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**CENTER FOR AUTISM
AND RELATED
DISABILITIES**



FACT SHEET – ABC’S OF CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR

Challenging Behavior

Children with autism spectrum disorders may exhibit behavioral challenges. Some examples of challenging behaviors may include tantrums, non-compliance, aggression, and inattention. Behaviors such as these can negatively impact the child’s ability to learn if they are not dealt with in an appropriate manner. Although these can be labeled “non-functional behaviors,” “bad behaviors,” or “problem behaviors,” challenging behaviors have a function and serve a purpose in the lives of the children that do them.

Everything children do, they do for specific reasons. Most challenging behaviors have underlying communicative intent. By engaging in the challenging behaviors children may be trying to tell you something or get something. In some cases challenging behaviors may be a child’s only way he or she knows to communicate.

There are 4 main reasons challenging behaviors occur:

- 1.) To escape or avoid an undesirable situation – ex. Avoid taking a bath
- 2.) To get social attention (positive or negative) – ex. Receiving a hug or a reprimand
- 3.) To gain access to a desired item/activity – ex. Receive a cookie or be able to go outside and play
- 4.) To access sensory input – ex. Enjoying the feeling of shaking their hands

Through a history of multiple cause and effect relationships, a child learns that specific behaviors can lead to specific results. For example, children may learn that if they scream and cry at the grocery store, their father may buy them a candy bar. Toddlers may learn that every time they hit their sister, their mother will pick them up. It is repeated relationships such as these that lead to the repeated occurrence of challenging behaviors.

ABC’s of Behavior

Every instance of challenging behavior has 3 common components, an Antecedent, a Behavior, and a Consequence. These are known as the ABC’s of behavior.

Antecedents

An antecedent is an event that sets the occasion for a behavior or what happens right before a behavior occurs. Antecedents can be factors in an individual’s external environment such as an instruction by a teacher or a mother turning the TV off. An individual’s internal states can also serve as antecedents, like experiencing pain from a headache or feeling hungry.

Behaviors

A behavior is anything that someone does. Behaviors can be observable such as riding a bike or shaking one’s head, but they can also be internal such as feeling pain or daydreaming. Because internal behaviors can only be inferred, most behavioral interventions focus on external behaviors that are observable and measurable.

Consequences

A consequence is anything that immediately follows as a result of a behavior. For example a child may say, “Juice,” and the consequence of that behavior is an adult pouring the child a glass of juice. Similarly, when a baby begins to cry, the consequence may be an adult picking the baby up. Consequences can increase the likelihood of a behavior happening again, decrease the likelihood of a behavior happening again, or have no effect on the occurrence of a behavior in the future.

Looking at the ABC's

Through direct observation, data can be collected on antecedents, challenging behaviors, and consequences that follow. These data can be analyzed, and a potential purpose of the challenging behavior can be determined. Once a possible reason is identified, an effective intervention addressing the function of the behavior can be established to decrease the behavior accordingly. For example: Data collected on a child's tantrum behavior may reveal that the antecedent is always his mother telling him to do something (clean his room, sit at the table for dinner, etc.) and that the consequence of this tantrum is often that he doesn't end up doing what he was told. These data would suggest that a possible function of the child's tantrum behavior is to escape his mother's demands.

Replacing Challenging Behaviors

Behavioral reduction plans should be designed to provide appropriate consequences or withhold unsuitable consequences for challenging behaviors, as well as teach appropriate alternatives to engaging in those behaviors. By reducing challenging behaviors we are removing a child's means of communicating and interacting with the environment. Therefore, it is important to identify and teach replacement behaviors in conjunction with the reduction of challenging behaviors. Replacement behaviors may include appropriate requesting, how to access attention appropriately, or how to appropriately communicate wants and/or needs. Appropriate replacement behaviors should be reinforced while providing the child with easy access to the same consequences that the challenging behaviors were providing.

Finding Someone to Help with the ABC's

Challenging behaviors can become very serious family concerns, and obtaining help from a qualified professional to manage them as soon as possible is recommended. The earlier a challenging behavior is effectively addressed, the easier it will be to replace. A Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) should be consulted when help with serious challenging behaviors is required. A Behavior Analyst is a specially trained professional who has met specific academic standards and has documented, supervised experience in the field of behavior analysis. These professionals can help families identify the ABC's of challenging behaviors, discover potential reasons behaviors are happening, work with families to develop plans to decrease the behaviors, as well as monitor and supervise the implementation of the plans.

Many FAU CARD staff members are BCBA's and can help you address challenging behaviors. To locate additional Behavior Analyst's in your community consult the local CARD office, your child's school district, your family service provider, or local Association for Behavior Analysis chapter. A list of Behavior Analysts, searchable by locality, is available on the BACB website registry www.bacb.com. When seeking professional help with challenging behaviors, be sure to inquire about supervised, professional experience and certification in the field. Attending workshops, completing courses or having some experience working with challenging behaviors does not qualify someone to practice behavior analysis nor does it make them a "behavior specialist." Challenging behaviors can be complicated issues and should be addressed by qualified professionals.

Suggested Readings

Green, G., Luce, S., & Maurice, C. (1996). *Behavioral Intervention for Young Children with Autism: A Manual for Parents and Professionals*. Austin, Texas: Pro-Ed.

Chandler, L.K., & Dahlquist, C.M. (2002). *Functional Assessment: Strategies to Prevent and Remediate Challenging Behavior in School Settings*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.

www.behavior.org

www.bacb.com

www.challengingbehavior.org