



Behavior as Communication

Understanding Challenging Behavior

“What we sometimes see as a failure to behave properly is actually a failure to communicate properly.”

— Amanda Morgan

All people, adults and children, communicate through their behavior at every moment of the day, even if we are not aware of it. When a child demonstrates problematic behavior, they are communicating with us a need that is not being met. These needs are usually about needing to get something or needing to avoid something. As adults, we can learn how to understand what children are communicating through their behavior and then help them learn how to get these needs met in a more appropriate way. The best way to decrease challenging behavior is through support. Punishing children’s behavior might stop the behavior for a moment, but it is likely the child will continue to have this behavior if he or she does not learn a better way to get needs met.

It is important to figure out what your child is communicating with challenging behavior. You can do this by paying attention to what happens before and after the challenging behavior and looking for patterns. Based on the pattern, you can make some assumptions about what skill(s) your child needs to learn. Three of the most common skills children need to learn to communicate are how to appropriately get attention, avoid or escape an activity, and get an item or participate in a preferred activity. To help decrease challenging behavior, we can prevent the behavior by changing what happens before it, teach the appropriate way to get the need met, and reinforce when a child uses the skills we are teaching.



Prevent, Teach, Reinforce

Need	Prevent	Teach	Reinforce
Attention	Give frequent positive attention, especially when there is positive behavior.	During times of positive behavior, teach ways to ask for attention like saying, “Look at this!” or “Can I have a hug?”	Praise your child and give attention when s/he asks for it appropriately (i.e., “Thanks for asking! I’d love to see it!”).
Escape	Set up routines, especially for work time, with scheduled breaks. Provide choices. Alternate easy and hard tasks.	During times of positive behavior, teach ways to ask for a break or change activities.	Praise your child and give your child a brief (2-3 minutes) break when s/he asks for it appropriately. Provide praise or reinforcement for returning to task after a break.
Tangible (Item or Activity)	Set up clear expectations of when and how your child can have items and activities.	During times of positive behavior, teach ways to ask for items and activities.	Praise your child and allow access to the item/activity if it is asked for appropriately. Preferred items and activities should only be available during times of positive behavior.

Adapted from: Chazin, K.T. & Ledford, J.R. (2016). Challenging behavior as communication. In *Evidence-based instructional practices for young children with autism and other disabilities*. Retrieved from <http://ebip.vksites.org/challenging-behavior-as-communication>

Additional Tips

- Teach your child to make requests using communication that works for them. This may include speaking, signing, gestures, writing, and/or visuals.
- Model making these requests throughout the day.
- Be aware of signals your child may be frustrated or experiencing a need. Remind them how to ask for what they need *before* the challenging behavior occurs if possible.
- Role play asking appropriately for different needs to be met with your child in a variety of situations. Be sure to praise your child during role plays.
- During challenging behavior, stay calm. When he or she is also calm, discuss what happened and give the opportunity for a “redo” or to try it again in a better way.
- Be patient. Behavior changes take time. Learning how to get needs met is a skill like any other, and learning new skills takes time and practice.

Additional Resources

- <https://www.bcps.org/system/coronavirus/>
- https://scs.bcps.org/departments/social_emotional_support
- https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/docs/whatworks/WhatWorksBrief_11.pdf
- <https://www.iloveaba.com/2013/08/fct-functional-communication-training.html>
- <https://pro.psychcentral.com/child-therapist/2019/07/functionsofbehavioraba/>
- <https://www.parentcenterhub.org/behavior-at-home/>

