



by Karen Stephens

Determining if a Child's Behavior is Normal

If you've been a parent for very long, you know this truism: Parenting is at its toughest when dealing with kids' unanticipated behaviors. Everything is smooth sailing, and then from left field comes confounding, even appalling behavior. It perplexes, worries, amazes, and even, frightens us. A calm angelic child can — within the flutter of an angel's wings — become, well . . . less heavenly.

No parent makes it through raising kids without that reality check. At some point, we all think, "She couldn't possibly be mine. They must have switched babies in the hospital!" In the next breath we quickly turn on ourselves: "What did we do wrong to make our kids act so strangely?"

I've had a parent or two turn to me in times of childrearing desperation. They pull me aside using a hushed, mysterious tone. Grimacing, they itemize their child's troubling behaviors. Invariably you ask yourself, "Is this normal?" The really honest parents outright beg, "Pahleeezzze, tell me this is normal!"

After nearly 30 years of working with children, I've found there are broad boundaries to "normal" behavior. Almost always, I'm able to reassure parents not to worry. I confirm their child's behavior is to be expected. I hear a sigh of relief when I say, "Oh, heck yeah, I've heard of kids doing that before." This usually bolsters parents' confidence. (It's always good to know you aren't the first to encounter unfamiliar territory!) The ironic thing is that we rarely remember behaving in unusual ways when we were kids. Truth is, we did; we've conveniently forgotten. So, even when your child's behavior seems unusual, it's likely as average as the next kid's.

To be sure, that's not always the case. Some behaviors are, indeed, cries for help, and they shouldn't be ignored in hopes that they'll magically go away. Behavioral symptoms should be addressed by family and, in some cases, professionals. As a rule of thumb, when facing kids' concerning behavior, parents should try to relax and make a sensible plan on how to respond. Sometimes it's simply waiting out a bumpy developmental stage. Parents can also turn to experienced parents and grandparents for help. Child care professionals can also provide reassurance, support, advice, and if necessary, referrals to helpful services.

But how do you distinguish benign, *false alarm* behaviors from disturbing behaviors that call for concern and action? It's a tricky call. Understanding the nuances of children's behavior is one of the ambiguous and hard-to-master fine arts of parenting. But there are ways to determine whether a child's behavior should worry you. Answering the following questions is a good starting point:

- **Is the behavior typical for your child's age and/or stage of development?** To determine this, refer to child development books, pediatricians, or experienced parents whose judgment you trust. Well-educated and experienced child care and education professionals are excellent resources for identifying typical and atypical behavior.
- **Is there a logical cause for the behavior?** Could recent events have triggered the behavior? Has the family moved recently? Has there been a death, divorce,

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or separation? Has a neighbor or classmate experienced trauma? Have catastrophes been prominent in the news?

- **How frequently does your child engage in the behavior?** Does it happen occasionally, frequently, several times a day, weekly, constantly?
- **How important is the behavior to the child?** Does she show a strong, moderate, or slight interest in the behavior? Does she engage in the behavior compulsively or only occasionally when bored? Is the behavior her only coping mechanism when enduring tough feelings such as anger, anxiety, or fear?
- **Does the behavior negatively affect your child's life?** Is the child embarrassed, humiliated, or scared by the behavior? Has she asked for help in coping? Does the behavior cause teasing or rejection by peers or siblings? Has it interfered with school or child care?
- **Have other adults who know your child well expressed concern about the behavior?** Have you received concerned comments from extended family that regularly see your child? Have the child care professionals in your program brought the behavior to your attention as something to be addressed?
- **Is basic health and well-being affected?** Does your child sleep more or less than usual? Eat more or less? Have self-help skills regressed, i.e. toileting, dressing?
- **Is your child using the behavior to manipulate you?** Is it a way of getting more attention? Of asking for reassurance? Of making you do what she wants?
- **How long has the behavior persisted?** Has it lasted a week or a month? Does it occur during a particular activity? Does it occur with particular people? Does it occur at a particular time of day?

After addressing these questions you should have a clearer path to follow for problem-solving. You may decide to seek professional help. Most issues can be solved by adjusting your child's environment and being more consistent in your guidance and positive discipline. Another problem solving option may be to join a parenting support group. Sometimes patience is the wisest choice; in that case, you avoid getting overwrought and let the developmental stage run its course. In all cases, hang in there!

Helpful Parenting Books

- Brazelton, T. B. (1994). *Touchpoints: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development, Birth to 3*. New York: Perseus Books, 1994.
- Brazelton, T. B., Greenspan, S. I., & Sparrow, J. (1997). *Touchpoints 3 to 6*. New York: Perseus Publishing, 2002.
- Leach, P. (1997). *Your Baby and Child: Birth to Age 5*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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