

Tip Sheets

Factors that Influence Behavior



There are many factors that can affect a child's behavior. Some are internal factors that might have a

neurological base. Others are external factors, which are part of a child's environment, either at home or in the early childhood setting.

Some factors can be controlled, reducing the tension for the child, while others are more difficult to control. Therefore, a child might need to be taught and re-taught to cope with the factors that are outside of their control. As practitioners observe and learn about a child, some of these factors that influence the child's behavior may be discovered.

Internal Factors that Can Influence Behavior

- Temperament
- Illness
- Fatigue
- Hunger
- Poor nutrition
- Physical disabilities
- Neurological challenges
- Developmental lags
- Speech and language difficulties

External Factors that Can Influence Behavior

- An environment that is over stimulating
- Expectations that are too high or too low
- Feeling crowded
- Neglect

- Witnessing or being a victim of abuse (sexual, physical, or emotional)
- Activities that demand too little or too much
- Inconsistent expectations
- Loss of a loved one
- Addition of a sibling
- Arguments with a caregiver or between parents
- Infrequent opportunities to make choices
- Medication
- Being encouraged or rewarded for aggression
- Exposure to media violence
- Frequent changes in caregivers or routines
- Unmet emotional needs
- Poverty or worries about money
- Mental illness of parent or family member
- Substance abuse by family member

Physical Environment

The physical environment can be defined as the area where children spend their time, both indoors and outdoors, the arrangement of the space, and how the space is cared for. It has an important impact on children's behavior. Even subtle changes in the physical environment can have a great impact (such as using child-sized chairs in a child care setting).

Physical space layout can be determined by walking through the classroom setting or by drawing a simple diagram. For example, most children will break into a run if there is a long, narrow passageway ahead of them. The same is true for a classroom with open stretches of space. It is worthwhile to study the room floor plan from a child's viewpoint.

Making Changes to the Physical Environment

Changing the environment may help to reduce or eliminate a problem behavior. This could include:

- Getting rid of clutter. Simplify the layout of the room and materials.
- Adding more activity choices and/or offering relevant activity choices. This can decrease behaviors like wandering and an inability to choose activities.
- Making a place for everything. Use picture labels to show where things go. This can decrease behaviors like using materials roughly and resisting cleaning.
- Using shelves to define areas so children are not distracted by other activities. This can decrease behaviors like being easily distracted or trouble with staying on task.

Additional Factors

You may find additional known and unknown factors causing distress for a child. When a factor can be identified, it might be possible to eliminate or modify it, thereby, reducing the stress the child experiences.

For example, if a child arrives at child care hungry, it may be helpful them play more calmly and be ready to learn if they have a snack or breakfast first.

Resist the urge to avoid changes because you might feel breakfast, for example, is the parent's responsibility or that it would take too much work or require a change in schedule. Each child's basic needs must be met before they can be expected to work and play alongside the other children in a cooperative manner. Practitioners need flexibility in their programs and a willingness to do whatever is needed to help a child perform at their best.

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