

# FOCUS

## on Early Childhood Mental Health



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## How Basic Needs Determine Behavior

According to William Glasser, human beings have five basic needs: survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun. Those five needs affect what we do and how we behave. When we're hungry or tired, we get grumpy or irritable; when we feel trapped, we lash out; when we're lonely we withdraw or try to draw attention to ourselves. If as adults we understand how not having these five basic needs met affects the way we act, as parents and caregivers we should be able to consider what unmet needs might be causing a young child's challenging behavior. Chances are the child isn't misbehaving just to annoy us!

### The five basic needs

- Survival:** physical needs for food, water, shelter, sleep and safety/security  
**Belonging:** relationships and friendships and feeling accepted, cared for and loved by others  
**Power:** feeling capable, worthy, and having pride in accomplishments  
**Freedom:** the need for independence and the ability to make choices, create and explore  
**Fun:** laughter, pleasure, enjoyment, humor

Understanding these basic needs can help parents and caregivers think differently about behavior and not assume that a child is deliberately trying to be difficult. Each child responds differently to an unmet need so it is important to treat children as individuals and empathetically teach them better ways to satisfy their needs.

**Example of how behavior is related to unmet needs:** The child who runs around and bothers other children during circle time might be hungry because he didn't have breakfast that morning or he doesn't feel secure enough to focus (survival); she might want to play with and talk to her friends (belonging); he is bored by what's going on in circle time and wants something challenging to do (power); she doesn't like being forced to sit down in a certain place at a certain time (freedom); he prefers hands-on activities that are enjoyable (fun). Take the time to examine the behavior, when and how often it occurs, and what the child may need but not be receiving. Then help him or her to find socially acceptable ways to meet those needs. Doing this may not only improve the child's behavior but also demonstrate to the child that you care about him or her as an individual.

### Resources

- Adapted from "Our Five Basic Needs: Application for Understanding the Function of Behavior," by L. Frey and K. Wilhite, *Intervention in School and Clinic*, January 2005.
- "Helping Children Express Their Wants and Needs," What Works Brief #19, Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning; [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/what\\_works.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/what_works.html)
- Related FOCUS on ECMH factsheets: "The Meaning of Behavior" and "Understanding Aggressive Behavior" (available at [www.parecovery.org](http://www.parecovery.org); click on Statewide Initiatives/Early Childhood Mental Health)