



Behavior Management

Parents are the most important teacher for their child. When children have behavior problems it can make it difficult to be consistent. It is important to know how to manage behaviors so they do not get worse or interfere with the child's ability to learn. Following through with steps to manage behaviors can be hard, and may make you feel uncomfortable. Even if you feel uncomfortable, it is important for you to address the behavior. By doing so, you will be better able to take steps to address the behavior, and to help your child succeed.

Conditions that affect behavior are called the A-B-C's. You need to understand what is happening when the behavior occurs. This will help you manage the behavior.

"A" is for antecedent. An antecedent is what happens before a behavior occurs. Antecedents can set the stage for behavior by making certain behaviors more or less likely to occur. Some examples are: requesting that a child complete a task, the presence of a particular person in the room, or an action related to an intervention or therapy such as putting on the child's hearing aids, or turning on the computer.

"B" is for behavior. Behavior is anything a person does, and includes actions, thoughts, and feelings.

"C" stands for consequence. A consequence is what happens after the behavior occurs. Consequences can make a behavior more likely to occur in the future. This kind of consequence is called reinforcement. For example, providing attention or giving a child a toy following a behavior. Consequences can also make a behavior less likely to occur in the future. This kind of consequence is called punishment. For example, placing a child in time-out or taking away a toy after an inappropriate behavior.

To review, the antecedent comes before the behavior, and the consequence comes after the behavior.

Let's go over some examples. In the first example, the antecedent is putting the hearing aids on the child. The behavior is the child crying and pulling them off. The consequence is that you do not require the child to wear the hearing aids. In this example, the consequence of the child's crying was that she got what she wanted (not wearing the hearing aids). Receiving a desired consequence increases the chance that the behavior, in this case crying and refusing to wear the hearing aids, will occur again in the future. This is an example of reinforcement.

Let's consider another example. The antecedent is you putting the hearing aids on the child. The behavior is the child crying and pulling them off. The consequence then is that you follow through and put the hearing aids back on. In this example, the child did not get what she wanted and, therefore, is less likely to cry and refuse to wear her hearing aid in the future. There is a handout available for download that explains the A-B-Cs of behavior.



Reinforcement increases how often the behavior occurs again in the future. Something is a reinforcer only if it increases the frequency of the behavior that it follows. If it didn't increase how often the behavior occurs, it wasn't a reinforcer! This is an important point. A reinforcer is not the same thing as a reward. A reward may or may not increase the frequency of a behavior. For reinforcement to be the most effective, it needs to happen immediately after the behavior. There are two types of reinforcement – positive and negative.

Positive reinforcement is when something is added to the situation and the behavior increases. When it comes to reinforcement positive means added, like in math. Positive does not mean good. One example would be praising your child for appropriate behavior, and then the behavior happens more in the future. Another example would be lecturing your child after a tantrum, and then the child has tantrums more often. In both of these examples, the child was given attention. Attention can be a very powerful reinforcer. It's important to remember that even though most people think of lecturing or scolding as "punishment," it can often function as a reinforcer. These are examples of positive reinforcement because something was added to the environment and the behavior increased. Let's watch an example of positive reinforcement.

Negative reinforcement occurs when something is subtracted from the situation and the behavior increases. Just like with positive reinforcement, with negative reinforcement, negative means subtracted, like in math. Negative does not mean bad. One example of negative reinforcement is when a child refuses to complete a task and the teacher stops asking the child to complete it. In the future, the child refuses to complete tasks more often. In this example, asking the child to complete the task was subtracted because the teacher stopped asking. Another example is when a child cries that she wants a toy, her parent gives her the toy, and the child stops crying. In the future, the parent gives the toy to the child more often. In this example, the behavior of the parent, giving the child the toy, was reinforced because the child's crying was subtracted from the environment. Each of these are examples of negative reinforcement because something was subtracted from the environment and the behavior increased. Let's watch an example of negative reinforcement.

Your child may not have learned the target behavior yet or is far from being able to do the complete behavior. You can use shaping to help your child gradually learn the behavior. Shaping is reinforcing baby steps toward the desired behavior. Start reinforcing at step 1 until that step is learned.

As each step is learned, the previous step is no longer reinforced and only the next step is reinforced. In this way, the child learns the final form of the behavior step by step. Remember, at each new step, you stop reinforcing the previous step and only reinforce the current step. Sometimes, prompting the child and modeling the correct behavior may be necessary during shaping.



There are a number of different factors that can affect a child's motivation. Take into account what motivates your child when deciding on how to reinforce your child. Motivating operations affect how well the reinforcer will work, by either increasing or decreasing the value of the consequence. One example of a motivating operation is a child who just ate a meal before a session, and therefore is full. Snacks are now less likely to be reinforcing, and completing tasks for snacks as a reinforcer decreases. A second example is a child who has not received much attention at home. Attention is now more reinforcing and completing tasks for attention, such as praise, increases. A third example is when it gets cold outside. Wearing a jacket is now more reinforcing, and looking for a jacket increases. Let's watch an example of motivating operations. In this example the child is learning how to use a picture tool to communicate. The items were chosen for the task because he likes them and is motivated to ask for them using the picture. In this task the child chooses the picture of the item he wants, and gives it to the teacher. His access to the item is controlled to increase his motivation to ask. For example, for the toy he gets to play with it for a short time and then it's removed so he is motivated to ask for it again, if he wants to continue to play more.

Extinction is when a reinforcer is no longer given after a behavior. It can be used to decrease undesirable behavior. Behaviors that are usually appropriate for extinction are tantrums, whining, and pouting. Inappropriate attention-seeking, and any behavior that has been reinforced with attention can also be put on extinction. An example is when a child receives attention from a teacher for disturbing other students during class. In other words, disturbing other students is positively reinforced. But then the teacher begins to ignore the child's behavior. Disturbing other students has then been placed on extinction to decrease this behavior in the future.

When a behavior is on extinction, it will often get worse before it gets better. This is called an extinction burst. An extinction burst is when the behavior temporarily increases in frequency or intensity before it decreases. If this happens, it is very important that you continue with extinction and that you do not reinforce behavior during an extinction burst. This means not giving the child the reinforcer, such as attention, a toy, or a snack. Reinforcing behavior during an extinction burst will only result in the child behaving even more inappropriately in the future. If you continue with extinction, the inappropriate behavior will eventually decrease.

Differential reinforcement is a combination of positive reinforcement and extinction. This is more effective than using either technique alone. It decreases undesirable behavior, and teaches the child the appropriate behavior to replace it. You reinforce appropriate behaviors while extinguishing inappropriate behaviors, usually by ignoring it. For example, if the child whines about completing work, ignore the behavior. As soon as the child does something appropriate, like working quietly, praise the child quickly.



Here is another example of differential reinforcement with hearing aid use. If a child is told, “Put in your hearing aids” and the child puts the hearing aids in, you would reinforce that behavior with praise, such as saying, “Good job!” This is positive reinforcement. However, after telling the child to put the hearing aids in, if the child whines, you would ignore the whining. This is extinction. Differential reinforcement requires you to be alert to each of the child’s behaviors and provide either reinforcement or extinction quickly.

Punishment decreases how often a behavior happens in the future. Something is a punisher only if it decreases the behavior it follows. If it doesn’t decrease the behavior, it wasn’t a punisher! Punishment is often incorrectly thought to mean any kind of unpleasant consequence – but it’s only punishment if it actually decreases behavior. For example, scolding and lecturing a child often increases behavior because these are both forms of attention. If they increase behavior, they are actually reinforcers, not punishers! Just like with reinforcement, there are two kinds of punishment – positive and negative.

Positive punishment occurs when something is added to the situation and the behavior decreases. Just like with reinforcement, positive means added - like in math. Positive does not mean good. An example of positive punishment is spanking a child for inappropriate behavior, and then the behavior decreases. It is important to know that, in many settings, it may be unethical or even illegal to use positive punishment.

Negative punishment is much more commonly used than positive punishment. It can be an effective and ethical way to decrease undesirable behavior. Negative punishment occurs when something is subtracted from the situation and the behavior decreases. Again, negative means subtracted, like in math. Negative does not mean bad. For example, a child refuses to complete a task and is put in time-out. That is, the enjoyable activities the child might otherwise be doing, such as interacting with other people or gaining attention, are subtracted from the environment. If refusing tasks then decreases in the future, this was an example of negative punishment. Another example of negative punishment is a child who is tantrumming and therefore is not allowed to watch television for the night. That is, television was subtracted from the environment. If tantrumming decreases in the future, this was an example of negative punishment. A third example is a child who “talks back” to her parent and then has her favorite toy taken away. If “talking back” decreases in the future, this was also an example of negative punishment. There is a handout available for download explaining the basic principles of behavior management.

The first step in managing behavior is to know exactly what behaviors you are trying to change. Start by choosing objective, measurable behaviors to track. For example, say that you want to increase the amount of time the child wears his hearing aids. Defining the behavior as “increase time spent wearing hearing aids” will make it easier to measure than defining the behavior as “learn to accept hearing aids.” You can measure the time that a hearing aid is in a child’s ear because this behavior is external and



objective. However, it is hard to measure an internal state like “acceptance.” Here is a tip for defining behavior: if you could capture the behavior on a video camera, it is probably objective and measurable. When possible, frame the behaviors in a way that focuses on increasing desirable behaviors rather than decreasing undesirable behaviors. It’s more effective to tell a child what he should be doing than to tell him what he shouldn’t be doing. Try to identify a desirable behavior to replace an undesirable behavior. Often, this is only a matter of how you look at the behavior. For example, a behavior such as “increase hearing aid use” focuses on increasing a desirable behavior, while a behavior such as “decrease removal of hearing aids” focuses on decreasing an undesirable behavior.

Now that you have chosen which behaviors you want to track, define the behaviors you want to increase. Be as specific as possible, so the child knows what to expect and so you know when the behavior has or has not occurred. For example, “staying on-task” is too broad of a definition to easily track. Try to narrow it down by asking yourself exactly you want to see. Include specific behaviors that make up the broader behavior of being “on task.” A specific behavior might be “complete assigned tasks without attempting to escape” or “remain in seat.” These behaviors are much more specific and easier to track. Also, don’t try to track too many behaviors. Between 1 and 3 behaviors is best.

Sometimes it is difficult to frame behaviors as increasing. In this case, it is okay to track behaviors you want to decrease. But remember, be specific. For example, you may want to decrease the number of tantrums a child has per session. This is an okay behavior to target, as long as you define what a tantrum is, so you will know it when you see it. A definition of a tantrum may include something like kicking, screaming, and task refusal. Behaviors that you have chosen to track are called “target behaviors.”

To decide what type of intervention to use, you will need to track the problem behavior that you have identified. This will help you understand the function of the behavior. It is only necessary to track the behaviors that you want to decrease.

You will be tracking three things for each behavior: the antecedent, the behavior, and the consequence. The antecedent is what happens before the behavior. The behavior is the actual behavior you’re trying to decrease, and the consequence is what happens after the behavior. These are known as the A-B-Cs of behavior and this type of data is known as A-B-C data. There is a tracking sheet available for download and use to record your A-B-C data.

A-B-C data that you collect before any behavioral intervention is called baseline data. You will need to collect baseline data in order to understand the function of the child’s behavior. Baseline data is a measure of how often the target behavior occurs without any intervention. Track target behaviors during a typical session or at home for a specific time period. If tracking behavior at home, it is best if you track behavior for the same amount of time and during the



same time of day each day. The amount of time you track the behavior will depend on how often the behavior occurs. You may choose a time when the behavior occurs the most, or a time that is convenient for you.

Collect baseline data for three to five days or sessions. While collecting baseline data, do not try to change the behaviors in any way. Do what you would normally do – that is, react in your normal fashion to the behaviors.

To know how to change the target behaviors, you must first understand the function of those behaviors. The function of a behavior is why a behavior occurs. In other words, what is the consequence that the behavior consistently produces?

There are three common functions of problem behaviors. The first function is attention-seeking. This is behavior that gains attention for the child. Don't forget, even so-called "bad" attention, such as scolding, can be reinforcing. The second function is gaining access to an item, such as a preferred toy or food. This is behavior that gets an item the child wants. The third function is escape or avoidance of a task or a demand. This is behavior that gets the child out of doing something that she does not want to do.

To understand the function of the target behaviors you are interested in changing, you will use the A-B-C data you collected. Based on these data, you should be able to see which antecedents and consequences tend to go with the target behavior. Using a chart, like this one, will help you identify the function of the behavior you are trying to change.

Once you have figured out the function of the target behavior, that is, once you know why the behavior is occurring, you can change the antecedents and consequences, which will then change the behavior. Changing behavior by changing environmental factors, such as antecedents and consequences, is called an intervention. You want to choose an intervention that matches the function you just identified.

You can affect behavior by setting up the environment, such as the home or the session room, for success. This means making sure the environment is set up to give the child the greatest chance of succeeding and behaving well.

For example, if the child is easily distracted from tasks by toys, remove toys from his or her sight except when using them as reinforcers. This will decrease the opportunities the child will have to become distracted. If the child is bothered by bright lights, dim the lights before the child enters the room. This will decrease the chance that the child will be bothered and act inappropriately. In both of these examples, there will be a better chance that the child will behave well from the beginning if some small adjustments are made. In general, if the child is



more likely to misbehave under certain circumstances, change the circumstances so misbehavior becomes less likely and good behavior becomes more likely. In other words, set yourself and the child up for success!

You will also want to make sure that the child is motivated to behave well. This is done through the use of motivating operations. Remember, motivating operations affect how well the reinforcer will work, by either increasing or decreasing the value of the consequence.

Another intervention you can use before a behavior ever occurs is to give effective commands. Effective commands increase the likelihood that a child will comply with a request. To give effective commands, follow these guidelines. Only give a command when you can follow through with it. Before giving a command, get the child's attention. Do this by saying the child's name and getting eye contact. Give commands the child is capable of completing, not tasks that are overly complicated or difficult. Give direct and simple commands, and give only one command at a time. Do not give a string of commands. Tell the child what to do rather than what not to do. Limit the use of explanations for your command. If you do give an explanation, make sure it is brief and give it either before the command or after the child complies with the command. There is a handout available for download that explains how to give effective commands. Let's watch an example of giving effective commands.

What if the child does not comply with your command? If the child does not comply, repeat the request one more time. If the child still does not comply, move to a consequence such as time-out. Do not repeat your request over and over – this is called nagging. Nagging will teach the child that there are no consequences for not complying and, eventually, the child will stop paying attention to your commands.

For reinforcement to be the most effective, it should occur immediately following the behavior. Reinforcement can be as simple as praising the child. For example, giving high fives, saying "good job!", or saying "thanks for listening!" are all examples of positive reinforcement. Other reinforcers may include toys, favorite foods, favorite activities, or taking a break from a task. When choosing a reinforcer, make sure it's something that the child actually likes. At first, reinforce the behavior every time it occurs. Once the behavior is occurring regularly, you can reduce how often you provide reinforcement.

Reducing the frequency of reinforcement is called thinning. When you thin reinforcement, do it slowly, and if the desirable behaviors start to decrease, then you should increase how often you provide reinforcement. Another thing to consider is how effective the reinforcer is. Often, as a child continues to receive the same reinforcer, she will tire of it. If the child seems to be losing interest in one reinforcer, switch to a different reinforcer. Children don't always like the same



things all the time. It's often necessary to switch reinforcers to keep the child's interest. Let's watch an example.

In example, the child and therapist are working on a task. To encourage the child to continue to cooperate, the therapist uses different kinds of positive reinforcement: positive reinforcement – verbal praise, negative reinforcement – a break to play with a toy, and after the break she gives him positive reinforcement – something to eat and verbal praise.

When you want to decrease undesirable behaviors, there are a few methods you can use. The method you choose will depend on the function of the behavior. Extinction is when a reinforcer is no longer presented after a behavior occurs. It is very important to know the function of the inappropriate behavior before using extinction. For attention-seeking behavior, extinction means ignoring the behavior. For behavior that occurs in order to gain access to an item, such as a toy or food, extinction means not giving the child the item she wants. For escape or avoidance of a non-preferred task, extinction means following through and requiring that the child complete the task and not get out of it. This last type of extinction is called escape extinction. In the case of escape or avoidance behavior, using the wrong type of extinction could actually make the problem worse. For example, if you were to ignore avoidance behavior, it could reinforce the behavior because the child would be getting what she wants – the opportunity to avoid the task without any consequences.

Ignoring is used when the function of the problem behavior is attention-seeking. Ignoring may seem simple, but it is often very difficult to do well. In order to ignore behavior effectively, follow these guidelines. When the problem behavior occurs, tell the child in a matter-of-fact voice, "I'm not going to talk to you when you do ____" and say what they did. Only do this once and avoid lecturing the child. Then remove all attention from the child. Do not talk or communicate with the child in any way, and avoid making eye contact with the child. To help you ignore, it can be good to engage in another task while ignoring, such as reading. Once the child stops the problem behavior, praise him as soon as he engages in appropriate behavior.

Escape extinction is used when the function of the problem behavior is escape or avoidance of a non-preferred task. When using escape extinction, do not allow the problem behavior to get the child out of the task. Make sure to follow through with your request for the child to complete the task. Do this by occasionally prompting the child until the child follows through with the task. No matter what, stick with it and do not give in to the child's attempts to get out of the task. As soon as the child completes the task, praise him. Sometimes, it may be necessary to praise the child along the way for completing just part of the task. If so, still require that he complete the entire task. Escape extinction often results in an extinction burst, which can be very difficult for the adult to deal with.



An extinction burst occurs when a behavior that has been placed on extinction, temporarily increases in frequency or intensity before it decreases. That is, the behavior gets worse before it gets better. If an extinction burst happens, it does not mean that your intervention is not working – it means that it is! Continue with extinction and the behavior will eventually decrease. It is very important not to reinforce behavior by giving in during an extinction burst. This will only make things worse by teaching the child that he must intensify his problem behavior in order for you to eventually give in.

Another technique is differential reinforcement. Remember this is when you combine positive reinforcement with extinction. When you use differential reinforcement, it is important to think about the function of the problem behavior. For example, when a child tries to use inappropriate behavior to get out of a task, teaching the child an appropriate behavior that would get them out of the task or delay the task is a good idea. For example, a child saying “Can I please take a break?” is better than a child tantrumming. When a child appropriately says she does not want to do a task, this allows the adult to negotiate a work and break schedule for the child. For example, the adult might say “If you complete these two exercises, then you can have a 5-minute break.” The break then becomes a reinforcer for completing the exercises. Let’s watch an example.

Another way to decrease problem behavior is through the use of time-out. If you use time-out, you will want to combine it with positive attention for appropriate behaviors outside of time-out (this is called time-in). Many adults say that they’ve tried time-out in the past and that it hasn’t worked. This is often because they have not used time-out in the most effective way. One thing to remember is that you should not use time-out if the function of the problem behavior is escape or avoidance. In this case, time-out will only reinforce the problem behavior. In order to use time-out effectively, follow these guidelines. Give an appropriate command. Wait ten seconds, and if the child does not comply with your command, restate the command with a warning that she will go to time-out if she does not comply. For example, if the command is to clean up toys, you could say, “If you don’t clean up your toys, you will go to time-out.” Wait ten seconds, and if the child still does not comply, send her to time-out. Begin by saying, “You did not do what I asked, so you must go to time-out.” Take the child to a predetermined time-out location. This location should be away from preferred activities such as television, other children, or toys. Place the child in an adult-sized chair in the time-out location and say, “Stay there until I tell you to get out.”

While the child is in time-out, do not give the child any attention. Do not talk to the child, remind the child why she is in time-out, respond to the child’s pleas, or make eye contact with the child. The child should stay in time-out for 1 minute for each year of age, but no more than 5 minutes. You may need to work up to 5 minutes, beginning with shorter amounts of time. Start this by letting the child out of time-out once she has been quiet for ten to thirty seconds. This means that the child has not cried, whined, screamed, or made any other noises or



engaged in any inappropriate behaviors during this time. After the child gets out of time-out, repeat your original command. This is important because we do not want the child to learn that time-out means she can get out of a task. If the child complies with your command, praise her. If the child does not comply, repeat time-out. Because you may end up repeating time-out a number of times until the child complies, make sure not to give the child a command unless you are in a situation in which you can follow through.

The most effective way to use time-out is to make sure the child also has time-in. Time-in is when the environment is fun and reinforcing – the child is receiving attention, praise for good behavior, has toys to play with, and has fun activities to do. Therefore, being removed from this fun environment is punishing. If the environment you remove the child from during time-out is not a fun environment, then time-out could actually function as a reinforcer (escape or avoidance of an unpleasant situation). There is a handout available for download describing how to use time-out effectively.

This section provides some behavioral examples.

When a child repeatedly uses problem behaviors such as crying, tantrumming, and refusal to avoid doing certain tasks, do not let the problem behaviors get the child out of the task.

Continue to prompt the child to complete the task in a neutral tone of voice; that is, don't sound angry or overly-emotional. Minimize giving the child attention and minimize your own emotional behavior between prompts. Prompt the child to complete the task until the child either completes it or uses some form of appropriate behavior to ask for a break. If the child completes the task, reinforce the child's good behavior. If the child asks for a break in an appropriate way, reinforce that behavior with a short break or negotiate a work and break schedule.

If the child keeps taking out his or her hearing aids, prompt the child to put them back in. If necessary, put them in for the child, giving the child as little attention while doing so as possible. If the child wears the hearing aids, even for a short amount of time, reinforce the behavior by providing praise, such as saying "Good job wearing your hearing aids!" or by giving the child a favorite food or item, such as an M&M or a sticker. Once the child is wearing the hearing aids for a short amount of time, slowly increase the required time he or she must wear them before you provide reinforcement. In other words, shape longer durations of wearing the hearing aids. Make sure not to provide the child with attention for taking the hearing aids out, as this could actually reinforce the behavior.

If the child has a tantrum, ignore the tantrum. Do not look at the child, try to calm the child down, talk to the child, or give the child anything, such as toys or food. If the child is tantrumming because he wants a specific item, it is very important not to give him the item. Otherwise, he will learn that tantrumming is how he can get what he wants. Once the child has calmed down on his or her own, wait a minute or two, and then prompt the child to ask nicely for what he wants. If the child asks for food or an item in an appropriate way, give the child the



food or item if it is a reasonable request. If it is not a reasonable request, then tell the child no and stick to it – do not give in. If the child asks for a break from a task in an appropriate way, give him a short break, and then require that he continue with the task. Only reinforce appropriate behavior. Do not reinforce tantrums!

If the child is not paying attention during a task, get eye contact, say the child's name, and give an effective command. If the child does the task for a short amount of time, reinforce the behavior by providing praise, such as saying "Good job doing your work!" or giving the child a favorite food or item, like an M&M or a sticker. Once the child is doing the task for a short amount of time, slowly increase the required time he or she must do the task before providing reinforcement. In other words, shape the behavior. Avoid nagging, which is asking the child to do something over and over without providing a consequence. Instead, ask the child once and then reinforce good behavior.