

# You Are Not Failing. Your Toddler Is Communicating.

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*A Behavior Guide for Moms Who Are Figuring It Out on Their Own*

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

Founder, Behavior Blueprint Consulting

20 years across the full continuum of care

[behaviorblueprintconsulting.com](http://behaviorblueprintconsulting.com) | 973.932.0599

## A Note Before You Begin

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This guide was written for the mom who is home, possibly alone, trying to figure out why her toddler does what they do. It was written for the mom who has Googled, read the articles, tried the strategies, and still feels like she is missing something.

What you are missing is not more information. It is implementation. Knowing what to do is only one piece. Knowing how to do it with your specific child, in your specific home, is a completely different conversation.

That is what this guide is for. Not to overwhelm you with theory. To give you a lens. And once you have the lens, everything looks different.

-- *Shivonne*

## SECTION ONE

# You Are Not the Problem

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**Nobody prepared you for this part.**

Not the books. Not the baby shower. Not even the moms who came before you who somehow make it look manageable on a Tuesday afternoon.

You are at home, possibly alone, trying to figure out why your two year old just melted down over the color of their cup. Or why they hit you when they were happy five minutes ago. Or why nothing you try seems to work the same way twice.

And somewhere in the back of your mind a voice keeps asking if you are doing something wrong.

You are not. What you are doing is raising a tiny human whose brain is developing faster than at any other point in their life. They are not giving you a hard time. They are having a hard time. And the difference between those two things is everything.

Here is something nobody tells you about all those parenting books and articles you have been reading.

They are not wrong. But they are written for every child, which means they are written for no child in particular. You can read every book on toddler behavior and still stand in your kitchen at 6pm not knowing what to do, because your child is not a chapter in a book. They are a specific, unique, wonderfully complicated individual.

The difference between information and transformation is implementation. Knowing what to do is only one piece. Knowing when to do it, how to do it with your child, and why it works changes everything. That is the piece most resources leave out. That is the piece this guide is going to give you.

## SECTION TWO

# What Behavior Actually Is

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Before we talk about what to do, we need to talk about what behavior actually is. Because most of us were never taught this and it changes everything.

Every single thing your toddler does is behavior. The giggling, the cuddling, the throwing, the hitting, the screaming, the shutting down. All of it. And here is the most important thing to hold onto:

All behavior has a function. That means your toddler is never doing something for no reason. There is always a why underneath it. Always.

This is not about blame. It is not about whether you are a good mom or a bad mom. It is about understanding that your child's behavior is their most powerful form of communication right now, especially before they have the words to tell you what they need.

When your toddler throws their cup across the room, they are not thinking I want to make mom's day harder. They are communicating something. Maybe they are done. Maybe they wanted something different. Maybe they are overwhelmed and do not know how to say so. The throw is the message.

Your job is not to stop the behavior by any means necessary. Your job is to decode the message and teach them a better way to send it. That shift alone will change how you show up for your toddler every single day.

## SECTION 2.5

# The Gap Nobody Talks About

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There is a difference between giving your child space to explore, develop, and be a child, and setting expectations that prepare them for the real world. Both are necessary. Both matter.

But here is what happens when that balance tips too far in one direction.

When children arrive at daycare, a learning center, or kindergarten without foundational expectations already in place at home, something shifts. Suddenly there is a teacher in front of them expecting them to sit, wait, follow a direction, transition between activities, and regulate

themselves in a room full of other children. And if those skills were never practiced at home, that classroom becomes a very overwhelming place very quickly.

**And then the calls start.**

I have sat at those tables. I have watched miscommunication between parents and educators escalate from a simple concern into a formal complaint, a due process filing, and in some cases legal action. And almost every single time the root of it was the same. Nobody caught it early enough.

Not because anyone was a bad parent. Not because the teacher was wrong. But because the window between ages 1 and 3, the window where behavior foundations are actually built, passed without anyone giving that family the tools they needed.

It is also worth noting: children who enter daycare as early as four months old are often at an advantage in one specific area. From the time they are six months old they are in an environment with structure, routines, transitions, and expectations. They learn to follow a direction. They learn to wait. They learn that certain behaviors lead to certain outcomes. Not because anyone sat down and taught them formally, but because the environment itself taught them naturally.

This guide is not about whether you work or stay home. It is about understanding that your child is always learning from their environment. And giving you the tools to be intentional about what that environment is teaching them.

## SECTION THREE

## The 4 Reasons Your Toddler Does What They Do

Every behavior your toddler engages in happens for one of four reasons. Behavior scientists call these functions. I call them the four messages your toddler is sending you. They spell SEAT.

<b>S</b>	<b>Sensory</b>	<i>"Something in my body needs attention."</i>
<b>E</b>	<b>Escape</b>	<i>"I want to get away from something."</i>
<b>A</b>	<b>Attention</b>	<i>"I need you to look at me."</i>
<b>T</b>	<b>Tangible</b>	<i>"I want something specific."</i>

### S — Sensory

Some behaviors happen because of how something feels, sounds, looks, smells, or tastes. Your toddler is not misbehaving. Their nervous system is sending them a signal and they do not know how to manage it yet.

#### You might see this when your child:

- Covers their ears in loud places
- Refuses to wear certain clothing
- Spins, jumps, or crashes into things repeatedly
- Puts everything in their mouth
- Melts down in busy or overstimulating environments

#### Real World Moment

*A mom once told me her son threw a tantrum every single morning getting dressed. She thought he was being difficult. When we looked closer his socks were the problem. The seam across the toes was unbearable for him. One simple switch to seamless socks and the morning routine changed overnight. The behavior was never about defiance. It was always about sensation.*

One more thing about sensory that most guides leave out. Not every child is calmed by the same type of touch. Some toddlers seek deep pressure. A tight hug, a firm squeeze, a weighted blanket. Others are touch sensitive and a hug in the middle of a meltdown can actually escalate things further.

*If you have ever tried to comfort your toddler and it seemed to make things worse, you are not doing it wrong. Their sensory system may need something different than what feels natural to you as a mom. This is one of those areas where understanding your specific child matters more than any general advice. It is also exactly the kind of thing we can work through together.*

## E — Escape

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This is one of the most common functions in toddlers and one of the most misread. When your child runs away, shuts down, cries, or melts down in the middle of a task or transition they are often trying to escape something that feels hard, boring, uncomfortable, or overwhelming.

### You might see this when your child:

- Refuses to stop playing when it is time to leave
- Cries when asked to clean up
- Melts down during transitions between activities
- Shuts down when asked to do something that feels too difficult

#### Real World Moment

*At a play place I watched a mom do everything right. She set a timer for her two year old, told him clearly what she expected, and told him what he would earn. But when the timer went off he still whined and resisted. The fix was simple. As the timer wound down she gave him a warning. Then when it went off she asked: do you want one more minute or two more minutes? That one question gave him autonomy and control while still moving toward the expectation. Same strategy. Small shift. Completely different outcome.*

## A — Attention

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Toddlers are wired for connection. They need your attention the way they need food and sleep. And if they have learned that a certain behavior gets your eyes on them immediately, they will use that behavior every single time.

Here is the part that surprises most parents. It does not matter to your toddler whether the attention is positive or negative. If hitting gets mom to stop what she is doing and look at them, hitting works.

### You might see this when your child:

- Acts out the moment you get on a phone call
- Escalates behavior when you are busy or distracted
- Follows you from room to room and melts down when you are unavailable

#### Real World Moment

*A parent I worked with could not understand why her daughter was perfectly behaved all morning and then fell apart the moment mom sat down to answer emails. Once mom built in a short five minute connection ritual before sitting down to work, the meltdowns reduced significantly. Her daughter did not need more time. She needed a predictable moment of connection before the attention shifted.*

## T — Tangible

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Your toddler wants something. A snack, a toy, the iPad, to stay at the park longer. And when they cannot have it or cannot communicate the want clearly, the behavior escalates.

### **You might see this when your child:**

- Grabs things from other children
- Melts down in a store when they cannot have something
- Throws a fit when the iPad gets turned off
- Cries for a specific food and rejects everything else

The key here is not giving in to the behavior but also not ignoring the want underneath it. Even a toddler who does not have full language yet can learn to point, use a simple word, or use a gesture. The behavior reduces when the communication pathway opens up.

Your toddler is not giving you four different problems. They are sending you four different messages. And when you figure out which message is being sent, you stop reacting to the behavior and start responding to the need.

## SECTION FOUR

## 5 Things Your Toddler Is Trying to Tell You

These are five of the most common things toddlers communicate through their behavior every single day. For each one you will find what it looks like, what they are actually saying, and one small shift you can make starting today.

1

**"I am overwhelmed and I do not know how to calm down."**

**What it looks like:**

Full body meltdown. Screaming, crying, throwing themselves on the floor, unable to be consoled. It seems to come out of nowhere or escalates faster than you can respond.

**What they are saying:**

*My nervous system is flooded and I do not have the tools to regulate myself yet. I need you to be calm because I cannot be calm on my own right now.*

**The small shift:**

Stop trying to talk them through it in the moment. When a child is in full meltdown their brain is not in a place to process language or logic. Instead get low, get quiet, and get close without forcing touch. A calm presence is more regulating than a calm explanation. If your touch escalates rather than soothes, try sitting nearby. Let your calm be the anchor. Once they regulate, then you reconnect. Then you talk.

2

**"My routine changed and nobody told me."**

**What it looks like:**

Your child is fine all week and then falls apart on a day that looks different. A different drop off. A skipped nap. A change in the order of the morning routine.

**What they are saying:**

*I depend on predictability to feel safe. When something shifts without warning my brain registers it as a threat and my behavior reflects that.*

**The small shift:**

Prepare your toddler for changes before they happen, even small ones. You do not need a long explanation. Just a simple heads up: Today daddy is picking you up instead of me. That preview gives their brain a map. And a brain with a map is a much calmer brain.

3

**"I need more practice, not more correction."**

**What it looks like:** You have told your toddler the rule a hundred times. Do not hit. Use your words. Stop grabbing. And they keep doing it anyway.

**What they are saying:** *I have not learned the replacement skill yet. Telling me what not to do does not teach me what to do instead.*

**The small shift:** Every time you correct a behavior ask yourself: what skill does my child need to practice to do this differently? The correction addresses the behavior. The practice builds the skill. You need both. And knowing how to practice it with your specific child is exactly what a consultation is for.

## 4 "I am trying to tell you something and I do not have the words yet."

**What it looks like:** Whining, pointing, grunting, pulling you by the hand, dropping to the floor, throwing things. Your toddler seems frustrated but you cannot figure out what they want.

**What they are saying:** *I have a need and no efficient way to communicate it yet. The behavior is filling the gap where language has not caught up.*

**The small shift:** Start building a simple communication bridge. Narrate what you think they want and give them a simple way to confirm it. Do you want more? Show me more. Even one word or one sign reduces frustration dramatically. If your child is between 18 and 24 months and not yet pointing, not using a few words, or not responding to their name consistently, that is worth a conversation with your pediatrician. I have worked with families whose children were as young as 16 months. Early is always better.

## 5 "I need connection before I can cooperate."

**What it looks like:** You ask your toddler to do something simple and they ignore you, refuse, or melt down immediately. But ten minutes later after some playtime together they do the same thing without any resistance.

**What they are saying:** *My cooperation tank is empty. I need to feel connected to you before I can follow your lead.*

**The small shift:** Before you make a demand, make a deposit. Even two to three minutes of getting on the floor and following their lead fills the connection tank. This is not permissive parenting. This is strategic parenting. You are setting yourself up for a yes before you ask the question.

*These five things will not solve every behavior your toddler has. But they will change how you see it. And when you see it differently you respond differently. And when you respond differently everything shifts.*

**SECTION FIVE**

## What Comes Next

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You made it to the end of this guide. And if you are still reading that tells me something important about you.

You are not looking for a quick fix. You are looking for real answers. And you are willing to do the work to find them. That is exactly the kind of mom I built Behavior Blueprint Consulting for.

This guide gave you the foundation. The framework, the functions, the shifts. But a framework applied generally is still general. And your child is not general. They are specific. They are yours.

What works for them requires someone who can look at your child, your home, your routines, and your dynamic and help you build something that actually fits. That is what I do.

I am Shivonne Troy. I am a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, a behavior systems strategist, and a mom. I have spent 20 years working across the full continuum of care, including with babies as young as 16 months, helping families understand behavior before it becomes a crisis, before it becomes a school conflict, and before it becomes something that feels impossible to turn around.

I work with toddler families virtually and in person in New Jersey. And I would love to work with yours.

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### **Ask Me One Question — \$47**

Not sure if what you are seeing is typical? Submit your question and get a detailed written response from a BCBA within 48 hours. No session needed. Just answers.

### **Book a Free 15-Minute Discovery Call**

Ready to get support specific to your child? A free 15 minute call is where we start. No pressure. Just a real conversation about where you are and what your family needs.

### **Stay Connected**

Follow along for more tools, tips, and real talk about toddler behavior delivered directly to your feed.

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***You do not have to figure this out alone. You were never supposed to.***

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