

# PARENT CONNECTIONS

A Newsletter for First Steps Families ❖ Fall 2016

## *Understanding Your Child's Behavior*

*Excerpt re-printed with permission from The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) Project, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN 37203*

Naomi, age 30 months, is happily playing with her blocks. All of a sudden, her mother looks at the clock, gasps, and says, "Naomi, I lost track of time! We need to go meet your brother at the school bus! Let's go." She scoops Naomi up and rushes toward the kitchen door. Naomi shouts, "NO!" and tries to slide out of her mother's arms to run back to her blocks. When her mother puts on Naomi's sneakers, she kicks them off, slaps her mother's hands, and repeats, "No! I STAY! I playing blocks!" Naomi's mother sighs with frustration and buckles her into the stroller with no shoes. This sets off another round of protests: "My SHOES! Where my SHOES?" Naomi pulls at her stroller's buckle, trying to unfasten it, and kicks, screams, and cries all the way to the bus stop.

Babies and toddlers might just be learning to talk, but they have many other ways to tell parents how they are feeling! Children can experience the same emotions that adults do, but they express those feelings differently... Naomi is also very clear about her feelings. She doesn't like having to make a transition from a fun activity (blocks) so quickly. She is giving her mother many "cues" too—her words, facial expressions, and actions are all saying, "This transition was too quick for me. I was having fun and I can't move on so quickly."

Children's behavior has meaning—it's just that adults don't always understand what the meaning is. In the early years, before children have strong language skills, it can be especially hard to understand what a baby or toddler is trying to communicate...

## *Three Steps to Understanding Your Child's Behavior*

When you see a behavior you don't understand, think about these "clues" to try to figure out what the behavior means for your child.

**Step 1: Observe and interpret your child's behavior.** Notice the sounds your baby is using. When have you heard this cry or sound before? What is your baby's facial expression? Think about what's going on, does the behavior happen at a certain time of day or in a certain place?



**Step 2: Respond to your baby.** It's okay if you are not sure... just try something. When you respond to your baby, say what you think his behavior might mean. By using language to describe what your baby is communicating, you will be teaching your child the meaning of words.

**Step 3: If your first try didn't work, try again.** Trying different techniques increases the chances that you will figure out the meaning of your child's behavior, understand his needs, and validate his feelings.

Remember that tantrums are a communication, too. A tantrum usually means that your child is not able to calm himself down. Tantrums are no fun for anyone. They feel overwhelming and even scary for young children. For adults, it is easy to get upset when you see upsetting behavior. But what frequently happens is that when you get really upset, your child's tantrum gets even bigger. Although it can be difficult, when you are able to stay calm during these intense moments, it often helps your child calm down, too.



# A Missouri Family's Story

By Nikki of Wentzville, Mo

Simply, First Steps was a life saver for my family. Our son was a little over 2 ½ years old and severely struggling emotionally and behaviorally. We thought, or were hoping, it was truly just a really bad case of the terrible two's. We noticed the older he was getting, the more aggressive he was becoming, almost unmanageable. His behavior was creating so much anger and frustration in our home which was also reflecting back onto him. It wasn't until he was dismissed from a Parents Day Out program that we knew we had a real issue to face. This was when we were referred First Steps. We found out during the application process he automatically qualified for First Steps due to a condition he had as an infant. It was disappointing that we didn't know of this amazing resource prior to his last 5 months of eligibility.

Though we were a late start, we had an absolutely amazing experience with First Steps. From our initial meeting all the way to very last appointment with our beloved Ms. Jill Brew the day before his 3rd birthday, Ms. Jill not only helped us learn how to work with our son's strengths and weaknesses, but she also helped us identify our strengths and weaknesses as parents. She gave us suggestions and the tools we needed to work with his specific needs. Some days she even served as a sounding board on days I just didn't know what else to do...but she did. Having the opportunity to have her in a home and school setting was invaluable. His teachers and I referred to her as the "baby whisperer."

Utilizing the First Steps resource was beyond beneficial and allowed us to learn how to parent our child as an individual. We regained our confidence and the joy of parenting was given back to us as our son has evolved into such an amazing little being of who we are very, very proud of. We will be forever grateful for the opportunity to utilize the program. Many, many, many thanks to everyone who helped us create a successful scenario for our little boy.

## Just for Fun...Sensory Exploration from Infancy

By Jill Brew, First Steps Special Instructor

Exposing your child to a variety of sensory experiences at a young age can be beneficial to their sensory system. Many children have a difficult time processing the world around them. Exposing their system at a young age is key.

- Placing your child on his/her tummy and exploring with their hands is a great opportunity to introduce textures. Use different types of fabrics for them to reach and grasp.
- A homemade pat mat is another activity that babies love. Use a zipper storage bag and fill it with water or hair gel and fun gadgets. Make sure the bag is safely closed with duct tape and double bag it.
- Once an infant is sitting up they can begin to explore with different types of food and textures. Allow them to get messy and explore. You can use puréed foods, yogurt, mashed fruits and veggies.
- Placing your child in the grass, sand, or other surface fosters exploration. Babies gain information through using their hands, feet, and mouth. Allow opportunities for your child to explore their environment through play.



The First Steps Parent Connections newsletter is written in collaboration with MPACT, Missouri's Parent Training and Information Center.



Office of Special Education  
205 Jefferson St., P.O. Box 480  
Jefferson City, MO 65102-0480  
Website: <http://dese.mo.gov/special-education/first-steps>

Phone: 573-522-8762  
Fax: 573-526-4404

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