



Making Sense of Challenging Behaviors

Jonathan Tarbox

Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD)

Christine Peterson

Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities (SCDD)

Monroe County Lecture Series

May 16, 2007

Sound Familiar ??

Tantrums at bedtime

Screams for hours

Hits the siblings

Bolts away from the yard

Mouths everything.. Everything

Refuses to eat at the table

Tears up the living room



Goals for Tonight

- Understanding Behavior:
 - The importance of **function**
 - The role of **communication**
- Making a Game-plan
 - **Assessing** the situation (setting events, triggers, function..)
 - Implementing a “**function-based**” plan
 - Don’t forget to **Teach skills...**



Understanding Behavior

What is Function?

- **Topography** = form = physical characteristics of the behavior = *what it looks, sounds... like.*
- **Function** = maintaining consequences = characteristics of the interaction between the behavior and the environment = why do we do what we do = *cause of the behavior.*

The A-B-Cs

- What do the ABCs stand for?
 - **Antecedent - Behavior - Consequence**
- What is an **Antecedent**?
 - *Events that **precede** behavior* are called antecedents
- What is a **Behavior**?
 - *Anything anyone says or does* is a behavior
- What is a **Consequence**?
 - *Events that **follow** behavior* are called consequences

The A-B-Cs

- Why do we care about **Antecedents**?
 - Antecedents often “**set the stage**” for problem behavior to occur (aka – the ‘trigger’)
- Why do we care about **Consequences**?
 - Consequences of problem behavior frequently serve to **represent the function** (aka - it “maintains” (reinforces) the problem behavior).

Types of Function (aka 'reinforcement')

- So, what are the primary types functions that maintain (reinforce) problematic behavior?
 - **Attention** (aka “pushing my buttons”)
 - Kids don't always differentiate 'good' attention (“Nice job, Sally!”) from 'bad' (“Knock it OFF!”)
 - **Tangible** (“please please please please?”)
 - Access to a preferred toy, food, video, whatever..

Types of Function (aka 'reinforcement')

- **Escape** from demand or attention (“smoke and mirrors”)
 - Consider: How often does the problem behavior inadvertently result in the student not having to “do the thing” (eat, bathe, come inside, play with others)...?
- **Automatic** (“it just feels right”)
 - The reinforcement for this behavior is not related to external factors, rather the behavior itself is reinforcing – often more physical in nature



The Role of Communication

- Along with understanding function, consider:

“How is **behavior** like a *form of language*?” ...



How is this like language?

Example: negative reinforcement (escape from demands)

Jacob hates baths. Parent says "Time to take a bath"



Jacob cries and throws himself on the floor



Jacob gets to avoid the bath for five more minutes

How is this like language? What is Jacob saying by crying and throwing himself on the floor? How about "Can I have five more minutes Mom?"



How is this like language?

Example: positive reinforcement (tangible)

Jenny is playing with her favorite toy. Parent says “okay, time to put away the toy”



Jenny starts whining



Parent lets Jenny have the toy a little longer

How is this like language? What is Jenny saying by whining? How about “I don’t want to put my toy away, can I play a little longer?”



How is this like language?

Example: positive reinforcement (tangible)
negative reinforcement (escape)

Johnny is playing outside. Parent says "Time to come inside and clean your room"



Johnny runs away



Johnny gets to play outside a little longer AND doesn't have to clean his room yet

How is this like language? What is Johnny saying by running away? How about "I want to keep playing AND I don't want to clean my room"



Challenging Behavior: Function of Parent's Behavior

**Jacob hates
baths. Parent
says "Time to
take a bath"**



**Jacob cries
and throws
himself on
the floor**



**Parent gets
to avoid
Jacob crying
and gets
some peace
and quite for
five minutes
by delaying
bath for five
minutes**



Challenging Behavior: Function of Parent's Behavior

Jenny is playing with her favorite toy. Parent says "okay, time to put away the toy"



Jenny starts whining



Parent avoids seeing Jenny unhappy by letting Jenny have the toy a little longer



Challenging Behavior: Function of Parent's Behavior

Johnny is playing outside. Parent says "Time to come inside and clean your room"



Johnny runs away



Parent gets to see Johnny have fun outside and gets to avoid the "fight" of chasing Johnny and getting him inside by not chasing him for a while



Making a Game-Plan

Step 1: Assess the situation

- **Observe** the behavior from the perspective of the **A-B-Cs** – what's happening prior to (**antecedent**/trigger) and following (**consequence**/reinforcement) the **behavior**
 - **Setting events** = additional factors such as sleep deprivation, hunger, illness – that increase the likelihood of a challenging behavior
- **Track behavior**: though difficult, it helps greatly to track behaviors, in order to identify the function and to develop an effective plan

Making a Game-Plan

Step 2: Develop a “function-based” plan

- Don’t serve the function through problematic behavior
- Decide what you want the child to “do” instead in order to get the “thing”
- Begin to teach the desired replacement behavior
- Provide lots of access to the “thing” when child is engaging in the appropriate replacement behavior
 - Remember to “shape” the desired behavior by reinforcing approximations along the way

Function-based Interventions

Non-examples

1. Time-out for a child who is looking to escape a demand
2. Yelling at a child who is misbehaving for attention
3. Giving desired toy to a child who is tantrumming

Examples

1. Giving child who is looking to escape a demand a break when they ask
2. Ignoring “misbehavior” for attention and giving lots of when they are appropriate
3. Withhold desired toy when child is tantrumming and providing toy when they ask

Making a Game-Plan

Step 3: Don't Forget to *Teach* ..

- **Communication:** the better able your child is to communicate accurately and effectively, the less they will have to rely on challenging behaviors
- **“Replacement” skills:** in order to truly eliminate a behavior, the child must develop the more appropriate skill to replace the behavior of concern

Examples of Replacement Skills

Behavior of Concern

- Mouths toys
- Hits sibling to get toy
- Tantrums at bedtime

Ex. Replacement Skill

- Develops appropriate toy play
- Learns to communicate: “Can I have a turn?”
- Establishes a consistent nighttime routine

Proactive Supports

- **Help your child to use communication systems at home (pecs, dynamite, sign, etc.)**
 - Often they get used to using them at school but not at home; use at home can decrease frustration... and challenging behaviors
- **Have a schedule in place**
 - Having a schedule at home can actually promote flexibility... and decrease challenging behaviors
- **Establish consistent routines around daily activities**
 - Consistency = understanding = less anxiety... and decreases challenging behaviors

Pop Quiz

- What do we mean by the term **“function”**?
 - (hint: it’s related to a “Wh” question)
- What are the **A-B-Cs** and **why do we care**?
 - (hint: the a-b-c’s help to identify _____)
- What role does **communication** play in understanding behavior?
- How does understanding **function** relate to **developing an effective plan** of action?
- What role do **replacement** behaviors play in minimizing challenging behaviors?



In Summary

- **“Knowledge is Power”**
- The more accurately you *understand* the behavior of concern, the better able you will be to intervene effectively and efficiently:
 - **Observe and track the behavior**
 - **Identify a function**
 - **Develop a function-based plan**
 - **Don't forget to Teach replacement behaviors**

Now you're....

Making Sense of Challenging Behavior!