

# Understanding Your Child's Behavior

## The Parent's Guide — Free Edition

*Parts 1, 2 and 3 of 7*

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*From Confusion to Clarity: Practical Guidance for Families Navigating Behavior Challenges*

**By Shivonne Troy, MS, BCBA, LBA-NJ, MA Ed Leadership**

*20 years across the full continuum of care*

Behavior Blueprint Consulting

behaviorblueprintconsulting.com • 973.932.0599

## What's Inside This Free Guide

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This free edition covers the foundation every parent needs:

- Part 1: Understanding Behavior — why your child behaves the way they do, what behavior is communicating, and the BBC framework: Decode. Design. Implement.
- Part 2: Home vs. School — why behavior looks different in different settings and what schools are actually tracking
- Part 3: When to Act — a clear decision framework for when to monitor, when to seek support, and when to act now

*The full 7-part guide — including school navigation, IEP rights, behavior strategies, and parent wellness — is available at [behaviorblueprintconsulting.com](http://behaviorblueprintconsulting.com)*

# PART 1: Understanding Behavior

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## You're Not Imagining It

If you've ever felt like you're the only one worried about your child's behavior...

If you've been told to "wait and see" but your gut says something needs attention...

If you're confused about why your child acts one way at home and completely different at school...

You're not alone. And you're not overreacting.

This guide exists because parents deserve clear answers, not vague reassurances.

After 20 years across the full continuum of care — public schools, out-of-district placements, residential programs, clinics, and home-based ABA — and over a decade specializing in behavior supports, I've seen the same pattern repeat: parents know something feels off, but they don't know whether to worry, wait, or take action.

The confusion is normal. The system is confusing. But clarity is possible.

## The Questions Parents Ask Me Most

- "Is this normal?"
- "Why does this happen at school but not at home?"
- "Should I wait, or should I do something now?"
- "Why do I keep hearing concerns but no one has a clear plan?"
- "Did I cause this?"
- "Will they grow out of it?"

These are the right questions. And they deserve real answers.

## Behavior Is Communication

Your child isn't trying to be difficult. They're trying to communicate something they don't have words for yet.

Behavior shows:

- Frustration ("This is too hard")
- Confusion ("I don't understand what you want")
- Overwhelm ("This is too much")
- Excitement (and difficulty regulating it)
- Fatigue or sensory overload

- Skill gaps (“I don’t know how to do this”)
- Difficulty with transitions or expectations

*Most behavior is not about being ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ It’s about what a child can or cannot handle in that moment.*

## The Shift That Changes Everything

Instead of asking: “How do I stop this?”

Try asking:

- “What is hard for my child right now?”
- “When does this happen most?”
- “What helps it go better?”
- “What skill is my child missing?”

*Understanding comes before change.*

## The BBC Framework: Decode. Design. Implement.

At Behavior Blueprint Consulting, everything we do follows three steps:

### 1. Decode

Understand what is driving the behavior and why it is happening.

Every behavior has a function. When we identify that function, we can respond effectively.

### 2. Design

Build a plan that fits your child, your family, and your environment.

Not generic strategies. A real plan that accounts for your child’s specific needs and your daily life.

### 3. Implement

Put it into action with support, adjustments, and follow-through.

A plan that sits in a folder helps no one. Implementation is where change happens.

This guide is built around that same framework. By the time you finish reading, you will be able to decode what you're seeing, design a response, and implement strategies that actually work.

## Why 'Is This Normal?' Isn't the Most Helpful Question

Every child develops at their own pace. Instead of comparing your child to what's 'normal,' look at patterns over time.

Ask Yourself:

- Is this happening more often?
- Is it lasting longer?
- Is it getting more intense?
- Is it affecting learning, friendships, or daily routines?

*A bad day is different from a pattern. A one-time meltdown is different from daily escalations.*

## Age-by-Age Behavior Guide

What's typical varies dramatically by age. Here's what to expect and when to pay closer attention.

### Ages 2-3: The Toddler Years

**What's Typical:**

- Tantrums (especially when tired, hungry, or overwhelmed)
- Difficulty sharing or waiting
- Limited language leading to frustration
- Parallel play (playing near, not with, other kids)
- Testing boundaries constantly
- Big emotions with little regulation

**Monitor If:**

- Tantrums last 30+ minutes regularly
- Aggression becomes frequent or intense
- No words by age 2, limited phrases by age 3
- Extremely rigid routines (severe distress if changed)

- No interest in other children at all

### **Ages 4-5: The Preschool Years**

#### **What's Typical:**

- Improving but still developing emotional regulation
- Some difficulty taking turns or losing games
- Testing rules and pushing back on limits
- Beginning to play cooperatively
- More questions than you can answer

#### **Monitor If:**

- Frequent meltdowns continue past age 4
- Can't calm down within 10-15 minutes
- Difficulty following 2-3 step directions
- Avoids or struggles with all group activities

### **Ages 6-8: The Early Elementary Years**

#### **What's Typical:**

- Better self-control, but still learning
- Occasional friendship conflicts
- Testing limits with talking back or defiance
- Worry about performance or fitting in

#### **Monitor If:**

- Can't make or keep any friends
- Frequent emotional outbursts in school
- Aggression toward peers
- Can't sit still or focus for age-appropriate tasks

### **Ages 9-12: The Pre-Teen Years**

#### **What's Typical:**

- Growing independence and boundary-testing
- Peer relationships become central
- Mood swings and emotional intensity
- Testing rules, arguing, debating

#### **Monitor If:**

- Social isolation or complete withdrawal
- Persistent sadness, anxiety, or anger

- Academic performance suddenly drops
- Risky or self-destructive behaviors

*When in doubt, trust your gut. You know your child better than anyone.*

# PART 2: Home vs. School: Why Behavior Changes

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## Why Behavior Looks Different in Different Settings

Many parents hear: “We don’t see this at home.” Or: “They only do this at school.” This is very common. And it doesn’t mean anyone is wrong.

Behavior changes based on:

- Noise level: A quiet home vs. a loud classroom
- Group size: One-on-one at home vs. 20 kids at school
- Transitions: Fewer at home, constant at school
- Structure: Loose routines vs. rigid schedules
- Expectations: Different rules, different settings
- Adult support: Full parent attention vs. shared teacher attention
- Sensory environment: Fluorescent lights, echoing hallways, crowded cafeterias

*A child who does well at home may struggle in a busy classroom because the environment is more demanding. It means the settings are different and that matters.*

## What This Tells You

- The behavior is situational, not a fundamental personality flaw
- Your child has the skills but may need help applying them in harder settings
- Environmental supports can make a huge difference
- Collaboration between home and school is essential

## The Four Key Metrics Teachers Track

**1. Frequency** – How often does it occur?

- Once a week? Probably manageable.
- Multiple times a day? Needs attention.

**2. Duration** – How long does it last?

- Quick recovery? Good sign.
- Extended episodes? Suggests regulation challenges.

**3. Triggers** – What usually happens before it starts?

- Clear triggers? Predictable and addressable.
- Random triggers? May indicate deeper issues.

**4. Impact** – Does it interfere with learning, safety, or participation?

- Minor disruption? Probably okay.
- Significant impact? Needs intervention.

*This does NOT automatically mean your child needs special services. It usually means they are monitoring patterns and trying to decide what support may help.*

## **What Schools Are NOT Telling You (But Should)**

- Whether the behavior is improving or worsening
- What specific strategies they've tried
- How your child compares to developmental expectations
- Whether they think evaluation is warranted

You can and should ask for this information directly.

# PART 3: When to Act: The Decision Framework

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## Monitor, Support, or Seek Help

### Monitor and Support at Home When:

- The behavior is occasional
- Your child recovers quickly
- Routines and structure help
- It's related to a specific stressor
- Behavior is age-appropriate and decreasing over time

#### What to do:

- Track patterns in a notebook
- Maintain consistent routines
- Communicate with school regularly
- Revisit in 4-6 weeks

### Consider Additional Support When:

- The behavior is happening more often
- Transitions are consistently difficult
- Your child is becoming more frustrated or overwhelmed
- School or daycare mentions it multiple times
- You're starting to feel stuck or overwhelmed

#### What to do:

- Schedule a consultation with a behavior specialist
- Request a school meeting to align strategies
- Consider parent coaching or small-group programs
- Rule out medical issues (sleep problems, hearing, vision)

### Seek Professional Guidance When:

- Behavior limits participation at school or daycare
- Concerns continue over time without improvement
- Intensity or duration is increasing
- Aggression or safety becomes a concern
- You're burned out and need help

#### What to do:

- Request a formal evaluation from your school district
- Contact your pediatrician for referrals
- Seek assessment from a psychologist or BCBA
- Document everything

## Yellow Flags vs. Red Flags

### Yellow Flags (Monitor and Support)

- Difficulty with transitions
- Occasional emotional outbursts
- Behavior that improves with structure
- Mild social awkwardness
- Periodic defiance or testing

### Red Flags (Seek Guidance Sooner)

- Behavior that interferes with learning or participation
- Frequent or intense emotional reactions
- Aggression toward self or others
- Complete social withdrawal or isolation
- Self-harm or talking about wanting to hurt self
- Regression (losing previously mastered skills)

*Trust patterns, not isolated moments.*

## Common Behavior Scenarios and What to Do

### Meltdowns at Pickup

- Bring a snack to pickup
- Allow quiet time before asking about their day
- Keep after-school schedule light

### Refuses to Do Homework

- Break work into smaller chunks
- Use a timer (“Work for 10 minutes, then break”)
- Talk to the teacher about homework load

### **Won't Make Friends**

- Facilitate one-on-one playdates
- Teach specific skills (“Can I play?”)
- Consider a structured social skills group

### **Extreme Tantrums (Past Age 5)**

- Stay calm yourself
- Identify triggers through tracking
- Seek evaluation if frequency or intensity increases

# You've finished the free edition.

*But there's more you need to know.*

## Want the Full Guide?

You've just read Part 1, Part 2, and Part 3. The full guide includes:

Part 4: School Navigation — IEPs, 504s, and your legal rights

Part 5: The Big Three — sleep, nutrition, and sensory processing

Part 6: Strategies That Work — specific, behavior-by-behavior guidance

Part 7: Parent Wellness — burnout prevention and building your support system

Plus: Action worksheets, full glossary, and national resources

**Get the full guide at [behaviorblueprintconsulting.com](https://behaviorblueprintconsulting.com)**

Or reach out directly:

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Or book a free 15-minute discovery call:

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**Shivonne Troy, MS, BCBA, LBA-NJ, MA Ed Leadership**

*20 years across the full continuum of care*

Founder, Behavior Blueprint Consulting

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