**Antecedent Strategies to Promote Positive Behavior**

**Background**

When we talk about “behavior,” we are referring to any action that we do, such as eating sleeping, talking, hitting, not complying, laughing etc... Whatever response happens after a behavior tends to grow it or diminish it. The increase or decrease of the behavior is dependent on the consequence it receives from its environment. For example, if I go into work in the morning and say good morning and my coworkers respond to my greeting, I will be more likely to say hello in future and similar situations because my greeting was reinforced by my coworkers’ response. Now the opposite is true, if I say hello to my coworkers in the morning and no one responds, over time I will be less inclined to greet those people.

Early language and communication development depends on the responses and inputs of the people who care for the young child. Sometimes children who have limited communication skills use challenging behavior to tell the adults around them what they need. Often a tantrum, grabbing hitting, running away, ignoring, etc. has a communicative purpose or **function.** All behavior has a function. Behavior usually helps people get something or get away from something.There are four common functions for behavior:

* **Obtain access to attention:** A child can say, “Look at me,” or tap an adult on the shoulder or raise their hand to get an adult’s attention. If they don’t have those skills, they may hit, bite, or throw something at an adult to get their attention. Both positive and negative behaviors can serve the same function.
* **Obtain access to tangibles:** A child can ask or point for a toy or can grab or hit a peer to get a toy.
* **Obtain automatic or sensory stimulation:** Rocking, chewing objects, picking skin, etc. provides the child with a sensation that they like.
* **Avoid a non-preferred task or activity:** A child can ask to do part of their homework or ask for help before starting the assignment. The child also can throw a tantrum, ask to go to the bathroom, or claim to be hungry to avoid doing the homework.
* **Escape an activity or engagement that started and became intolerable:** A child goes to circle time and engages for a while, then gets bored. They can either ask for a break or an alternate activity, or they can melt down, throw objects, cry, run away, tease a peer etc. to get out of the circle time.

In all the examples above, the child either communicated functionally or through challenging behavior to obtain or avoid something. The objective is to teach children to “tell” us what they need in a universally understandable way that poses no harm to the child and/or others.

The best strategy to mitigate challenging behavior is to prevent it from happening in the first place. These are called antecedent-based interventions because they happen before the behaviors. We use strategies to prevent challenging behavior by changing the environment. The antecedents involve both the physical environment or the interactions that happen before a challenging behavior occurs. By changing the antecedent, or what happens before the challenging behavior, we often intercept these behaviors and provide/teach a functional replacement to them.

**Antecedent Strategies**

* **Structured schedule**:Create and implement a daily schedule of all major activities that the child will engage in. Use pictures to represent each activity. The schedule should be present at all times, and the child can be reminded to check the schedule before all major transitions.
* **Priming**: Prime your child about what is going to happen next and describe the expected behavior. For example, “When the bell rings, we use quiet feet to stand in line.”
  + Use a visual schedule to help the child predict the next activity.
  + Use timers and verbal warnings to announce the end of one activity and the start of the next.
  + Create a set of rules with your child and go over them before the start of the activity. This sets up the expectations of the day.
  + Scripted story: Read a scripted story with your child in the beginning of each day or before the activity and then reference the story throughout the day to establish the desired behaviors.
* **First-then**: Introduce a less preferred activity, then reinforce the child with access to a preferred one. First finish your breakfast, then playdough. First sit for five minutes, then break. Make sure to follow through and provide the reward or highly desired item or activity after completing the first demand.
* **Environmental enrichment**: Provide free access to highly preferred stimuli while the individual is engaged in the non-preferred task that usually evokes challenging behavior. Keep in mind it must be something that does not interfere with the child’s ability to complete the task.
* **Providing choices**: Offering a student two or more options and allowing the student to independently select a choice allows the child to have control over their environment. Choices can be used to encourage and support appropriate behaviors and academic growth.
* **Shared control**: Shared control refers to a balanced interaction in which each partner has some control or choice over the activity. For example, the child may select the material or activity, but the adult may require a communicative behavior before handing the object to the learner or continuing the interaction. The child may be able to play with the material or engage in the activity for 30 seconds or so, but the adult may also take turns with the object or decide when to momentarily stop the activity to elicit a response from the child. This is in contrast to adult control, in which the adult is making all the decisions about what the learner has to do and what rewards they receive. In shared control, the adult follows the learner’s lead to insert teaching opportunities within an activity that the student is motivated to engage in.
* **Behavioral momentum/high-probably request sequence**: Present the child with a series of directions that they are likely to perform (i.e., high-p command) delivered immediately before a request that the child is lesslikely to perform (i.e., low-p command). *Example:* A teacher can ask a student to give her/him five, touch nose, clap hands just before directing him to relinquish a toy.  Using a series of high-p requests builds behavioral momentum to increase the probability of compliance with the low-p request.
* **Task variation:** To encourage attention and increase momentum in task completion, ensure the child has a variety of tasks with which to engage in. Intersperse non-preferred activities or new tasks within preferred or mastered ones.
* **Follow through**: Always follow through with the demands placed on the child.  If he is having a tantrum, wait until he calms, then present the demand again and follow through. If it’s apparent that it’s not going to be possible to get him to follow the full direction, lessen the demand (e.g., instead of picking up all the cars, pick two, or offer to help complete the task). This strategy is very important for the child so that they understand that engaging in challenging behavior will not get them out required tasks.
* **Reducing tasks:** Accept approximations to desired behaviors and modify the way in which tasks are presented to decrease motivation to escape them. Whenever possible, alter tasks so the topic, setting, or way in which they are presented are more preferred by the individual. For example, after destroying a friend’s block tower, if the child refuses to rebuild it, you can modify the demand and say, “I will help you, you can pick up two blocks and I will pick up one.”
* **Demand fading:** Start small and build your child’s tolerance to activities and requests. Decrease the amount or frequency of demands that are placed on the child to a level that will not evoke challenging behavior. Contingent on stable, low rates of the challenging behavior, gradually increase the amount or frequency of demands, until an amount is reached that is developmentally appropriate.
* **Redirection:** When the child is unable to or refuses to be on task, redirect them to the original task using verbal or physical prompts and use the first-then rule.
* **Non-contingent reinforcement:** To remove the need for the child to engage attention-seeking behavior, provide frequent positive attention to the child regardless of what they are doing. Enrich their environment with activities and toys they like. Some ways to provide this form of reinforcement:
  + You can give the child leadership roles and jobs, such as line leader.
  + Sit next to the child in a large group setting and give them descriptive praise.
  + Give them access to their toy, blankie, playdough, etc. while engaging in a less preferred activity.
* **Differential reinforcement of alternative behavior**: Reward the behaviors and skills that you want to increase and ignore/redirect those you want to reduce or get rid of.
  + Grant the child access or escape immediately after “using their words” or when functionally communicating their needs (even when prompted). Initially give the child access or escape 100% of the time to establish the replacement skills.
  + Give the child a lot of positive attention/praise using high affect when they exhibit desired behaviors (e.g., sitting and waiting).
  + Do not respond to the challenging behavior that you are trying to replace. Exhibit neutral affect and avoid giving attention or tangible items to reward the challenging behavior.
* **Functional communication training:** Frequently prompt the child to request attention from others and give lots of positive attention immediately when they request it. If possible, prompting must be done before the challenging behavior occurs, not as a reaction to it. Also, frequently prompt the child to request preferred items or activities and give it to them immediately when they request them. In the case of teaching the child to tolerate non-preferred activities, frequently prompt the child to ask for a break from the task, a decrease in the amount of the task, or help with the task.
* **Response effort:** Make it harder for your child to engage in challenging behavior by using all the above proactive strategies. Understand your child’s needs, prepare their environment for success, and try to understand the function of their challenging behavior and find the replacement that you want to teach.