

## Behavioral Challenges

### What kinds of behavioral challenges might we face with our child?

Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) have a hard time relating and communicating with other people. Many also have unusual ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to different feelings. These qualities can cause behavioral challenges. For example, children with ASDs may have a hard time telling their parents what they want or need and may throw a tantrum instead. They may become very upset when there is a change in their routine. They may hurt people's feelings by seeming not to listen or refusing to play with another child. Each child's behavior is unique. Learning behavioral principles can help you to increase your child's good behavior and reduce problem behaviors.

### What should we know about behavioral principles?

Basic behavioral principles can help explain how children with and without ASDs learn. Typically, behaviors occur in response to events in the environment as well as emotions.

Some examples of problem behaviors include

- Throwing a tantrum instead of using words to get attention, to get something the child wants, or to avoid doing something the child does not want to do
- Nail biting because it has become a habit
- Rocking back and forth or hand clapping for self-stimulation when bored or to tune out too much outside stimulation
- Tics, hyperactivity, and night waking in response to biological conditions

Some behaviors start out for one reason, and then keep happening because they take on new meaning. For instance, a child who first bangs his head because of ear pain may continue to head bang with tantrums.

Talk to your child's doctor, a school behavior specialist, or a psychologist if your child has these or other behaviors (such as hand flapping or self-injury) that are problematic. The reasons that behaviors occur can be different for each child.

### What can we do to improve behavior?

You can increase your child's good behavior and decrease problem behavior by taking consistent action. That means trying to always have the same response.

#### *1. Reward the child's good behavior.*

You can increase behaviors you want from your child by positive reinforcement or praise/reward when a desired behavior occurs. Teaching a child how to behave in a positive fashion is the most important part of any behavioral plan. Most children learn language by receiving a reward, such as praise, for saying a word or sentence. It might take a while for your child's behavior to change because you will need to teach her what behaviors are pleasing to you.

Rewards vary from child to child. Smiles, praise, and earning privileges are all examples of rewards. One way to use rewards is by having a star or sticker chart where a child gets a star or sticker for good behavior. When the child earns enough stars or stickers, she can trade them in for a reward. It is not the same as bribing.

#### *2. Have your child earn privileges for desired behaviors and withhold them for undesired behaviors.*

Working for reinforcement helps teach new behaviors. One way to decrease behaviors you do not want from your child is to take away things your child likes, such as TV, when your child engages in behaviors you do not want him to do. You can also have your child earn TV time by periods of desired behavior. Time-out is an example of removing a child from activities as a response to undesired behaviors. It will only work if "time in" is positive. Teaching your child behaviors you want will help him know behaviors you do not want. Sometimes children act up because they find the class- or adult-directed behavior stressful. They act up because time-out may be a relief. If that seems to be the case, it is important to figure out what is stressful for the child about the adult-directed activity.

Time-out for younger children needs to happen as soon as they do something wrong. The amount of time a child is in time-out should depend on his understanding. A guide is 30 seconds to 1 minute per year of mental age.

If you put your child in time-out, make sure he is safe. Tell your child why he is in time-out, and as soon as time-out is over, lead your child to a good behavior that you can reward. He needs to learn how you want him to behave.

### 3. Have consequences for undesired behaviors.

Although many families punish children when they have undesired behaviors, this approach is not endorsed. Spanking your child and other physical punishment may teach your child to use violence with anger. What is considered punishment varies from child to child. It can include consequences such as making a child write 100 times, "I will not chew gum in class," to cleaning up a mess made during a tantrum.

### How can we better understand behavioral problems?

Think about your child's behavior using the ABC method.

- A** = Antecedent, or what happened before your child's behavior
- B** = Behavior, or what your child did
- C** = Consequence, or what happened after your child's behavior

This can help you to think about why the behavior happened so you can prevent it in the future. The goal is to avoid situations that can lead to problem behavior and to reinforce good behaviors so they continue. A simple chart can help you keep track of your child's behavior so you can figure out why it is happening. It might look like the following:

Date and Time of Behavior	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Sample: Monday 8:00–8:15 am	Told to turn off TV	"No" and tantrum	I turned off TV and took him to school bus after he stopped.

Schools can also help you understand behaviors. You can ask your child's school about a functional behavioral analysis and plan if your child is having behavioral problems in school. This analysis looks at your child's specific behaviors and when they occur. It should help you to find out what might influence problem behaviors and identify ways to change them. Many families benefit from input from a behavioral health professional to better understand their child's behavior and develop a plan to help.

### Resources

Harris SL, Weiss MJ. *Right from the Start: Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism*. 2nd ed. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House; 2007

Myles BS, Southwick J. *Asperger Syndrome and Difficult Moments: Practical Solutions for Tantrums, Rage, and Meltdowns*. 2nd rev ed. Shawnee Mission, KS: Autism Asperger Publishing; 2005

Phelan TW. *1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12*. 3rd ed. Glen Ellyn, IL: Parent Magic, Inc; 2003

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