

Behavior 101

Challenging behavior can interfere with successful social interactions, learning, and employment. Behavior is a form of communication that usually is expressing a desire for an object, attention or activity or a way to escape or avoid an object, attention, or activity. With all behavior begin with **ABC**.

A is the antecedent. What is happening immediately before the undesired behavior? What activity is the child engaged in? Is it a preferred activity? Who is present? Is it a preferred adult? Is there about to be a transition to a less desired activity, person or location?

If you can identify an antecedent, then you can sometimes change the behavior by making adjustments before the behavior occurs. There are many strategies that can be utilized once you suspect the antecedent.

You can:

Offer choices to allow the child some control over his environment. It gives him options. You can offer two choices either verbally or with visual support.

Wait time or processing time is extremely important. If you have offered choices then be quiet and allow him to think about the choices. It may take him awhile to process the advantages/disadvantages. Do not interrupt this process or he will be back to square one and have to process all over again. The wait time may be longer than you expect.

Walk away to give him time to process. Sometimes it is hard to think with someone standing over you waiting for an answer. You are worried about what the adult may do and how much time you have.

Use a visual schedule to let the child know what to expect. This does not have to be fancy. It can be computer generated or handwritten. It can be pictures or words. If you know the child does not want to end a particular activity or leave a particular person you can let them know when he will get that person or activity again. It is not gone forever.

Provide warning before transitions with words or signals such as a timer. For example, in two minutes it will be time to go to bed.

First/Then this can be visual or verbal. Since children with Down syndrome are visual learners, using a visual might be better. First we are going to pick up toys, then you can watch Daniel Tiger.

Timers are wonderful ways to signal a change in activity. Provide a warning that when the timer goes off, then you will ... Children are less likely to argue with a timer than an adult.

Social stories are simple, short stories about what is going to happen. Again you can create very simple ones by hand or on the computer. Read this shortly before you want the behavior in the story to happen. So if you know coming in from outside is going to be a problem, before you go outside you read a short story about why it will be necessary to come in and what that should look like. The expectation is to pick up toys and carry them inside to put away so they will be ready to go outside another time.

Transition items or jobs can be useful when switching from one activity to another or from one location to another. "I need help, can you carry this?" Or a favorite toy that is only obtainable during transition is available to carry from activity to activity. Sometimes singing songs during transitions help. Elementary classes will often use songs to signal it is time to clean up.

Sensory issues can be addressed with different lighting in a room, sunglasses, headphones to block noise in loud areas, sitting in a different spot in the room or on a different kind of seat, sitting by a different person, using a different kind of marker or writing instrument, and so forth.

Give attention before he acts out to get your attention. If he is seeking your attention then make sure he gets your attention without having to act out.

Always give positives for the behavior you do want. When you get the behavior you are looking for reinforce it with words, high fives, stickers, etc. **A child should get 10 positives for every negative.** You can put rubber bands on your wrist or paperclips in your pocket and every time you give a positive for desired behavior move the item to the other side. That will allow you to see if you are giving positives for the behavior you desire.

B is behavior. Describe exactly what behavior is observed. Not just there is a tantrum but what it looks like and sounds like. Is he throwing himself on the ground/yelling/spitting/refusing to move/hiding under a table/attempting to leave the area, or some other behavior?

Teaching a replacement behavior is necessary. If you don't want the behavior you are getting then you might need to teach a behavior that would be acceptable. This will not happen with just one explanation to the child. He may not know how to replace the behavior he is exhibiting. You will have to teach it.

Provide cues to remind the child of choices he does have. This can be hand signals, verbal words/phrases, or pictures. Consistently use the same signal or phrase.

Visual modeling of the desired behavior can be reinforcing. Video the child behaving the way you want and allow them to watch the video over and over, especially right before an event that might spark the inappropriate behavior.

“Hidden curriculum” expectations do not come naturally to all children. Some expectations most children pick up from watching peers and adults but not everyone is able to do this. For example, you do not speak to adults of authority such as teachers in the same way that you may talk to a brother. Another example would be that not all students can differentiate between the whole class can answer questions and now only individuals are expected to answer. They need a prompt to help distinguish between the two expectations.

C is consequence. What is the consequence for the behavior? Does the child get his way? Does he always get a bribe (something he wants) to change the behavior? Is he punished? Is it really punishment or does he get out of the undesired activity? Is he really getting what he desires by the consequence that the adult views as punitive?

Be sure if he wants something that you do not inadvertently reward him with what he wants or what you are teaching him is that if I act inappropriately then I can get what I want. For example, in a grocery store if a student wants candy and you say no, but then they start yelling, refusing to move, blocking the aisle, etc. and he then gets the item so as not to cause an uproar at the store, the child has learned that this is an effective way to obtain what he desires.

Instead, make him ask in an appropriate way. It still doesn't mean he gets it that moment. You could have them “earn” it and be open to negotiating how they will earn the item. Let him have a part in it.

If you place him in time out because he doesn't want to clean up, and he is not required to clean up later then once again you have reinforced that inappropriate behavior gets you out of the task you are trying to avoid.

So, always think about the consequence you give in relation to what the child is trying to obtain. Don't accidentally reinforce the behavior you want to lessen.

Consequences do not have to be determined in the heat of passion. You can just state that there will be a consequence to be determined later. It is better than choosing something that is unenforceable or undesirable to you.

Always follow through with a consequence. Do not say you are going to do something and not do it. A child must know you mean what you say. If you waver, then they will forever test you because you just might give in.

Consequences should be enforceable and equivalent to the crime (no TV for a month may be excessive), **and clear** (what do you mean by stay in your room...do I just get to play with all my toys in my room, am I restricted from the TV, computer, or certain other items that might be there)?

A child's attention span is equivalent to their age. So to a preschool child 30 seconds in time out is an eternity. Five minutes to a 5 year old is about as long as they can sit without changing activities. Keep that in mind when determining consequences.

Be consistent. If it is the expectation and the rule, then it is to be enforced every time.

Allow 3 to 4 weeks for changes to be a habit for both of you. It may not work well the first time but the more consistent you are the easier it will become.

To change a behavior, we need to change our behavior. If you keep doing what you are presently doing, you will probably continue to get the behavior you are observing. **The only behavior we can change 100% of the time is our own.**
Avoid power struggles. You cannot make children do what you want them to do. What you really are seeking is cooperation, which is easier to obtain if you are calm, respectful, consistent and have a plan.

If you have questions or comments, please contact Peggy Wolf, Education Manager of DSACT, at peggy.wolf@dsact.org or 737-932-5551.

Additional resource:

<http://www.pbisworld.com/>