



What am I Trying to Say?

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

As adults, we have the ability to restate, rephrase and show someone what we are trying to say. When I am sad, you can usually tell as it is written all over my face. Sometimes I will share why I am sad and will even ask for help! (There is a collective gasp someplace as my family is currently pointing their fingers at me and chanting, “Liar, liar, pants on fire.”) So while I might not be the best at asking for help, I do have that ability.

But what about our children? Do they have that ability? Are they using their words to get what they need? Or, are they speaking out in a different way?

In [Beyond Behaviors](#), child therapist [Mona Delahooke](#) writes, “When we see a behavior that is problematic or confusing, the first question we should ask isn’t ‘How do we get rid of it?’ but rather ‘What is this telling us about the child?’ ”

Imagine if each time a child’s behavior erupts in unexpected or disruptive ways, we could hear the child saying these words from [Elita Amini Virmani, Holly Hatton-Bowers, and Ayumi Nagase](#):

I have a need that is not being met. I might not know how to tell you that need in words, but I do know that I need you, I really need you to pay close attention to me, not just to my behavior, but to me, to my thoughts and my feelings. And I need help figuring out how to get this need of mine met.

Acting Out & What it Looks Like

At each different age, the acting out looks very different. Infants cry to let you know when they are cold, hot, hungry, overstimulated, tired, pretty much everything! Toddlers are physical. They might grab what they want. And they might bite for the same reason.



Toddlers know they use their mouths to get what they want but just haven't mastered the art of talking. Preschoolers are still working on communication skills and so grabbing and hitting might still be a part of their repertoire.

As children grow, communication changes and can incorporate missing curfew, skipping school, failing an assignment and worse. Of course, these are all negative. As parents and teachers, we also get to experience the positive side of silent communication but it is rarely something that people struggle with.

Observation

As educators and parents, an important part of our job is to observe, adjust and re-work so that each child is getting what they need, when they need it and really any individual we include in our interactions.

Maybe it is a space issue and we need to redesign the classroom to make the flow better. Or maybe the materials should be changed out as the children using them are developmentally ready for new and bigger challenges. As parents, it might be putting down the phone to make your daughter your only focus. It is our job as the people with the ability to communicate in socially acceptable ways to make these changes.

Listen

But don't just use your ears. Listen and hear with all parts of you. Maybe your children are letting you know that it's time to eat even though it isn't the right time on the clock. It could be your child's tired even though bedtime isn't until much later. As with the observing, listening is a positive consequence of being in the moment, present and aware when interacting with children or anyone.

Adjust

And what do you do with what you see or hear? You have to adjust. You have to meet individual needs so they can be successful. When you are working with others, if they are successful, you will be as well.



With equal compassion for the adults, the authors also point out, “Many early childhood educators feel they are supposed to check their emotions at the door and enter the classroom ready to receive the children in their care unencumbered by their own emotional needs. But can we expect early childhood teachers to attune to the emotional needs of young children if they do not attune to their own emotional needs first?”

Put On Your Oxygen Mask First

This rule is valid in ALL areas of life. You have to meet your needs before you can do for others. This is important to remember as moms, as dads, as teachers, as people. We need to be a little selfish in order to help others.

