differences from neurotypical peers (Blacher & Eisenhower, 2023). As EC teachers are working with traditionally marginalized groups of children, they can consider (a) the ways in which their own backgrounds, cultures, neurotypes (i.e., a way a person engages and responds to the world around them, e.g., Autistic, neurotypical, obsessive compulsive disorder), abilities, and biases may impact the decisions they make when working with children with varying identities; (b) how behavior may be impacting the child; (c) the ways in which they are interpreting a child's behavior; and, ultimately, which behaviors they are targeting for potential intervention; and (d) if such behaviors would be targeted for intervention if another child with a different identity engaged in the same behavior (Alexander et al., 2023; Anđelković et al., 2022; Blacher & Eisenhower, 2023). By doing this, teachers will be more conscientious about how their own experiences and beliefs influence their perceptions of behavior, which will allow them to support their children's educational development more equitably and inclusively.

Behavior is a form of communication, and the ways in which individuals communicate through behavior are defined by their: sensory, escape or avoidance, attention, or tangible (Cooper et al., 2020; DEC, 220). In other words, individuals communicate they are trying to gain access to something (e.g., sensory stimulation, attention) or trying to avoid something through their behavior. Behavior is learned over time by being reinforced through the environment. For example, when a child raises their hand because they want to say something or need something, and the teacher calls on them, this behavior has been reinforced. After raising a hand has been reinforced repeatedly, the behavior becomes part of the child's behavioral repertoire, or part of their normal behavioral functioning. Similarly, if a child throws their materials in class, the teacher may place them in "time out" located in a solitary setting in the classroom. The child may find the solitary setting confining, which is appealing because of the child's sensory needs. Because the child is reinforced by the confining space, they may continue to engage in the throwing behavior because they have learned this is an opportunity to go to the confining space. This behavior becomes part of the child's behavioral repertoire. This behavior (i.e., throwing materials) communicates the need for a sensory input which teachers can proactively implement in the classroom space to support the child.

Presume Competence

The way teachers perceive behavior matters has an impact on the classroom community and the individual relationships with children. The term "presume competence" originated with individuals who use alternative and/or augmentative communication (AAC) and asserts that although someone uses AAC, they may not be incompetent in other areas of their life as well (Biklen & Burke, 2006). The term "presume competence" has since been brought to other

areas, including behavior. For example, if a child engages in perceived "challenging" behavior, teachers should (a) not assume the behavior is intentionally problematic, and (b) that the child is incompetent in other areas of their life as well (Greene, 2014). Children want to do well and will if they can (Greene, 2014). When children are given support, they are capable of using desirable behaviors. In cases where the behavior is considered challenging, Greene (2014) points out that it is essential the adult recognizes their role in the child's behavior. These tpyes of behaviors do not occur in isoltation and it is important teachers reflect on how their responses and words may contribute to the situation. When teachers presume competence "they define the student as someone who wants to learn and engage, thus putting themselves in the role of educational detectives, discovering ways to organize instruction that maximizes heterogeneous student-to-student interaction" (Biklen, 2020, p. 236).

When teachers presume competence, they make a valid choice to believe children are capable of learning and engaging in age and developmentally appropriate behaviors (Biklen & Burke, 2006). Teachers can continue to collect data and use the data to adjust their teaching practices based on their children's strengths and needs. However, many teachers default to assuming neurodivergent children are not able to learn or engage in certain tasks (Santoli et al., 2008), and that minoritized children and boys engage in challenging behavior (Alexander et al., 2023; Gilliam et al., 2016). When teachers have positive views of inclusion and disability, they are more likely to engage in effective instructional practices and enhance the learning opportunities of their children with disabilities (Jordan et al., 2009). To see tips to presume competence, see Fig. 1.

Is the Behavior Being Misinterpreted?

Mrs. Thompson consults the behavior specialist, Ms. Brown, about Jake's behavior. She states she is concerned about his lack of work completion during learning centers. Ms. Brown schedules her first observation in Mrs. Thompson's classroom so she can get a better picture of what is occurring in the classroom. During the observation, Mrs. Thompson is working with four children at a small table conducting reading groups. The other children in the class are participating in learning centers. In Mrs. Thompson's class, children are required to complete a specific set of activities (i.e., read a book with a partner, play a reading game with a partner, play a writing game with a partner), and then complete free-choice activities to complete for the remainder of centers. Ms. Brown observes Jake choose a book and sit next to a bookshelf, out of sight of Mrs. Thompson, and read the book to himself. He reads it out loud, and Ms. Brown hears he can read each word correctly and quickly. Next, Jake takes a puzzle from a shelf and takes it back to his original spot. As Jake begins working on the puzzle, another child, Maizie, comes over and asks if she can help him put it together. He agrees and they put the puzzle together. Maizie puts the puzzle away and picks up another game, requiring them to practice their weekly spelling words. She walks the game over, asks Jake if he wants to play that game, and sits down next to him. They go through each spelling word together, and then Maizie puts the game away. Then, Jake walks over to his desk and takes out three markers, a pencil, and his activity schedule. He stands next to his desk and begins playing with his school supplies while looking out the window. All three activities were completed very quickly, but accurately. After school, Ms. Brown informs Mrs. Thompson that Jake was completing his work, and explained what she observed (i.e., that Jake completed his work next to the bookshelf).

Sometimes children are perceived to engage in behavior teachers find challenging; however, when teachers seek to better understand the circumstances, they can gain a better understanding about why the child is engaging in the behavior. In the scenario provided, Mrs. Thompson was concerned because Jake was not completing his work during centers. However, upon further observation, it was discovered Jake *was* completing his schoolwork. Jake was simply following Mrs. Thompson's directives at a pace faster than his peers and she was unable to observe him completing the tasks.

EC teachers may also misinterpret behavior that is being displayed by their children who are from a different cultural background, gender identity, or neurotype than them. For example, when a teacher gives two children a directive, one child may loudly complain, shuffle their feet, return to their desk, but comply with the directive. Another child may quietly go to their seat, cross their arms, and not comply with the directive. If there is a mismatch in identity, culture, or background between the teacher and child, the teacher will determine which behavior is problematic based on their own perceptions. However, the teacher can consider what is directly impacting the child's physical, academic, and social-emotional wellbeing in class.

Mrs. Thompson may also be concerned that Jake is spending part of the instructional time facing the back of the classroom. In many early elementary classrooms, teachers have an expectation that children participate during an entire instructional block (e.g., all of centers). This expectation has been passed down from when schools predominantly served White, neurotypical children (Annamma et al., 2012). Given the diverse nature of children in schools, it is imperative teachers reflect on their own identities and beliefs. When teacher and child identities align there are more opportunities for similar behavioral communication

TIPS TO PRESUME COMPETENCE

RECOGNIZE THAT STUDENTS ARE EXPERTS OF THEMSELVES

It's important to collaborate with students to identify beneficial accommodations. Without doing that, we risk choosing ones that could be harmful to the person (Kingsburg et al., 2020)

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

It is important to get to know the student and their family. The behavior may be accepted and typical for the child's culture and family. Talk to them and learn.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Communicate with the student and the family in ways that they prefer or are most accessible for them. If they have limited speech or are unable to speak, use AAC devices such as a communication board.

Do not assume that because someone cannot speak that it means they are not able to understand or do things.

DO NOT MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

Key to presuming competence is to not make assumptions about student behavior. "Teachers must be willing to not just give (a student) a desk and then leave (them) to fill the chair. (Students) need to be asked questions, and given time for (their) thoughtful answers. Teachers need to become a conductor and guide (students through the place (they) may get lost" (Biklen & Burke, 2006; p. 172)

Fig. 1 Presuming competence tips

to occur; however, when teacher and child identities do not align, there are more opportunities for miscommunication to occur (Redding, 2019; Welsh & Little, 2018).

Breaking Down the Intervention

When an EC teacher sees a young child engaging in a behavior the teacher finds challenging, the teacher can use a six-step process to ensure they are Hearing Behavioral Messages and respecting the child's diversity. This intervention draws from applied behavior analysis, neurodiversity-affirming principles, and culturally relevant practices to ensure it is evidence-based while also centering children (Cooper et al., 2020; Gay, 2002; Hartman et al., 2023). To review the full process, see Table 1.

Step 1: Operationalization: What is the Behavior?

By first identifying what the behavior is that a teacher may be concerned about, the teacher can develop an operational definition and ensure the behavior is truly problematic for the child. When operationalizing a behavior, the teacher ensures the definition of the behavior is clear, objective, and measurable (Cooper et al., 2020). This means that any observer can read the definition of the behavior, come to the classroom, and observe the behavior as defined and measure the behavior in the same way the teacher defined it. In the example provided above, Mrs. Thompson might say Jake "never participates during centers." Another observer may believe Jake does absolutely nothing during centers. However, if Mrs. Thompson stated, "When participating in centers, Jake stands next to his desk with his body turned towards the back of the classroom, manipulating his writing utensils in a fashion similar to cars," another observer can get a better idea of what the behavior looks like. Anyone who sees the child and his behavior will know the behavior does not involve anyone else, when the behavior is most likely to occur, that it is isolated to the area around the child's desk, and what the child is doing with his materials. When operationalizing the behavior, it is important teachers do not personalize the behavior, or add language that incorporates their own opinions, thoughts, or biases about why the behavior may be occurring. For example, Mrs. Thompson might *want* to add, "Jake ignores directives given to him to complete his work," or, "Jake chooses not to complete his work even when provided a verbal reminder." Mrs. Thompson is not able to identify whether Jake is ignoring directives or choosing not to complete his work, and therefore cannot make judgment calls about the reason Jake is not completing his work. She can only state facts about what she is observing.

Table 1 Hearing behavioral messages action plan

Step	Considerations
Step 1: Operationalization: What is the behavior?	• Provide a clear, objective, and measurable definition of the behavior • Avoid opinions, thoughts, or biases when defining the behavior
Step 2: Teacher reflexivity: What are the teacher's identities and beliefs, and how might they shape perceptions about behavior?	• Teachers should reflect on their own identities[a] and expectations for "typical" classroom behavior • Teachers should ask themselves how these identities and expectations are similar to, or different from the child • Teachers should consider how their own identities and expectations may be infiltrating their decisions related to what is "challenging" and how to discipline the child
Step 3: Communication: Has the teacher talked with the family and child?	• Discuss the behavior with the family and/or child • Is the behavior accepted in the child's culture and/or for the child's neurotype? • How is the behavior interpreted by the child's family? • After teachers have reflected on their own identities and beliefs, and the child's culture and neurotype, is there evidence that the behavior is problematic or that it is being misinterpreted based on culture or neurotype? Is it necessary to address this behavior?
Step 4: Impact of the behavior: Is the behavior impacting the child or their peers?	• Is the behavior physically, academically, or socially-emotionally harmful to the child? How do you know? Consider responses to questions in Steps 2 and 3. • Is the behavior physically, academically, or socially-emotionally harmful to the child's peers? How do you know? Consider responses to questions in Steps 2 and 3. • If the answer to both questions is no, is it necessary to address this behavior?
Step 5: Reason for behavior: Why is the behavior occurring?	• Collect data about the behavior, including antecedent-behavior-consequence data, scatterplot data, interview data (from the child, family, other practitioners), environmental data, etc. • Identify when the behavior is likely to occur and when it is not likely to occur
Step 6: Intervene if needed: Is intervention needed based on the information gathered?	• Check the environment: what changes can be made to the environment to support the child? • Check yourself: what changes can the teacher make to support the child? • Check the child: what supports can be provided directly to the child?

Note.[a]Identities refer to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, neurotype, disability, gender, language, as well as intersecting identities

Step 2: Teacher Reflexivity: What are the Teacher's Identities and Beliefs, and How Might they Shape Perceptions about Behavior?

In Step 2, teachers should reflect on their own identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, neurotype, intersecting identities) and their beliefs about behavior, and the ways in which their identity and beliefs may impact their perceptions of behavior. As previously stated, one's own culture, background, race/ethnicity, and bias form their perceptions of behavior (DEC, 2017). However, a teacher relying on their own identities, beliefs, and/or experiences about behavior to make decisions and change the behavioral functioning of a child is inappropriate. Instead, teachers should consider how their identities and beliefs may be similar and/or different from those of their children, and how those similarities and differences may impact disciplinary practices in their classroom, while understanding that children develop at different rates. When variations in identity and beliefs impact what is viewed as challenging, teachers can withhold judgment based on their own ideals and instead attune to the ideals of their children and their family's cultural beliefs. Anđelković and colleagues (2022) recommend teachers engage in reflective practices, specifically around their own beliefs, so they can improve their teaching practices. The authors define reflexivity as:

> a higher level of the process of learning and teaching that arises through the awareness of personal beliefs and ways of acting in the classroom, whereby it presupposes the ability and readiness of teachers to change in order to improve student and personal development (p. 8).

The authors also explain that reflection is the essence of the practice of teaching, a practice all teachers engage in as they consider their inner beliefs (Anđelković et al., 2022). As teachers are reflecting on their own internal beliefs they can also consider the beliefs and experiences of their children and families.

As teachers are considering what reflexive practices they may consider taking part in, they might consider infant and early childhood mental health consultation, reflective practices, and mindfulness. Infant and early childhood mental health consultation has been shown to support teacher-child closeness and child attachment behaviors when implemented with fidelity (Davis et al., 2020). Reflective practices can be used to support teacher well-being, specifically related to building teacher capacity in working with children. A recent study found that using reflective practices can build belonging, self-efficacy, and agency for EC teachers (Cigala et al., 2019). Finally, mindfulness-based practices can be used to improve teacher well-being, which can, in turn, build prosocial classroom environments. Researchers have found that providing training related to mindfulness supports teachers and children in early childhood settings (Dewhirst & Goldman, 2020).

Step 3: Communication: Has the Teacher Talked with the Family and Child?

The next step is to discuss the behavior with the family and child (DEC, 2014). The goal of this step is to situate the behavior in the child's and family's identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, neurotype, intersecting identities). Teachers can discuss ways in which the family's culture or background influence the child's behavior, how the child's disability and/or neurotype influence the behavior, and the family's views of the behavior. The teacher can also consider information from Step Two (i.e., teacher reflexivity) in this section, and how their own identities and beliefs may align with or interact with those of the family and child. If the teacher's identities and beliefs interact with those of the family and child, the teacher should consider ways in which they can set aside their own identities and beliefs in favor of their child's and family's identities. Ensuring they are meeting the needs of their child should be their top priority. When communicating with the child, the teacher should consider the child's mode of communication and language development. The teacher can employ age and development appropriate interview skills, such as using AAC devices, pictures, or asking questions that require short responses. After completing Steps 1–3, the teacher should consider whether the behavior is truly problematic, or if there were biases associated with the perceptions of the behavior. If the teacher determines the behavior is problematic based on information provided by the family, child, and their own reflection, they should continue to Step 4.

Step 4: Impact of the Behavior: Is the Behavior Impacting the Child or Their Peers?

Step 4 focuses on *who* is impacted by the behavior. The teacher considers how the child(ren) may be physically impacted (e.g., bodily injuries such as headbutting, biting), academically impacted (e.g., unable to learn due to leaving the assigned environment), and socially-emotionally impacted (e.g., having feelings hurt because of unwanted comments). First, the teacher considers the child in question and asks if that child is impacted physically, academically, or socially-emotionally. If the teacher determines the child is not impacted by the behavior, the teacher can then consider how peers may be impacted by the behavior. Sometimes

teachers believe a child is interfering with their peers' learning when they may not be. For example, a child may hum to themself when working. The teacher may believe this behavior is interrupting the environment for other children, and therefore feel it is problematic. When observing the childre, though, the teacher may find the other children in the class do not notice the humming and continue to work through it. If it is determined that neither the child nor their peers are impacted by the behavior, the teacher can then decide whether it is appropriate to proceed with the plan. If the teacher determines the child and/or their peers are impacted by the behavior, they can proceed to Step 5.

Step 5: Reason for Behavior: Why is the Behavior Occurring?

If the teacher has determined the behavior is impacting the child and/or peers, the next step is to figure out *why* the behavior is occurring. When a child is engaging in a specific behavior, it is helpful to remember that behavior is a form of communication. Therefore, collecting behavioral data helps teachers understand what the child is communicating. To start, communicating with the child, other teachers, and the child's family can help to understand why the behavior may be occurring and what supports may have been used in the past. Understanding a child's neurotype and cultural diversities will help to understand why the behavior may be occurring, and if the behavior is tied to a specific characteristic within the child (DEC, 2014). For example, some neurodivergent children have sensory needs that can be easily addressed by identifying the sensory need and addressing the associated support. In other words, by discussing those needs with the child, their family, and/or previous teachers, the teacher may be able to provide appropriate support to the child relatively quickly. Having conversations with the family and child early may help the teacher proactively adjust the environment to make the classroom more accessible and effective for the child. The next step is to collect data, such as antecedent-behavior-consequence data, scatterplot data, or other forms of behavior data, to get a better idea of (a) what other events may be occurring when the behavior occurs, (b) what is triggering or maintaining the behavior, and (c) what may be occurring or not occurring during other portions of the school day (Cooper et al., 2020; DEC, 2014). EC teachers may consider eliciting the support of other practitioners when collecting data, such as special education teachers, school psychologists, or behavior analysts. By having a clear idea about why the behavior is occurring, teachers can help to appropriately support the child.

Step 6: Intervene if Needed: Is Intervention Needed Based on the Information Gathered?

After collecting data, teachers can consider whether intervention is needed. In many cases, teachers consider intervention to mean a program, system, or group of strategies that are implemented directly with the child. However, intervention can, and often should be, focused on changing the environment, adjusting the teacher's practices, or providing the child with supports, as needed. Teachers can begin by considering the environment (DEC, 2014). Are there environmental barriers that could be changed to adjust the behavior? For example, when collecting data, did the teacher identify that the behavior only occurs when the sun is shining through the window, which makes it bright and hot for the child? Perhaps the child engages in a problematic behavior to escape the bright sunlight. Instead of providing the child with sunglasses or moving the child to a new location in the classroom, closing the blinds can be an environmental change that does not disrupt the child and their learning. The next strategy to consider would be to change the teacher's behavior. If it is determined the teacher can change the way in which they are presenting directives or instruction, where they are standing in the classroom, or how they are addressing a child, it can often change the behavior. Finally, if it is not possible to change the environment or the teacher's behavior, providing direct intervention to the child may be an option. This might be through teaching the child a new behavior such as making a request, providing the child with tools that will allow them to remove stimuli in the environment that are triggering (e.g., headphones), or providing them opportunities to remove themselves from environments when they need a break. When providing interventions directly to the child, it is helpful to teach the child to be a self-advocate in communicating their needs to the teacher and providing those needs upon request. The purpose of supporting the child by checking the environment, checking the teacher, or checking the child is not to force the child to assimilate or mask who they are. Instead, it is to provide the child a voice in articulating their needs so they can continue to be a diverse individual who belongs in an inclusive educational environment. For a review of additional resources see Table 2.

Mrs. Thompson understood that Jake was completing his work but expressed concern that he spent most of the time playing with his school supplies. Ms. Brown told Mrs. Thompson she had heard about a plan for Hearing Behavioral Messages. Ms. Brown and Mrs. Thompson wanted to ensure the learning space was inclusive for Jake and decided to follow the plan. They already operationally defined the behavior (Step 1). For Step 2, they discussed their own identities and beliefs. Mrs. Thompson and Ms.

Table 2 Additional resources

Topic	Author (Year)
Setting up the environment	Hancock, C. L., & Carter, D. R. (2016). Building environments that encourage positive behavior: The preschool behavior support self-assessment. *Young Children, 71*(1), 66–73. Lesaux, N., K., Jones, S. M., Bock, K. P., & Harris, J. R. (2015). The regulated learning environment: Supporting adults to support children. *Young Children, 70*(5), 20–27. Ostrosky, M. M., & Meadan, H. (2010). Helping children learn and play together. *Young Children, 65*(1), 104–110. Park, K. & Pinkelman, S. (2017). Function-based approach to designing an instructional environment. *Beyond Behavior, 26*(3), 124–134. https://doi.org/10.1177/1074295617729813
Data-Based Decision Making	Hojnoski, R. L., Gischlar, K. L., & Missall, K. N. (2009). Improving student outcomes in decision-making: Collecting data. *Young Exceptional Children, 12*(3), https://doi.org/10.1177/1096250609333025 McGuire, S. N., & Meadan, H. (2022). A five-step approach to replacing challenging behavior. *Intervention School & Clinic*, https://doi.org/10.1177/10534512221140509 More, C. M., Buchter, J., & Oh-Young, C. (2022). Stop banging your head: Changing self-injurious behavior into communication. *Beyond Behavior, 31*(2), 115–124. https://doi.org/10.1177/10742956211023499
Changing Beliefs	Guerra, P. L., & Nelson, S. W. (2009). Changing professional practice requires changing beliefs. *Phi Delta Kappan, 90*(5), 354–359. https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170909000509 Haydon, T., Alter, P., Hawkins, R., & Theado, C. K. (2019). "Check yourself": Mindfulness-based stress reduction for teachers of students with challenging behavior. *Beyond Behavior, 28*(1), 55–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/1074295619831620

Brown recognized they were both neurotypical, White, middle-class women. Jake was an autistic, middle-class, White boy. They both recognized their neurotypes did not align with that of their child. Mrs. Thompson also recognized that she expected her children to engage in centers for the duration of allotted time, without engaging in any other activity. After reflecting on their identities and beliefs, both teachers realized the classroom environment was likely not set up to support a neurodivergent learner. The current classroom expectations, along with the mismatch in neurotypes, likely led to Jake's behavior being identified as "problematic" when it was not. Following the completion of Step 2, Mrs. Thompson and Ms. Brown interviewed Jake and his family. Jake's family felt it was important for him to be engaged in academic tasks, and wanted to know he was "on track" academically. Mrs. Thompson assured Jake's family that she was not concerned about his academic progress. Jake's family then said they also wanted him to have opportunities to express his neurotype in an environment that was neurodiversity-affirming. He was able to do that at home, but they weren't sure if he was able to do that at school. When Mrs. Thompson and Ms. Brown discussed the behavior with Jake, he explained that he likes to finish his work quickly so he can work on his own. He knows he must work with other classmates but does not always like to work with them. He would rather work by himself. After considering the information gathered in Step 3, Mrs. Thompson and Ms. Brown felt that the behavior was an appropriate behavior for Jake to engage in and was reflective of Jake's desire to work alone sometimes. Because of that, they did not feel it was appropriate to move on to Step 4.

Conclusion

The way some EC teachers interpret behaviors children engage in is not always accurate and can lead to hasty actions that may or may not be beneficial to the children they are trying to support. If teachers rely on their initial assumptions and their cultural frame of reference alone, they risk addressing behaviors that either are not necessary to intervene upon or, worse, could lead to exclusionary discipline practices that further marginalize children (Alexander et al., 2023; Blacher & Eisenhower, 2023). Just because a behavior looks "different" from what would be expected does not necessarily mean it is harmful or inhibitory towards learning. The goal should not be to make the child attempt to assimilate to the dominant cultural or neurotypical norms. Rather, the goal should focus upon helping children to be safe, able to learn successfully, and develop confidence and pride in who they are. By going through the Hearing Behavioral Messages process, teachers can make informed decisions by looking at the behavior in context, with consideration of the child and what function that behavior serves, and avoiding making decisions that would promote masking, assimilative behaviors instead.

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