



Dear Reader

I have written before about my younger son, Otis. We call him our “walking exclamation point.” From age 3 weeks when colic struck, until about age 4, we did not experience a day without a dozen tantrums—fists swinging, face red, tears streaming. Board books would fly.

Doors would slam. Our entire household lived at the mercy of its youngest resident.

An outsider observing our family may have formed one impression: That is an out-of-control child. That is a sometimes-unlikable child. That is a sickly child. That is a poorly behaved child.

My parents would bring him home early from their special grandparent afternoons, unable to manage his temper. Friends of mine always began conversations with, “How is Otis?” They knew my answer to that question would also hint at how my own life was going.

He was, in a word, challenging.

But here is the thing. His behavior was entirely a result of and response to his context. Diagnosed early with a weak

immune response, Otis did, likely, feel discomfort if not abject pain every day as an infant. He was subjected to blood draws and obscure tests, medical appointments, and an endless parade of strangers in white jackets who seemed only to poke and prod at his tiny body. He struggled to digest common foods, mandating for two years a strictly monitored diet. He spent both his first and second birthdays in the hospital with lung infections. This tiny little guy had it rough.

As his mother, I possessed a nearly endless well of empathy for my son. Because I could view his behavior and temperament

within the context of the bigger picture, I understood that he was not trying to be difficult. He did not enjoy being fussy (a word I would love to banish from the early childhood vocabulary!) and did not want to cause trouble. He wanted love, nurturing, and connection, just as we all do. He was communicating his needs in the ways his body was able to. When he was “clingy” (another word worth banishing,) he was telling me he needed to be held, snuggled, and spoken to gently. When he was screaming, he needed to release all of his big feelings and did not yet possess the language to do so.

We learned a lot during those years. (For starters, I learned I am a comfort eater!) We learned techniques for mitigating our newborn’s physical discomfort. My husband and I tried to give each other breaks from the screaming—I would drive around my neighborhood during that long Nebraska winter, listening to music or just enjoying the silence. We did our best, while working full-time jobs and parenting an older child, to give our baby the best of ourselves—unconditional love and tender care. When we felt ourselves cracking, we would find a moment of open air.

As Otis became a toddler, we learned from his devoted and masterful child care providers what worked in the classroom. We offered choices. We found favorite books and stuffies that served a soothing purpose. We discovered that fresh air—any time outdoors—could calm many of his worst emotional storms, and so we built nature time into every day, regardless of the season. We collaborated as a team—parents, brother, grandparents, teachers. We communicated openly about our frustrations but we did not let them define us, or our relationship with Otis. And ultimately, we made all made it through.

This issue of *Exchange* explores behavior writ large, and I think you are going to LOVE this super-sized collection of articles that address the root causes of many of children’s challenging moments, put them into context, and then offer strategies that you can take into the classroom *today*. Our authors are rethinking the roots of challenging behavior, and we’re eager to take you along for the ride.

You’ve got this.

Sara W. Gilliam

