



Podcast 20: What Children Really Need

Episode notes: <https://prekteachandplay.com/podcast20>

Hi fellow early childhood Solutionaries. This is Kristie, and today's episode is all about needs versus wants. Whenever I think about (or talk about) needs and wants, I always hear the lyrics to the Rolling Stones song, *You Can't Always Get What You Want*. It plays over and over in my head. You know, the lyrics that say, "You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, well, you might find you get what you need."

Well, when it comes to children, we can't afford to sometimes wait and see if they find what they need- it's our job to provide for those needs. Many of you are nodding your head, and you're saying, "Yes, well of course, of course. *Of course* we would provide for children's needs." But, it turns out, it isn't always that simple. Let's take for example three common situations where we might find ourselves struggling to determine, "Is this a need or is this something that a child wants?"

In fact, these three scenarios have come up over and over again in professional development. In just the past few weeks, these three came up time and time again when we were talking about responding to children's needs versus when they want something. So, the first scenario, there's a child who wants your attention non-stop. We even got to the point where we were calling this, "Your little mini-me," someone who wants to be near you, with you, directing you, directing others on your behalf, all kinds of ways that they do things, because you perceive that they want your attention non-stop.

Second scenario, and this is a direct quote from some providers, "The child wants to avoid doing their work." This is a child who may really struggle with persistence, or with variety, or with following through, and it is our perception that they're avoiding what they need to be doing. Third scenario, the child wants to get their way all of the time. This is the child who wants to be first, wants to play in a particular area, wants to sit by a certain person, wants to have just one more turn. You get the idea, right?

There are these three scenarios where we begin to perceive that a child wants our attention, wants to avoid something, or wants to get their way. In today's episode, I want to create an

opportunity where we can really explore what's going on in each of these situations and how we might maybe better respond, or think about our response, in a slightly different way.

Gaining clarity on wants versus needs will help you to strengthen your relationship with children, and as I say all the time, relationships are the only active ingredient to supporting children's development and learning. Of course, we need to find better ways to strengthen those relationships. Since many of you may be multi-tasking while you're listening to this episode, be sure to go to preteachandplay.com/podcast20 to download the transcript for today, and you can also download this episode's freebie. Again, go to preteachandplay.com/podcast20, which includes a set of guiding questions that can help you determine if a child needs something or just wants something.

Let's start with a little bit about needs- what are they anyway? For me, when I think about needs, I take [Maslow's hierarchy](#), brain research, and common sense, and I mush them all together. In no particular order, but in that vein of Maslow's hierarchy, food, drinks, shelter (yes, of course, right?)- that's what all children need- but they also need safety, and love, and affection, and connections. So there we go, we're moving up the hierarchy, but we also know that this is what the brain research tells us is critical for kids to develop and to learn. It's also kind of common sense, right?

From there, we can really start to think about how children need our time, need our attention, need our understanding. This really morphs into our role as a brain architect, meaning children need consistency, they need us to set boundaries, they need us to integrate the left and the right hemispheres, they need us to capitalize on their interests and strengths, and they need us to recognize and reduce stressors. That's all great, right? That Maslow's hierarchy, meets brain research, meets common sense.

But what about wants? What's a want versus a need? For me, again, when I think about a want, I think more about entitlement, excess, or even something like icing on the cake, clear as mud, right? How do you tell the difference between a want and a need- particularly if we go back to those three scenarios, where we saw a child constantly seeking attention ("avoiding their work"), or aiming to get their way all the time? Here's a couple of things (and you know, par for the course with me) I really have questions more than answers, but it's through those guiding questions that we can find answers.

Again, thinking of the guiding questions, you can go to preteachandplay.com/podcast20 and download today's freebie, which gives you just a handful of guiding questions that I'll talk about next. First of all, is the child that we're talking about in these scenarios young? If they are, I'm going to argue it's their response, their behavior, their situation, it's more of a need



than a want. For young children, they are still in a place where they need us to set the boundaries, for us to clarify, for us to make things predictable, for us to reduce their stressors, for us to be understanding. The burden really falls to the adult in the situation. We may want the child to act differently, but they really need something from us, because they're still young, they're still developing, they still don't have that conscious control over their thoughts, their feelings, and their actions.

Then, because one of the roles that we need to play (notice the *need* there) is to reduce stressors for kids. Is this child exposed to a lot of stressors? We want to think about if they are, and if so, we give them more of the benefit of the doubt, and we really would interpret the situation as a need versus a want if we know this child is being exposed to lots of stressors. So A, they're young, B, they're exposed to lots of stressors, so they're operating from this heightened state of fight, flight, or freeze.

Many of their actions are really coming from their brainstem, versus again, that conscious control out of a clear understanding of cause and effect. Another thing that we might consider is, where are they "in the peak"? Many of you have heard me talk about, "Teach before the peak," the red train, and the green train. If you haven't before, this is that idea of when the child's already flooded, or they already have all of these stressors that are triggered, that this is not a time where they can really have conscious control, they're not able to make good choices, they don't really understand consequences. What they need instead is help getting back on the green train, really getting into that place of a more neutral state.

Speaking of needs, when they are on that red train, when there is this heightened emotional reaction, it isn't that they need ... well, it's not that they need us to think differently about what they are doing, but think differently about why they're doing it. Let's see if I can say that again. Sometimes what children need is for us to slow down and wait until they're ready to learn.

That means getting off of that red train, that really heightened sense of fight, or flight, or freeze, and that means they need us to wait until they're back and ready on the green train. Then they can learn the real consequences, they can learn cause and effect, they can learn how to make a better choice. When they get older, they're able to do these things more on their own, but when they're young, and/or on the red train, they need for us to slow down and wait for them, they need us to reduce or remove barriers, and they need our help to get onto the green train.

Notice in each of these instances, we started off talking about a child who *wants* to avoid, a child who *wants* our attention, a child who *wants* their way. Really what their bodies are

saying to us is that they need for us to understand that they are young. They need for us to set boundaries, to clarify, to make things predictable. They need for us to recognize and reduce stressors. They need for us to understand that they may already be on the red train and that what really has to happen first is that they need our help getting on the green train, so that they can learn how to respond differently the next time.

This also might mean that we need to take an objective look at the situation. Sometimes our triggers are being activated, and it's keeping us from operating from our best selves, and from using our 'upstairs brain'. The question is, "Is the kid all the time doing fill in the blank?" Is the kid always seeking our attention? Is the child always avoiding? Is the child always needing to have their way? Sometimes it's just so intense, or our triggers are so activated, that we get a feeling that it's all the time. That said, even in talking to someone else, we might find that this is a constant situation.

We also might need to think about, "Is this really about the child, or is it our own shark music?" Not an easy question to ask. Then, when we think about consistency, sometimes our triggers can get activated because, "Well they did it yesterday, they did it earlier today, they've done it before, why can't they do it today?" Or "Why are they doing it today?" We need to remember again, emphasis on *need*, that it is our job to continue to support, scaffold, and reduce stressors. If a child has been successful in the past, the question is, "Why are they having difficulty now? Have new stressors arisen? Do they need more support in this particular situation? What is our role going forward?"

Self-awareness is fabulous, right? That we're aware of the issue is great, and taking time to reflect and get objective data, that can go a long ways to allowing us to use our 'upstairs brain', as Dan Siegel would call it, to really think through the situation. When we're feeling like, and we can feel ourselves saying, "This kid just wants my attention", and we're just tired of it, then we're probably not on the green train ourselves, we're not really operating from our 'upstairs brain'. We really need to think about, "How can we approach this objectively? How can we reduce the triggers, so that we can really see what's going on behind this child's behavior?"

We can also really think about, "What does a child really need?". Speaking of Dan Siegel, he talks about the acronym HALT, H-A-L-T. Is it really an underlying issue of Hunger, Anger, being Lonely, being Tired? Those go back to those major things that children need, in terms of food, shelter, safety, predictability, and connection. Instead of interpreting it as, "The child wants my attention", it becomes "I can understand that they have this feeling of being lonely, and this is the child's response to that". We begin to see that it is why they're behaving this way. It's not them trying to be annoying, it just ends up that way.

How do I really see this as a need for my attention, versus that they want my attention? My colleague [Barb Avila](#) also talks about that, how the child may need more information, they may need more control, they may need more processing time. If I can slow down and provide that information, provide that choice within a choice, provide that processing time, I may be able to get a different response from the child.

I also may need to think about stressors in a more holistic way. Remember, I talked about being a brain architect, and how we are responsible for recognizing and reducing stressors, and eventually restoring the child to a more neutral state. When we think about stressors, are we thinking broadly enough? Are we understanding that even experiencing a strong emotion can be a trigger for a child?

Inadequate sleep or rest- even large group activities which are overcrowded, less personalized, less responsive, and allow for children to make fewer of their own choices- can cause stressors to the body. That body can react or respond in ways that may then trigger us into thinking the child just wants their own way, or wants our attention, or wants to avoid something, when in fact their body is saying, "I need space, I need time, I need your attention."

Anytime the child has stressors where there is a feeling of things being unpredictable; being unsafe; there's conflicting or changing demands; there's lots of processing demands; there's repeated demands without scaffolding; there's lots of stimuli; there's time that's really spent in passive waiting, but not time for processing; there's lots of unnecessary stop and starts; there's unpredictable situations; and there's unresponsive adults, right? Any of these things can add stressors to the child, causing something that looks like a want but really becomes a need.

Also, another question is, "Is an opportunity being presented that the child has enough models of the difference between a need and a want?" Have we actually taken the time to teach children the difference between this access or icing on the cake versus what is a true need, as well as model how you can get those needs met in socially appropriate ways?

Again, oftentimes children are imitating what they see, and so it's our job to help them understand the difference between a need and a want, and what they can do differently when they have these different feelings. That's how we begin to better understand what's really going on in situations where children appear to *want* something, but it's more likely that they actually *need* something.

Again, we may think that the child wants our attention non-stop, wants to avoid doing what's required or necessary, or wants their way. But if we can dig a little deeper- and when we

understand that when they are young; when they are exposed to a lot of stressors; when they are maybe on the red train (and not the green train)- that all of these times, it's really their bodies responding to stress, it's their bodies really working from their brainstem in terms of fight, flight, or freeze. It's not really their conscious control over saying, "I need something," versus "I want something."

Gaining clarity on wants versus needs will help you strengthen your relationship with children. Don't forget to go to preteachandplay.com/podcast20 and download a few of these guiding questions that can help you reflect on and determine when something is really a need even though it feels like a want.

As always, I'd love to come to your district or program to connect with, train, and encourage other inspired educators. Contact me at kristiepf.com to speak at your conference or your next professional development event.

Thank you Solutionaries for all you do to help children thrive in school and in life.



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