



Repetitive Behaviors

You & Your Foster Child

A guide for
foster parents

It is believed that repetitive behaviors such as rocking and nail biting stimulate children and help them release tension and calm themselves. Rocking back and forth, for example, is a common self-soothing behavior infants and toddlers do when they are trying to fall asleep. Some children simply like to do the same thing over and over again because it can give them a sense of security.

These behaviors occur less and less frequently as children reach 3 years of age, especially when they are placed in interesting and nurturing surroundings.

Foster parents should be particularly sensitive to repetitive behaviors, because they tend to be seen more frequently when a child is under stress. Having their lives frequently disrupted, being separated from their parents for months or years, and the tension surrounding visits with their birth parents can all cause stress in the lives of foster children and lead them to engage in repetitive behaviors.

Understanding and coping with repetitive behavior

You can make it easier on yourself, your foster child, and family by knowing a little about repetitive behaviors and by adopting some strategies to help you deal with them.

Examples of repetitive behaviors

- Rocking back and forth.
- Head pounding.
- Masturbation.
- Hair pulling.
- Nail biting.
- Facial and other tics.
- Thumb sucking.



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Characteristics of repetitive behaviors

- Some repetitive behaviors are very private activities, and children may not be aware that they are doing them.
- Children who engage in repetitive behaviors often do so at night when they are still full of energy.
- These behaviors may appear during transitions in developmental stages—when a child is learning to walk, during spurts in language development, and when learning to use the toilet.
- In most cases, children outgrow these behaviors by the age of 3 years, depending on the child and circumstances.
- These behaviors may become long-lasting habits if you repeatedly call attention to them.
- Repetitive behaviors can become more frequent when a caregiver tries to force a child to stop.
- In general, these behaviors should be ignored — unless they occur with other, more serious symptoms, such as wanting to be alone most of the time, a lack of communication, unusual body movements, and shying from physical contact.

Dealing with repetitive behaviors

Living with a child who exhibits these behaviors can be frustrating and disruptive to a household. But there are some tactics for handling repetitive behaviors that can help. Don't try to force a child to stop a repetitive behavior. Try the following instead:

- Lower stress. Do your best to reduce excess stress in your foster child's life. For example, prepare for visits with birth parents, and keep a regular schedule.
- Offer an outlet for your child's extra energy, such as playing outdoors, throwing a ball, or playing tag. Spending some of that energy can help to reduce symptoms.
- Create your own rhythmic activities, such as rocking your child in a rocking chair, swinging on a swing set, dancing to lively music, playing hand or circle games, such as patty cake, ring around the rosie, etc.
- Play music. Music is soothing, especially when played at night. In the day, music can be used as an outlet for extra energy when played loud and danced to.
- Have a bedtime routine. Repetitive behaviors appear in the evening as a way to relax and release extra energy. You can help a child relax in other ways with a bedtime routine that soothes with music and your quiet attention and comforting.
- Don't wait until your children are ready to drop asleep before putting them to bed. You run the risk of them becoming overly tired if you do.



Keeping your child safe

If your child displays repetitive behaviors, make the surroundings safe. For example:

- Put padding around hard surfaces that your child pounds his or her head against.
- Remove castors from cribs so they cannot be rolled across the room.
- If your child is a hair puller, provide a plush toy to tug on.
- Make sure that fingernails are clipped and smooth.

When to seek professional help

Most repetitive behaviors are not serious. But in some cases, they may indicate a serious condition that requires the help of a health care professional. Consider getting professional help if, for example:

- Your child's repetitive behavior becomes excessive and interferes with normal functioning or daily activities.
- Your child shows more acute symptoms, such as wanting to be alone most of the time, a lack of communication, unusual body movements, or shying away from physical contact.
- Your foster child begins to injure himself or herself, particularly if the behavior reaches the level of self-mutilation.

Repetitive behaviors that cause injury can indicate a child has been abused physically, emotionally, or sexually. They also might indicate a psychological condition, such as depression or anxiety. Behaviors that can become serious and lead to injury include:

- Vigorous head banging.
- Extreme finger or hand biting.
- Cutting the skin.
- Extreme hair pulling.
- Burning or branding the skin, including eraser burns.
- Hitting oneself in ways that may cause injury.
- When a child is older, frequent body piercing or tattooing.

Extreme behaviors should be assessed by a health care professional to determine the root of the problem, whether it is a symptom of a more serious disorder, and how to treat it.

