

# Parenting Challenging Behaviors



**Align your parenting to support the goals you have for your child's behavior.**

*Tips from Licensed Clinical Marriage and Family Therapist and Professor, Dr. Michelle Robertson, Ph.D., LCMFT*

Parents, you're tirelessly trying to guide your child to improve their behavior. But as your child makes progress, your old parenting strategies may not be nurturing their growth.

Whether you're parenting a young kid or a teen (or both!), this guide will help you understand your child's dysregulated behavior and give you actionable strategies to support your child and encourage improvements in behavior at home.

## **The key to helping your child: understand their dysregulated behavior.**

What are "challenging behaviors"? Challenging behaviors are anything that creates a disruption for your family. Behaviors that impact relationships, learning, interacting, or relating. Maybe your child talks back often, fails to follow directions, argues, yells, throws, or lies. These behaviors interrupt your daily life and are a stress on the whole family. Below, you will find strategies to help you better manage the expectations you have for your child's behavior and understand why your child may be consistently misbehaving.

## **Are your expectations for your child's behavior unattainable due to their developmental stage?**

The reality is that some kids are not functioning at their actual age because chronological age is rarely an accurate indicator of where a child is, functionally.

A child's development does not always track in a seamless, well-timed chronological schedule, but we think it does, so we keep adjusting our parenting style trying to mold the behavior we want to see for our child or the behavior we expect for their age.

If your child is 15, you might expect she can handle doing the dishes every night after dinner, but what if her brain development was more like that of a 10-year-old? How does that change your expectations and your responses to her? "We've been over this SO MANY times! What's wrong with her?"...but what if the lack of improvement in this expectation is because she is not developmentally able?

If the areas of the brain responsible for tasks like organization, forward-thinking, emotional regulation, decision-making, and frustration tolerance are lagging behind, your child may not be able to complete tasks, stay calm, and interact the way you expect for their age. Instead of giving the same instructions over and over we have to adjust our parenting according to the current skills of our child and then build on those skills over time. This lets our children gain the confidence and experience that they need to meet our more advanced, mature expectations.

## Your child wants to do well.

In spite of what it may seem, your child **WANTS** to do well. They are not “enjoying” being difficult. Most children are not attention-seeking, manipulative, coercive, limit-testing, or poorly motivated. On the contrary, their brain is having a hard time processing the situation around them. With this new understanding in mind, you can shift your approach and reaction to your child’s behavior to better understand your child. If in the moment of challenging behavior, you viewed your child as not being defiant, but in fact trying to communicate something urgent to you and asking for help, you would absolutely help them problem-solve, wouldn’t you? They just aren’t asking the way we expect, and we miss it. We can shift our approach to working with our kids to solve whatever is distressing them.



### Remember These *2 Things*

1. Your child isn’t giving you a hard time, their brain is having a hard time.
2. Your child wants to do well.

## Actionable Strategies

There are helpful and unhelpful approaches we can take as parents when our children become dysregulated.

## Unhelpful Approaches to Challenging Behaviors



In our desire to maintain the hierarchy of the parent-child dynamic, we may be making things worse. Although it feels like this will help her surrender and re-regulate, from a brain processing standpoint, it actually pushes her deeper into her lower brain functioning (those flight, fight, freeze responses). Rather than getting more regulated, she becomes more dysregulated. And then we inadvertently foster defiant behavior instead of compliance, over time.

Instead of trying to control the situation, we need to work with our child collaboratively to problem solve and increase confidence, which is really how we gain compliance. Remember – your child **WANTS** to do well, but they don’t have the skills to do so.

## Helpful Approaches to Challenging Behaviors

### STEP

# 1

Stay  
grounded  
(regulated)

We have to keep our cool, parents. That's step one! You must stay grounded before you can help your child when they are dysregulated.

What does staying grounded look like? Stay focused on the present moment and the situation in front of you. BREATHE and keep breathing steadily. Focus your attention on your child and not anyone else (at the dinner table, for example). Then, you might invite your child to step away from the table to a private area of the house to discuss what's going on.

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### STEP

# 2

Get down on  
your child's  
level—*literally*

Our height and size while standing over a child signals a "threat" to the brain's limbic processing. So, standing tall over the child engages in a power struggle with a brain that is devolving further and further into fight, flight, and freeze. For younger children, this can involve kneeling in front of them and looking up at them. Or pulling them into your lap to talk. For an older teen, at least sitting eye-to-eye in a chair can be helpful. This shifts the power dynamic in the exchange.

### STEP

# 3

Regulate  
your child

Now that we are eye-to-eye, help your child to regulate and calm their fight, flight, or freeze response. We do this by creating a space of safety, calm, and love. We should use a warm, soothing tone of voice. Say their name gently or use terms of endearment. Stay close to your child, sitting next to them or nearby. Turn off background noises and ask other family members to leave the room.

### STEP

# 4

Relate to  
your child

Relate and connect with your child through an attuned and sensitive relationship using empathy and validation around their feelings, so they are seen, heard, and understood.

Acknowledge what emotions you see. For example, "I noticed that you seemed a little nervous to try the chicken grandma made. Is that right?" And then maybe, "I bet it didn't feel good when everyone was staring at you when your brother pointed out that you weren't eating anything, did it?". Remain silent to give space for them to respond and talk, if they are ready.

### STEP

# 5

Reason  
collaboratively  
with your child

Support your child to reflect, learn, remember, articulate, and become self-assured—after they are calm.

This means we can finally ask, "What would be helpful right now?" and we can now problem-solve collaboratively.

The above steps are not easy and take a lot of practice. We are not perfect, and it's okay for our kids to see us mess up and then observe how we repair and address our mistakes. That is excellent modeling behavior. It normalizes their own struggles and gives them confidence that good things can still come to them, even when they struggle.

# Helpful Parenting Resources

The following books, podcasts, and professionals are helpful resources for parents as you navigate family life and strive to align your parenting to support the goals you have for your children.



## Professionals

- Ross Greene: <https://livesinthebalance.org/>
- Robyn Gobbel: <https://robbyngobbel.com/>
- Becky Kennedy: <https://www.goodinside.com/>
- Dan Siegel: <https://drdansiegel.com/>
- Tina Payne Bryson: <https://www.tinabryson.com/>
- Bruce Perry: <https://www.bdperry.com/>
- Eli Harwood: <https://attachmentnerd.com/>
- Mona Delahooke: <https://monadelahooke.com/>



## Books

- *The Explosive Child* by Ross Greene
- *No-Drama Discipline* by Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
- *The Yes Brain* by Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
- *The Whole-Brain Child* by Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson
- *Brainstorm* by Dan Siegel
- *Waking the Tiger* by Peter Levine
- *Good Inside* by Dr. Becky Kennedy
- *The Connected Parent and The Connected Child* by Dr. Karyn Purvis
- *How to Talk so kids will listen & Listen so kids will talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- *Raising an Emotionally Competent Child* by John Gottman
- *The Conscious Parent* by Dr. Shefali Tsabary and the Dalai Lama



## Podcasts

- *Play Therapy Parenting*
- *Parenting After Trauma* by Robyn Gobbel
- *Good Inside* with Dr. Becky





## Breakthroughs are what we do.

Brain Balance is an integrated approach to helping kids, teens, and adults improve focus, anxiety, behavior, and academics. The program can help individuals improve the critical skills needed to achieve greater success.

We've made it our mission to help frustrated families with a drug-free program that goes beyond the more mainstream approaches you may have tried.

## The Best of All Methods

The Brain Balance Program is an all-natural, whole-body approach designed to strengthen and improve your brain's functioning – helping to positively impact many areas of your life. The Program incorporates cognitive exercise, physical, and sensory exercise, and nutrition methods and combines them into one optimized approach.

### Integrated, Drug-Free Program

Our integrative approach combines sensory, auditory, visual, and physical exercises. You'll get nutritional guidance to provide optimal fuel for peak performance.

### Dedicated Coaching

Our supportive team of experts will coach you to reach your goals. Your child will complete the program at a nearby center or from the comfort of your home, depending on your location and preference. The program is personalized to each individual's unique goals and challenges.

### Measurable Outcomes

Throughout the program, you'll receive measurable data on your progress, and what it represents in terms of your child's goals and areas of improvement.

## Proven *effective* By Research<sup>1</sup>



### Focus & Attention

The Brain Balance Program® was found to be as effective as a common stimulant medication in alleviating ADHD symptoms in kids. Improvements include:

- A significant reduction in ADHD index scores
- Discernable changes in hyperactivity
- Enhanced cognitive attention
- Smaller-scale reductions in oppositional behavior



### Cognitive Skills

Children who completed three months of the Brain Balance Program® saw significant overall improvements across all cognitive tasks measured, with the greatest changes seen on tasks of:

- Memory
- Reasoning
- Verbal Ability
- Concentration



### Mental Well-Being

After completion of a 3-month program, parents reported significant improvements, including:

- **53%** improvement in feelings of happiness
- **53%** improvement in academic follow through and motivation
- **51%** improvement in school performance and test scores
- **42%** improvement in social confidence
- **49%** improvement in feelings of anxiety



### Focus & Attention

After completion of a 3-month Brain Balance Program, parents reported a decrease in ADHD symptoms.

- A clear majority of participants (81%) demonstrated improvement in the (BADDs) score as reported by their parents pre and post program.
- Kids with more severe ADHD symptoms are more likely to observe a decrease in symptoms.