

# Hitting, Spitting, and Kicking, Oh, My!!

*Strategies to support behaviors that are challenging*




*Developed and presented by:  
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**DC EARLY EDX**

An aerial photograph of a large, diverse crowd of people gathered for an outdoor event. The people are densely packed, and the scene is filled with various colors from their clothing. The text 'Who's in the Room?' is overlaid in a white, cursive font.

*Who's  
in the  
Room?*

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# Objectives

1. Discuss behaviors that are challenging and explore how behaviors impact the early childhood environment.
2. Understand behavior as a form of communication.
3. Identify strategies for supporting social emotional wellness and reducing behaviors that challenge.

# Behaviors That Challenge

The hardest part of the job

“Y'all gon'  
make me lose  
my mind...”



<https://www.facebook.com/share/r/17pofaQnFk/>

# Behaviors That Challenge – What We Know

- Teachers report that challenging behaviors are associated with increased feelings of stress, decreased feelings of competence and a general questioning of career choice (*Doubet et al., 2025*)
- Teachers often feel they do not have the necessary training and skills to manage behaviors (*Martin et al., 2018*)
- Without training on social emotional learning supports, the teacher is left to rely on compliance-based strategies (ex. time-out and rewards systems) instead of research-based and relationally supportive practices (*O'Grady & Ostrosky, 2023*)
- Children who exhibit behaviors that the adult caregivers find challenging are more likely to experience exclusionary discipline practices (*Clayback & Hemmeter, 2021; DuShane & Yu, 2023; Gilliam & Reyes, 2018*)

# Behaviors That Challenge – What We Know (cont.)

- Through the course of healthy development, it is common for young children to exhibit behaviors that may be perceived as aggressive or noncompliant, with 10-30% of children presenting as such  
*(Zinsser et al., 2022)*
- Young children, who do not have mastery over their developmental capacities (i.e., language and emotional regulation), often utilize behaviors as a form of communication. Behaviors serve to express unmet needs, seek connection or support and illicit a response from their adult partners. Behaviors, which may be experienced as challenging by adults, serve a communicative function for the child  
*(Dunlap & Fox, 2011; Carr et al., 2002)*

Good  
news



Bad  
news



I have good  
news and bad  
news.

Which do you  
want first??

# The 4 R's - Strategies for Supporting Social Emotional Health and Reducing Behavior

**R**esist

**R**eframe

**R**eplace

**R**einforce





Resist  
Negative  
Assumptions

# RESIST Negative Assumptions and Frames

**MANIPULATIVE**

**Defiant**

*Disrespectful*

*Oppositional*

**Violent**

**Spoiled**

**Doing it on purpose**

# The Language of Behavior



**"Children are not born  
with  
bad behavior;  
they are born with  
unmet needs."**

**-Dr. Daniel J. Siegel**

# Reframe the Behavior

Finding a positive frame

# Reframing

“A process of reconceptualizing a problem by seeing it from a **different perspective**. Altering the conceptual or emotional context of a problem often serves to alter perceptions of the problem’s difficulty and to **open up possibilities for solving it**”

(American Psychological Association)

# Negative vs. Positive Framing

## Negative Frame (Reactive)

## Positive Frame (Responsive)

"She always knocks down other people's block towers. She is so aggressive"

"She doesn't know how to enter into play. Knocking down the tower is her way of entering. I can teach her how to join play"

Damages the relationship with the child

Preserves the relationship

Problem focused

Solution focused

Feels overwhelming and unmanageable

Specific to a certain skill - feels manageable

I don't know how to move forward

I know what I can try

# The Language of Behavior – Finding the Function

## Positive Function

To obtain someone or something



*When we identify the function, we find the unmet need!*

*The unmet need will help us with a reframe*

## Negative Function

To avoid someone or something



# Reframing Resource

This is a resource from the National Center on Pyramid Model Innovations.

You can use this to practice reframing!

<https://www.challengingbehavior.org/document/reframing-behavior/>



## Reframing Behavior

Directions: 1) Challenge the "original" thought and reframe with a new, more objective thought.  
2) Choose a thought you have that you'd like to challenge and reframe with a new thought.

### Original:

*Johnny whines the moment he arrives and continues throughout the day. He doesn't like being here.*

### Reframed:

*Johnny must miss his family. It takes time to adjust...*

### Original:

*Sally clings to her parents at drop-off and to certain teachers. She does not seem interested in me.*

### Reframed:

A dashed rectangular box for writing a reframed thought, set within a larger orange cloud-shaped border.

### Original:

A light green rectangular box for writing an original thought, set within a larger green cloud-shaped border.

### Reframed:

A light blue rectangular box for writing a reframed thought, set within a larger green cloud-shaped border.

An aerial photograph of a beach at sunset. The ocean waves are breaking onto the shore, creating white foam. The sand is a warm golden-brown color, and the sky is a mix of orange and blue. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

**Behaviorally challenging kids are  
challenging because they're lacking  
the skills to not be challenging.**

Ross W. Greene



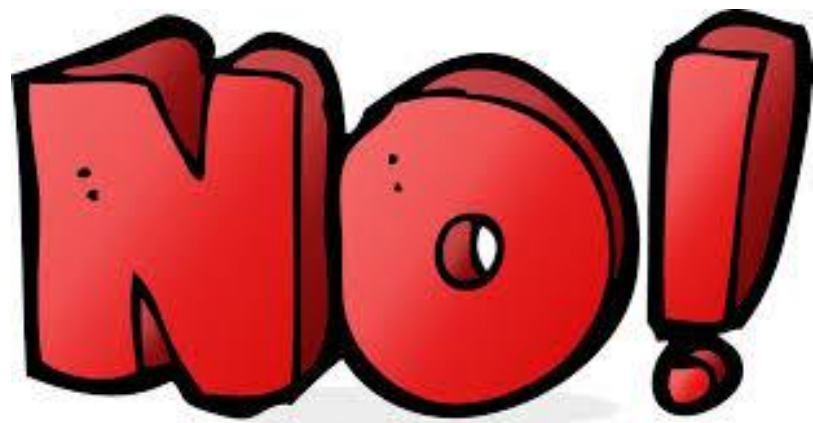
“

See a child differently,  
and you'll see  
a different child.”

STUART SHANKER

# Replace the Behavior by Teaching a New Skill

Moving away from "No," "Don't," "Stop"



# REPLACE – State Expectations Positively

Instead of reacting with a negative statement (ex. stop),  
...FOCUS ON WHAT YOU WANT THEM TO DO

<https://www.challengingbehavior.org/document/communication-is-key/>

Avoid	Say/Model
Don't run!	Walk; Stay with me; Hold my hand
Stop climbing!	Keep your feet on the floor
Don't touch!	Keep your hands down; Look with your eyes
No Yelling!	Use a calm voice; Use an inside voice
Stop whining!	Use your words/signs/pictures/device so I can help you
Don't stand on the chair!	Sit on the chair
No coloring on the wall	Color on the paper
Don't throw your toys!	Play with the toys on the floor
Stop taking big bites!	One bite at a time; chew first, and then you can have another bite.
Don't play in the water/sink!	Wash your hands
No biting!	We only bite food; Show or tell me if you're upset (give the child appropriate words, signs, or visuals to use to express emotion)
Don't hit!	Hands are for playing, eating, and hugging; Use your words or signs (give the child appropriate words, signs, or visuals to use to express emotion)



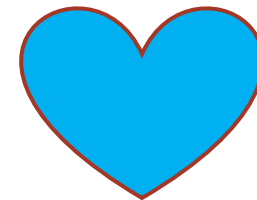
# Reinforce the Positive Behavior

Putting emphasis on the positive behavior



CATCH  
THEM  
DOING  
THE  
RIGHT  
THING

**Behavior  
goes where  
reinforcement  
flows!!**



# Reinforcement – Provide Positive Descriptive Feedback

- Providing feedback to the child that is specific and descriptive
  - Instead of “good job” you would say, “Johnny, you helped a friend clean the table. Thank you for helping your friend take care of the classroom”
- Helps children understand what they have done that is in-line with positive behavior
- Public acknowledgement reinforces the behavior for the child (ex. Johnny) and serves as a model for the rest of the class





## Some Starters for Giving Positive Feedback and Encouragement

This resource from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations gives some examples of PDF starters

- 😊 "You must feel proud of yourself for..."
- 😊 "You've done a wonderful job at..."
- 😊 "You have really learned how to..."
- 😊 "See how \_\_\_ has improved in..."
- 😊 "You have worked so hard..."
- 😊 "You do a dynamite job of..."
- 😊 "Excellent idea for..."
- 😊 "Brilliant thinking for..."
- 😊 "That's a cool way to ..."
- 😊 "Look how well s/he did at..."
- 😊 "That's a resourceful way of..."
- 😊 "You are a real problem solver for..."
- 😊 "You've really grown up because you..."
- 😊 "Give me an EXTRA HUGE high five for..."
- 😊 "You are being so respectful when you..."
- 😊 "You are creating some amazing things..."
- 😊 "WOW!! What a fabulous job you've done of..."
- 😊 "Class, I have an announcement! Let's all give a hip, hip hooray to \_\_\_ for \_\_\_"
- ☹



<https://www.challengingbehavior.org/document/starters-for-giving-positive-feedback-and-encouragement/>

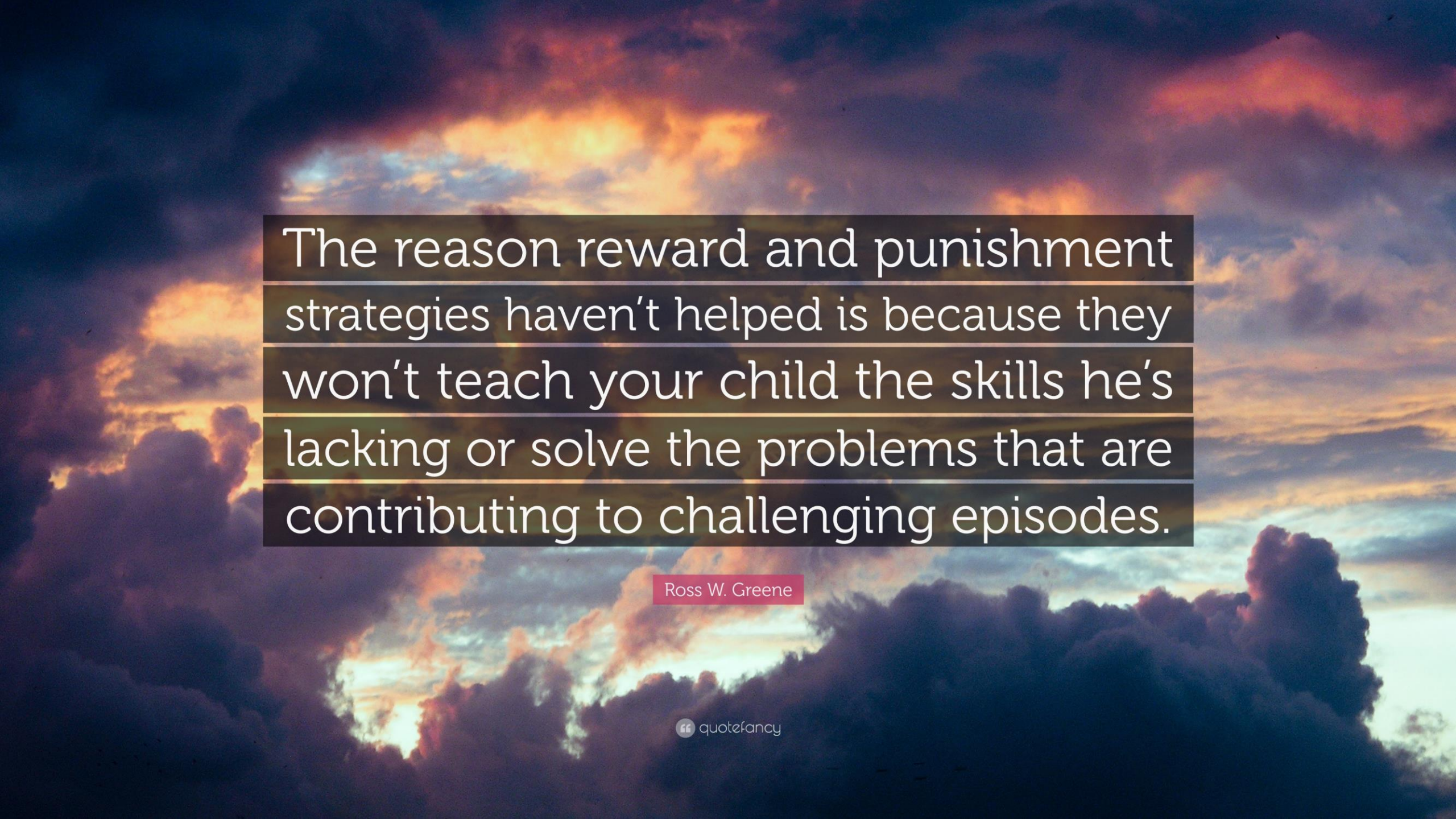
# Putting It All Together

**RESIST** the urge to hold negative assumptions

**REFRAME** the behavior in a positive/solution focused way

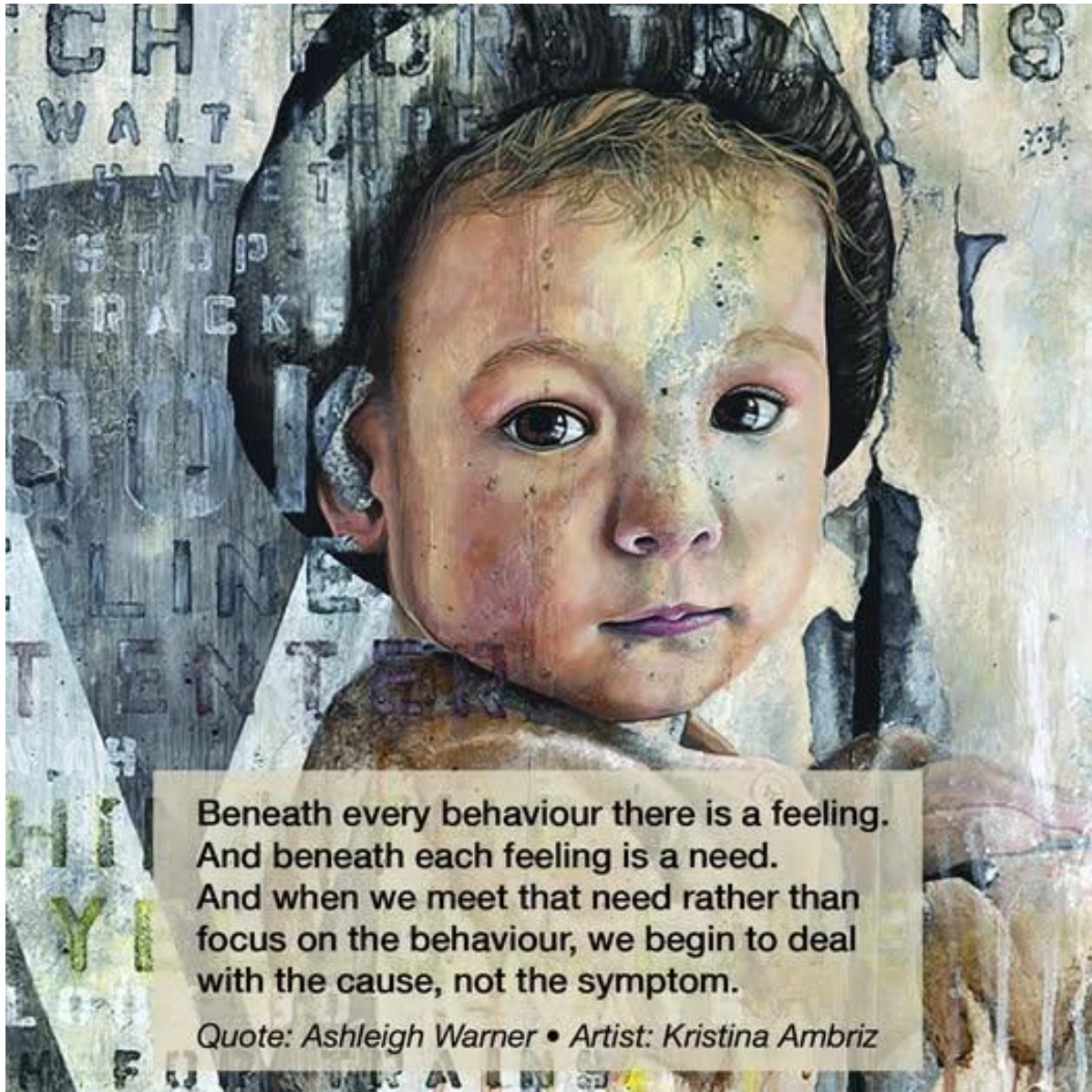
**REPLACE** negative statements with positive statements

**REINFORCE** prosocial positive behaviors



The reason reward and punishment strategies haven't helped is because they won't teach your child the skills he's lacking or solve the problems that are contributing to challenging episodes.

Ross W. Greene



Beneath every behaviour there is a feeling.  
And beneath each feeling is a need.  
And when we meet that need rather than  
focus on the behaviour, we begin to deal  
with the cause, not the symptom.

*Quote: Ashleigh Warner • Artist: Kristina Ambriz*

Find the unmet need

Teach the unknown skill

Reinforce the child's  
growth

Hold yourself with space  
and grace as you move  
through this work

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- O’Grady, C., & Ostrosky, M. M. (2023). Suspension and expulsion: Early educators’ perspectives. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 1-11

# Resources

- <https://www.challengingbehavior.org/document/reframing-behavior/>
- <https://www.challengingbehavior.org/document/communication-is-key/>
- <https://www.challengingbehavior.org/document/starters-for-giving-positive-feedback-and-encouragement/>
- <https://www.challengingbehavior.org/document/recommendations-and-considerations-for-positive-descriptive-feedback/>

Thank

You

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I look forward to hearing from you!