BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT AT HOME

UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF BEHAVIOR

BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

PREVENTING BEHAVIORS

UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF BEHAVIOR

There is a reason for everything, including your child's behavior! The *function*, or reason, for behavior can be difficult to determine, especially when the behavior is difficult to manage. Often times when we attempt to correct a child's behavior, we try to correct the *form* of the behavior, or the behavior itself. However, if we do not also think of the behavior's *function*, the intervention we try will likely not work. Read the example below.

Sandra's 8-year-old son Alex struggles with getting ready in the morning for school. From the moment he gets out of bed, he purposefully moves slowly and sometimes even throws tantrums before leaving the house. It has gotten to the point where Sandra is getting in trouble at her work for being late because she cannot get her son out of the house on time. Sandra has spent hours reading blogs online from other mothers whose children also struggle with their morning routines. She has taken their advice and has tried using sticker charts, timers, and even bribing Alex with money to persuade him to get ready for school...but nothing has worked. Lately, she has found herself becoming so frustrated that she "loses it" and yells at Alex, which makes him cry and ultimately makes them even later for school and work. Sandra is now feeling hopeless and like a "bad parent." She feels alone in her struggle and can't help but think that it shouldn't be this hard.

Does this sound familiar to you? Have you spent countless hours researching different strategies to correct your child's behavior, only to have none of them work? Have you ever reached the point where you "lose it" and yell at your child, or find yourself feeling alone in your struggle to help them? If so, know that you are not alone and that many parents feel the same way as you! It is our hope that this text can help you figure out the appropriate interventions to help your child. In doing so, it is important to first know (1) the difference between the form and function of behavior, and (2) the types of behavior functions. Continue reading to finally learn what you need to know to manage your child's behavior at home!

IN ORDER TO DETERMINE HOW TO MANAGE YOUR CHILD'S BEHAVIOR, YOU MUST FIRST DETERMINE WHY THE BEHAVIOR IS OCCURRING.

FORM VS. FUNCTION

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

The form and function of behavior are two important, but different things. In order to understand how to manage your child's behavior, you must understand both its form and its function.

FORM

The form of behavior refers to the actual behavior itself, or what the behavior *looks like*. In the example you just read, the form of Alex's behavior would be moving slowly and tantruming. When Sandra attempted to correct her son's behavior, she considered its form (researching other children who struggle to get ready in the morning), but not its function.

FUNCTION

The function of behavior is the reason why it is occurring. You can also think of function by thinking about what the child is *gaining or avoiding* as a result of the behavior. In Alex's case, his behavior's function, though Sandra did not know this, was to avoid going to school on time. Part of his teacher's morning routine was to give your partner a high-five, but Alex's parter high-fived too hard and hurt his hand. Had Sandra known the function of her son's behavior, she could have spoken with the teacher about it and easily solved the problem. However, because she did not understand the function of her son's behavior, none of the strategies she tried worked.

OTHER VARIABLES TO CONSIDER

There are many other variables to consider when determining the function of behavior. Remember, the same form of behavior may have different functions. For example, a child who hits her brother (form) may do so for attention, to get something from him, or to get him to leave her alone. Also remember that the same functions of behavior may have different forms. A child who wants attention (function) may achieve this goal by yelling, tantruming, hitting/kicking, and more. This is why you must also take into account the environment, timing,

FOCUS ON THE 'WHY' AND THE SOLUTION WILL FOLLOW

KNOW YOUR ACRONYMS: EAT

THE FUNCTION OF BEHAVIOR CAN BE BROKEN DOWN INTO 3 CATEGORIES:

ESCAPE

- The behavior allows the child to avoid something that is undesirable
- *Example: A child crying to avoid doing her chores.*

ATTENTION

- Interaction with adults or peers is gained by the behavior.
- *Example: A child making silly noises to get others to laugh.*

TANGIBLE

- Access to an item, person, or activity is gained as a result of the behavior.
- *Example: A child throws a tantrum when his toy it taken, but stops when he is given it back.*

ANTECEDENTS & CONSEQUENCES

It is also important to account for the environment when attempting to understand your child's behavior.

What happens *before* the behavior (the antecedent)? Have you noticed the behavior only happens after something else? For example, does your child only tantrum after you grab your keys to leave for work? If so, you leaving would be considered the antecedent.

What happens *after* the behavior (the consequence)? How do you (or the environment) respond to the behavior? For example, do you attempt to soothe your child when they tantrum? If so, your soothing would be considered the consequence of your child's behavior.

IF ALL BEHAVIOR IS A FORM OF COMMUNICATION, WHAT IS YOUR CHILD SAYING TO YOU?

WHAT IS REINFORCEMENT?

POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE VS. INTERMITTENT

All reinforcement refers to something that increases the likelihood of a behavior. You likely already use reinforcement with your child everyday!

POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Positive reinforcement increases the frequency of a behavior by adding (+) something desirable to the equation. For example, when you tell your child they can have a piece of candy if they are quiet in the store, you are using positive reinforcement!

NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT

Negative reinforcement increases the likelihood of a behavior by removing (-) something undesirable from the equation. For example, when you tell your child that if they finish their dinner they do not have to help wash dishes, you are using negative reinforcement because you are removing something your child finds undesirable (washing dishes) in order to increase the behavior of finishing their dinner.

INTERMITTENT REINFORCEMENT

Intermittent reinforcement refers to the fact that a behavior is most likely to form when it is only rewarded *sometimes*. This is the idea casinos are built on and one of the reasons for gambling addictions. Though you may not get rewarded every time you play the slot machine, the fact that you get rewarded *sometimes* makes you hopeful and keeps you coming back! The same is true for children, which is why it is crucial to be consistent with your expectations. If you tell your child "no" and then later give in and say "yes" after they cry, they will be much more likely to cry the next time you tell them "no" in the future because they have learned that *sometimes* it works.

ESCAPE

We all know children try to avoid things they do not like, and we call this avoidance *escape*. An obvious form of escape that you may be familiar with is *elopement*, or running away. Children who run out of the room the second you tell them it's bath time are quite obviously escaping the situation. However, remember that escape is a *function* of behavior that can be achieved through many forms, so even though your child's behavior might not *look* like escape, it still could be.

What do children try to escape? The most obvious thing children try to escape is an undesirable *task* such as chores or homework. Has your child ever gone "missing" when it is time to do the dishes? Escape! However, children also try to escape *situations* and *people*. The child who becomes suspiciously sick before going to summer camp may be escaping the unfamiliarity of a new situation. The child who gets sent to his room for pulling his sister's hair may be trying to get some alone time!

There are many ways to determine if your child's behavior is a result of escape. One way is to consider the antecedent and consequence of their behavior. What happened before the behavior occurred? What happened afterwards? What strategy did you use to correct the behavior? Sometimes the "punishment" you use is exactly what the child wanted in the first place!

However, no matter what the form of the behavior is, there are certain strategies you can use when your child is attempting to escape situations, tasks, or people. Continue reading to see what they are!

ESCAPE. ATTENTION. TANGIBLE.

MARIA

AN EXAMPLE OF ESCAPE

Maria does not like math. Her mother sits down with her at the kitchen table to help her with her math homework and Maria begins to cry. Her mother tells her that crying will not help the situation and that she has to do her homework anyway. Maria then, distraught, grabs her pencil and throws it at her mother. The pencil hits Maria's mother in the eye, which angers her. Her mother scolds her for doing something so dangerous and then sends her to time-out.

Maria's behavior is an example of escape. First, she attempted to cry to escape doing her math homework. When crying did not work, she then threw her pencil. When her mother sent her to time-out, Maria actually achieved what she wanted in the first place...escape.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES

Below are some strategies you can use at home to manage your child's escape behavior. When choosing a strategy, first ask yourself what your child is escaping. This will allow you to choose the most appropriate intervention.

- **USING A 'FIRST, THEN' VISUAL AID**
  - Whether you write it down on a piece of paper or use a professional picture chart, using a "first, then" model can help your child remember that a favorable activity is following an undesirable activity (Ex. *First* you clean your room, *then* you can play video games)
- **USING A VISUAL SCHEDULE**
  - Make a schedule for your child to use as a reference throughout the day. Make sure to include activities he or she will find fun to maintain motivation!
- **OFFERING CHOICES**
  - Giving your child choices can help them feel like they have control. For example, if your child does not want to brush her teeth in the morning, you can say, "You can brush your teeth now and then watch TV until we leave, or you can wait 5 minutes in your room and then go brush your teeth, but you cannot not brush your teeth. Which do you choose?"
- **FOLLOWING THROUGH**
  - The best strategy to use when managing your child's behavior is consistent follow through. Remember what you read about intermittent reinforcement? When your child learns that *sometimes* you will let them escape, they will be much more likely to continue with their maladaptive behavior.