



Center for Early Education and Development

Tip Sheets

Bridging Education & Mental Health

Interpreting

What is Interpreting?

Interpreting is a therapeutic technique to reframe a stressful situation by providing insight into the child's emotions. It is often useful when anxiety, fear, or anger is causing disruptive behavior.

How Should Interpreting Be Used?

Interpreting should be used to help children understand the cause of their emotional state at the moment. When experiencing fear, anger, or anxiety, children can engage in challenging behavior that can cause harm to themselves, to others around them, and the physical environment. Interpreting can be used as a way to help the child think differently about the situation and to diffuse tense times that could escalate into an episode of challenging behavior. It can be used with one child or a group of children experiencing the same situation.

Before using an interpreting technique, it is important to determine if the child has the representational and symbolic capacity to use interpreting. Many at-risk children are functioning at lower levels of development at pre-symbolic levels and may be unable to use interpretation. In order to help children develop the capacity for symbolic reasoning, adults need to be engaged partners in their play. Symbolic play such as role playing and dramatic play scenarios supports the development of symbolic reasoning in young children.

Specific Strategies

When using interpretation, it is important not to tell children how they feel but instead to suggest how they might be feeling. Statements such as, "I wonder if...", "That makes me think about...", "Sometimes children...", or "It sounds like..." are open-ended beginnings that allow for the child to disagree with the interpretation of the adult. If a child disagrees

with the way her emotions have been interpreted, it is critical to validate her feelings and follow up with responses such as "You don't think so?" or "You don't like that idea? Do you have another idea about what happened?"

Examples From A Classroom



Scenario: The bus arrives at school and there is a substitute teacher, Marsha, unexpectedly waiting at the door. The teacher, Julie, announces that the assistant teacher is out sick and that there will be a new helper today. One child in the classroom, Tommy, runs away and stands kicking the wall a few feet away, refusing to enter the building.

Julie approaches Tommy and, recognizing the possible cause of his distress, she says, "I see Paul is gone today and Marsha is by the door. You don't know Marsha."

Tommy says, "I hate Marsha!"

Julie interprets Tommy's feelings by responding, "You don't know Marsha, I wonder if that might be why you are having a hard time going in the door?"

Tommy replies, "I don't know Marsha!"

Julie then offers support by saying, "Why don't you hold my hand today?" Marsha doesn't know you yet, and you don't know Marsha yet. Let's go tell her your name is Tommy. And you can hold my hand."

Tommy responds by taking Julie's hand, and he looks at the substitute suspiciously saying, "My name is Tommy."

Marsha replies, "Hi Tommy, my name is Marsha. I'm new in your room, aren't I?"

Tommy continues holding Julie's hand as he walks in the door saying to Marsha, "I don't know you yet."

Julie has validated Tommy's feelings of fear of strangers and by naming his anxiety, she has helped him work through his feelings



and continue with the morning routine successfully.

Scenario: A child approaches a teacher abruptly and pinches her.

Teacher: "Ouch! That hurts me. It's OK to be angry, but it's not O.K. to pinch. If you are angry, tell me. You can say, I'm angry!"

Often children will use actions to communicate their feelings. Although they may have the words, in a stressful situation they may not be able to readily access the right words or be able to label their emotions to effectively communicate exactly how they are feeling. As a teacher, it is important to help children interpret these actions and to use these situations as learning opportunities for the child to recognize the feelings behind their actions and to learn new ways of communicating those feelings.

Summary

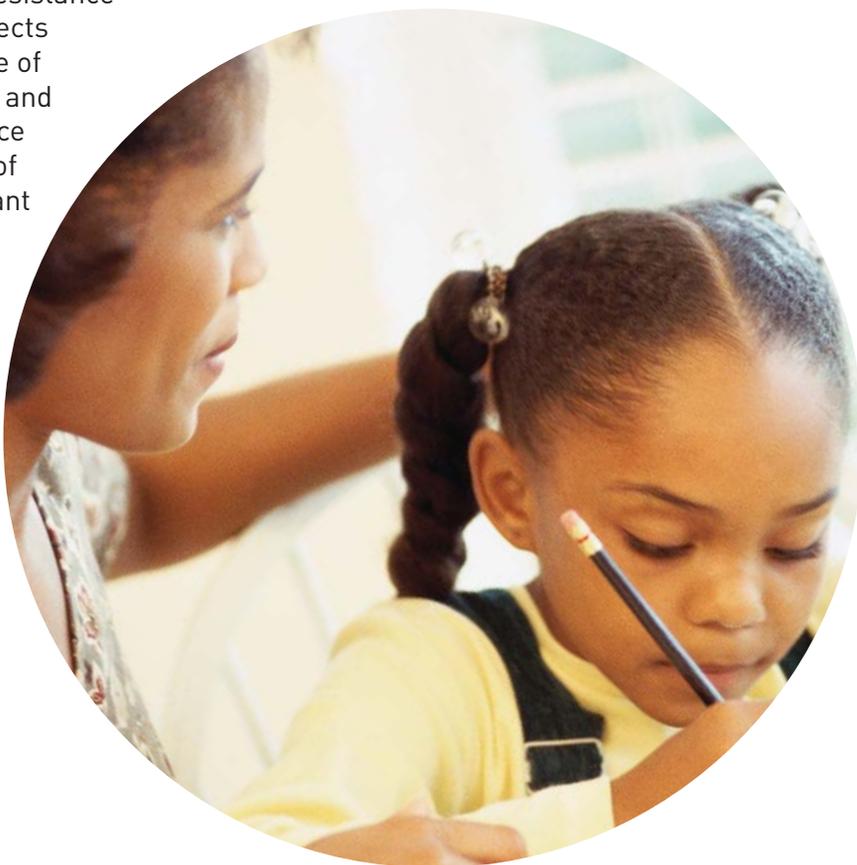
In the first example, you see the teacher reframing the situation for Tommy by interpreting his resistance to entering the building and the anger he directs at Marsha as fear of strangers. Julie is aware of previous abuse that Tommy has experienced and she is tuned into situations that might produce anxiety for him. Teachers may not be aware of all of the children's histories but it is important to pay attention to emotional cues and take a moment to analyze the situation before responding. Ask yourself, "What underlying emotions could possibly be behind this behavior?" Once you can identify a plausible explanation, help children identify their feelings and facilitate a way for them to work through them in a constructive way that validates their experiences and helps them become more aware of their feelings in the future.

Reference

Koplow, L. (Ed.) (1996). *Unsmiling Faces: How Preschools Can Heal*. New York: Teachers College Press.

For additional information on this topic, please visit CEED's web site at <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>.

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