How to Decipher the Emotions Behind Your Child's Behaviors

Being open to your child's thoughts and feelings can help with the trickiest parenting struggles.

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My four-year-old daughter: *You CAN'T comb my hair!*
Me: *It's late—we have to leave for school in five minutes. I need to comb your hair.*
My daughter: *I'll never let you comb my hair! I want wild hair!*

Some version of this battle occurred daily over a very long three weeks, during which I tried five different types of brushing implements—from wide-toothed combs to wet brushes—three different kinds of spray-on conditioners, myriad forms of distraction (songs, books, TV), and, of course, the promise of lots of rewards. Yet nothing worked, for this kiddo did not want to have her hair combed. It was no use.

what we perceive as harmful habits.

When it comes to many parenting challenges with typically developing kids, simple strategies can go a long way. However, every so often, a particularly irksome parenting challenge crops up—the kind that just won't back down in response to our go-to positive reinforcement, clear limit-setting, or distraction.

Clearly, some situations require us to dig deeper. Research suggests that parental mentalizing—the capacity to seek to understand our own and our child's behaviors from the perspective of underlying mental states, such as thoughts, feelings, and needs—can help us get to the heart of the trickiest parenting issues.

The power of parental mentalizing

Parents who have the ability to mentalize can perceive the less obvious and less immediately apparent causes of their children's behaviors.

When a child is angry, for example, we might be tempted to respond by giving a firm consequence, such as a time-out, or by removing something that the child likes, such as a prized toy or technology time. But a parent who mentalizes may see the hurt underneath the child's outward anger and respond in a way that directly addresses that pain and gets to the root of the problem—for instance, by slowing down to ask the child whether they are upset and want to talk about it. In so doing, the parent may be able to remove the reason behind the anger, rather than addressing only the symptom of the problem, and may actually give the child a tool to address this issue in the future: reaching out for support.

It turns out that parents who mentalize see a wide range of benefits in their children. For one, their kids develop greater attachment security, which transpires when children feel safe and secure in their relationships with their parents. Further, in one experiment, parents who mentalized more for their own children persisted longer in trying to soothe a pretend crying baby. This vividly illustrates how being able to reflect on children's thoughts and feelings may give us the mental flexibility to try multiple approaches in responding to their distress. In turn, not surprisingly, children of parents who mentalize more are able to take better care of their own emotions, engaging in better self-regulation and -soothing.

In addition, recent research suggests that mentalizing may be *especially* important when parents or kids are experiencing higher levels of stress or trauma. Among mothers who seemed to be more prone to stress, those who mentalized more behaved the most sensitively toward their children. After another stressful night when our toddler refuses to sleep, learning to focus on their mental states and needs could help us respond sensitively to them, and even reduce these types of battles in the future.

Mentalizing also has advantages for the parents themselves. Mentalizing can allow us to reflect on our own

feelings, which in turn can assist us in regulating them. Ultimately, research suggests that parents higher in mentalizing experience greater well-being in their roles as parents.

OPENing up to your child

Although mentalizing sounds like a complicated concept, implementing it with your child involves only a few simple steps, represented by the term OPEN.

1. Reflect on your *O*wn emotions. When you're feeling stressed, pause and think about how you're feeling, what you're thinking, and what the impact of that might be on your child. Your stress is a good guide to how your child is probably feeling.

Some questions to ask yourself include:

- How am I feeling right now?
- What's happening in my body?
- What thoughts or feelings am I having that could be impacting my parenting or my child?

For example, during a stressful parenting moment, you may realize that you're worried about arriving late somewhere and that pressure could be impacting your behavior, making you clench your fists and grit your teeth. It may also be spilling over into your interactions with your child, causing you to speak more sternly with them.

Engaging in some mindfulness practices—in the moment or at other times in your day—may also help you to avoid any destructive emotional responses to your child. Learning to check in with yourself and pay attention to your current thoughts and feelings without judgment can help you attend to your own and your child's experiences.

Body Scan

Feeling tense? Feel your body relax as you try this practice

Try It Now

2. *Pause to reflect on your child's thoughts and feelings.* When your child is exhibiting a behavior that is perplexing or upsetting to you, pause to allow yourself to think of all the different potential internal explanations for this behavior, such as the thoughts, feelings, or desires your child might have. Here, it is

Some questions to ask yourself include:

- Is it possible my child is worried, sad, or angry right now?
- Even though my child's behavior makes it seem as though they are angry, is it possible they are actually feeling something else that they are too scared to show?
- What underlying need might my child have that they are trying to express through their actions? How can I help them give voice to this need?

For example, if your child stomped off to a different room after an interaction with his sibling, it would be easiest to assume that he is angry. If you paused to check on what he might be feeling, you may learn that he is feeling rejected or excluded, and talking about the feelings or getting help from a parent to feel included in his sibling's play may help him feel better.

Trying to take a third-person perspective on the situation can help you figure out what your child may be experiencing without adding your own interpretation into the mix.

3. *E*ngage. Slow down and ask your child what they are experiencing. Use open-ended questions and convey curiosity in understanding your child's true thoughts and feelings, wherever they may take you. Make sure to do this at a time when your child does not have any time pressure or competing demands on their attention (a hard thing for a parent to accomplish, we know!).

Statements and questions such as the following may help set the desired tone:

- Is something on your mind?
- I'm wondering if you are feeling upset about something.
- I always want to know how you're *really* doing.

4. Be open to *N*ew experiences. Once you have created the right environment to talk about your child's thoughts and feelings, it is important to continue to convey a state of openness to new experiences. Maybe your child has always hated being the center of attention, so when a group of kids sing happy birthday to her, it would be easy to assume that she's embarrassed. But remember to *ask* before assuming; you might be surprised to learn that the reason she's actually upset is that her friends forgot to call her by her preferred nickname. It's important to remember that, just like us, our children's thoughts, feelings, and preferences are constantly evolving.

Past experiences serve as a database for us to reference when we encounter new situations. However, we must remain OPEN to the always-evolving child, continually revising this database. Once OPEN, always OPEN.

It turns out that my daughter's hatred of hair combing had nothing to do with simple defiance, garden-variety

of attention. I happened upon this information when we had a conversation about the combing struggle during a nightly pre-bedtime talk—notably, a less stressful time of day, when emotions run calmer and time pressure is lower.

This is something I, a child psychologist who studies mentalizing, never would have guessed on my own. It wouldn't have been the fourth or even the tenth explanation I would have come up with as an account for her behavior.

Knowing that my daughter was nervous about the extra attention of combed hair allowed us to come up with a plan to address the issue in a way that would mutually achieve her parents' goals (non-tangly hair) and her goals (not attracting undue attention): gradually exposing her to increasing amounts of combing each day over a week.

Although there will undoubtedly be challenges that stump even the most gifted mentalizers, this parenting trick is a good one to have in your back pocket—even better than those amazing wet brushes—especially when all of the rewards in the world can't untangle the situation.