

COMPASS Information Series: Behavior Management

Helping Children with Autism Learn How to Behave

Children with autism present special challenges to parents and those who interact with them and teach them. Learning social behavior and learning to cope in a complex social world is difficult for people with autism. Understanding the perspective of a person with autism so you can more effectively help with confusion, anxiety, refusal, or anger is also difficult.

What is behavior management?

Behavior management is a systematic way of increasing or decreasing behaviors. It involves what we do to teach appropriate behaviors. Sometimes without knowing it we fall into patterns that keep a behavior that we may not like at high levels. At other times we fail to pay attention to behaviors that we would like to see the child use more. Discipline is all that we do to help a child behave in appropriate ways.

What factors put the child with autism at risk of using inappropriate behaviors?

Factors that are part of the disability of autism must be understood for each child.

These may include:

- Not understanding social interaction patterns; having trouble understanding the perspective and motives of others and what other people think and feel
- Relying on routine and not understanding events that are out of order
- Having difficulty expressing wants, needs, and emotions
- Having a restricted number of interests and activities
- Not understanding or becoming anxious about time; waiting, hurrying
- Reacting to environmental noise, sights, smells, movements, and expectations
- Taking longer to process, organize, and retrieve information
- Having trouble applying learning across settings and people
- Having uneven development across and within skill areas
- Having motor planning or other motor problems
- Holding onto familiar ways, objects, interests, and people

What factors other than the disability put the child at risk for developing behavior problems?

People who misunderstand the child's problems

Too often people make judgments without really understanding the child's needs. Sometimes parents are blamed or given suggestions by people who really don't know about autism or the child. Sometimes people assume that this is a child who needs to be controlled rather than a child who is having trouble understanding and interacting with his environment and the people in it.

Inconsistency

Different rules and approaches from day to day, from place to place, or from person to person cause extra confusion to the child with autism. The child needs as much consistency in rules and expectations presented in concrete and understandable ways as possible.

Confusing, disorganized environments

Too much movement, clutter, noise, visual stimuli, smells, or general chaos will likely overload the child with autism who isn't able to screen out the stimuli and focus on what he is supposed to pay attention to.

Changes

New shoes, cars, or eating utensils, rearranged furniture, a different route, spots on clothing, a person entering a room, or any number of changes may upset the child with autism. Family members who are aware of the child's needs can plan smoother acceptance of changes through preparation and prior, accurate information.

Punitive approaches without the positive teaching

Children with autism often have difficulty connecting consequence to behavior unless it becomes part of a consistent plan. Most are not able to have the impulse control to stop from engaging in a strong behavior when told to do so. They must be taught the skills needed to engage in appropriate behavior. Erratic punitive approaches erode trust and rely on external means to "control" behavior.

Within child factors

Health issues like allergies, colds, constipation, toothaches, ulcers, seizures, and any and all health issues must be ruled out as factors that may be contributing to difficult behaviors. Additionally, everyday issues like being tired, hungry, or needing a hug or time alone can aggravate behavioral problems. Investigate sensory difficulties and how these may change from time to time and place to place.

Steps to Take in Developing a Plan to Teach Your Child with Autism Socially Appropriate Behavior

1. Decide what you want your child to do. What really matters to you?

- *Decide what behaviors are absolutely necessary for your child's safety.* Some of these might include staying within boundaries, staying away from hot things, holding someone's hand, keeping inedibles out of her mouth, stopping when told to do so, staying away from knives, and staying by your side in a parking lot.
- *Decide what behaviors are essential to the well being of the family.* Some of these might be staying in bed at night, using words or pictures rather than yelling, keeping things in place, and refraining from hitting or biting.
- *Decide what behaviors are needed to be able to be with peers successfully.* These might be sitting with other children, doing what other children do, staying within boundaries, attending in a small group.
- *Decide what behaviors are needed to take part in family activities.* These might include going to the store or out to eat at a fast food restaurant, riding in a car in the car seat, or watching a brother's baseball game.

- Consider what behaviors will help your child keep learning. These might include attending to certain activities, learning independent skills like toileting and dressing, and following specific directions.
- Consider what behaviors will help your child feel good about him/herself. These might include painting pictures, climbing and going down a slide, helping Mom, passing out food to others, or being independent.

2. Decide what rules govern your home and family and how these translate to what you want your child to learn? The more consistently rules are applied across settings and people the easier they will be for your child to learn and abide by. Try to answer these questions as you make these decisions:

- Do these rules always apply?
- Do these rules change in different settings or with different people?
- Do they change if people visit or children are present?
- Are they concrete and specific?
- Does your child understand them?
- Is your child reinforced for following them?

Examples:

Eat sitting down. (Where? How long?)

Be nice to each other. (How?)

Use words or inside voice. (Where? When? What is an inside voice?)

Keep shoes and socks on. (Where? When?)

Hug only family and close friends. (How are these defined?)

Wear a coat when Mommy wears a coat.

Cross a street with someone else, holding that person's hand.

3. State what you want your child to do in a positive way. It is easier to state what you DON'T want your child to do, rather than what you DO want your child to do. We are all used to saying "NO" and "DONT". We have to teach ourselves to state positively what we want a child to do. Teach by gesturing and showing your child what TO DO. He may not really know, remember, or be able to do it himself at that moment. Use objects and demonstrations to direct and redirect. Many children will stop momentarily at hearing a "NO" but then do not change their behavior. Some children become anxious and behavior escalates when hearing a sharp, "NO"

Examples:

"Sit at the table," rather than, "Don't run around with food".

"Shoes on then go outside," rather than, "Don't go outside with bare feet."

"Put the blocks in the box," rather than, "Don't throw blocks".

"Give that to me," rather than, "Don't put that in your mouth."(include gesture)

"Lunch first then outside," rather than, "No, we can't go outside now."

4. Plan PROACTIVE teaching rather than concentrate on consequences after the behavior occurs. Put most of your effort into teaching in a proactive way. Teach your child to stop at a curb, to hold your hand while crossing a street, or to stand by you and it will save much grief and time in the future.

Some general teaching strategies include:

- Get your child's attention by using her name, being in close proximity, being at eye level and showing and stating clearly and precisely what to do. *Example: "Jody, stop. Hold Mommy's hand." (Put your hand out.)*
- Give your child time to respond. Pause and wait before you repeat the direction or intervene with physical assistance. Be close so you can assure that the direction is followed.
- Be consistent. Consistency helps your child learn and helps the world become more predictable. It's impossible to be consistent all the time, but an effort needs to be made to be as consistent as possible. Try to apply rules at all times in the same way.
- Make the world as predictable as possible by giving accurate information ahead of time in a way that your child can understand. Your child anticipates from whatever his past experiences have been. He needs to have prior information about changes in routines, routes, or schedules. He may also need to review this information several times through the use of visual means paired with verbal.

5. Try to figure out what the behavior means from your child's point of view.

This isn't easy since most children with autism view situations quite differently from most people. It's difficult for adults to take the perspective of any child. Becoming a good observer and putting together events and behaviors will help. If possible keep notes and charts on specific, difficult behaviors.

Examples:

Child hits baby. Possible reasons: *Baby is crying and the noise bothers her, baby is sitting on Mom's lap and the child wants to sit there, child wants to interact with the baby but doesn't know how, Child want to see the baby cry.*

Child won't sit in the cart at the grocery store. Possible reasons: *He doesn't like the feel of the cart or the height may be too high, he feels confined, he wants to run, he doesn't like the store with all the stimuli, he has trouble sitting beyond a certain time, he wants certain objects in the store and can't get them when in the cart.*

6. Reinforce your child. Motivate your child to use the behaviors that are acceptable and you want to see increase.

Children need to know they are doing what we want them to do through reinforcement and encouragement. Many children rely heavily on social reinforcement like smiles, words, touches and hugs. For many children with autism these are often not particularly effective, although we continue to pair a smile and word of praise with other reinforcers. Children with autism may need sensory items and experiences as motivators. Teach the format "Do this..... Then you may do that." Use what your child enjoys as reinforcement.

Examples:

Learn to eat with a spoon by eating a favorite food like ice cream.

Sit at the table to eat a favorite food.

Put on shoes to go outside.

Get in the car seat then hold the favorite sensory toy.

Hang your coat up then listen to the music.

7. Teach your child by using methods that meet your child’s learning needs and style. These may include:

- Allowing time to watch. Encourage your child to watch.
- Allowing time to get used to a situation through short exposure, repeated trials, and rehearsal with picture sequences.
- Making sure your child knows and sees the sequence of events.
- Making sure your child knows the exact meaning of what you say.
- Providing visual supports to make messages clear.
- Teaching your child to “wait” in various situations by doing something while waiting – a waiting strategy.
- Being patient

8. Put environmental adaptations in place. Each family has to consider what adaptations can help them and their child be successful at following established rules. Some of these include:

- Establish places to do certain activities. These might be a place to jump like an old couch, to eat that is comfortable and confining, to relax like a beanbag chair or rocker, to play in water, or to do other activities.
- Provide objects that calm and comfort and places to keep them.
- Provide places to keep toys and things with small pieces.
- Use visual cues to provide information about what to do.
- Consider how to establish and mark boundaries.
- Desensitize to environments that require adjustment over time and that may be stimulating or difficult, i.e. restaurants, stores, or malls.
- Consider ways to help your child be comfortable in new environments or while waiting such as having a book bag with familiar objects inside.

Functional Behavioral Analysis

This term applies to studying the behavior from the perspective of the child to better understand the function or purpose of the behavior. We then have a better idea what to teach the child to do instead of engaging in the behavior. This approach can be applied to almost any behavior that we want to decrease. It’s not only useful for extreme behaviors. In fact, it can be applied to behaviors that we want to increase. We are then figuring out how to teach the child to do more of the behavior and analyzing the reasons why the behavior might be at a low rate. Steps in conducting a functional analysis of behavior include:

- Identify the behavior in behavioral (observable and measurable) terms.
- Gather information from interviews, observations, and records about the behavior.
- Identify actions and events that precede the behavior – antecedents (immediate and delayed).
- Develop hypotheses regarding patterns and predictors based on current information. What are the reason(s) we believe the child is engaging in these behaviors?
- Test the hypothesis by changing variables and observing outcomes.

- Confirm or deny your hypotheses (some behaviors occur for a number of reasons).
- Determine purpose(s) of the behavior from your child's point of view and be specific. Wanting attention or trying to annoy you is not specific enough.
- Design the behavioral instructional component. Identify what new skill your child can learn that serves the same purpose as the behavior you want to decrease or eliminate. Design strategies for teaching the new skill(s).
- Design the behavior management plan including reinforcement for the appropriate behavior and correction and practice for errors.
- Collect data, chart progress, and set time frames to analyze.
- Adapt or continue intervention according to results of the analysis of data.

Examples of Behavior Plans

Target Behavior: Goes limp and falls to the floor when asked to move from place to place. This occurs especially when directed to get in the car, take a bath, and get dressed.

Possible purposes: Child is refusing because he doesn't like what is coming next. He may not want to leave what he is doing to take a bath or get dressed and may not like to sit in the car seat. He may not have another way to refuse or his other ways are not listened to. He may not know how to negotiate for more time or choice. He may not be ready to transition, or he may just want more control.

Possible new behaviors to learn:

- To respond to "First do this...then do that."
- Learn to respond to a reward, with the routine, i.e. get in the car seat then have goldfish to eat.
- Learn to respond to timer, either visual or auditory. i.e. timer goes off, get dressed. This would be part of routine.
- Learn to make choice, i.e. Bath now or in two minutes.

Within child factors that put this child at risk for engaging in the behavior include:

- Doesn't know how to give a direct No or it is not honored or acknowledged.
- Has not learned the meaning of words or sequences to know what is coming next
- Has his own concept of being finished
- Is sensitive to being rushed or touched
- Has a fairly long response time
- Wants more choice and say
- May not be easy to reinforce

External factors that put this child at risk for engaging in the behavior include:

- Lack of routines and sequences
- Lack of visual means to show the child passage of time or next activities
- Lack of teaching of the concept of Do this....then that

- Much stimuli in the environment that is distracting
- Too many words delivered too fast

Protective factors within the child that may help to teach new skills and behaviors include:

- Interest in what others are doing
- Desires to be around other people and wants to interact
- Likes books with pictures and good visual learner
- Likes a number of activities especially things sensory and active
- Tries to communicate
- Is persistent
- Good long term memory

Protective Supports – Ways to teach new skills

- Use pictures to show sequences, routines and the concept of Do this...then that.
- Teach the child another way to express “No” such as by a sign or gesture.
- Teach the child direct choice making with visual objects or pictures and encourage the child to make choices whenever possible.
- Practice transitions by going through a set routine and pattern and reinforcing the child. This might involve rehearsal with visuals ahead of time or showing the child by a visual timer when something will happen and actual practice.
- Provide the child something to do at the end of an activity that signals the activity is over like carrying or putting things somewhere.
- Provide the child with some reason to move on to the next activity.
- Try rehearsal of the activity sequence with videotapes.
- Provide environmental and touch cues and back away from physical cues.
- Allow response time.

Targeted Behavior: Grabs hair and necks of people

Possible reasons for the behavior: Wants to interact, has a fascination with hair, imitation of a behavior the child has seen or experienced, needing to get someone’s attention, someone is too close, or other sensory issues like wanting to smell hair.

Possible new behaviors to learn:

- To indicate a greeting that people see and respond to.
- To tell someone to move away.
- To learn rules of initiation and interacting, i.e. Who you can touch, where and when.
- To have sensory activities that are appropriate available and have access to them.
- To learn what to do with hands when anxious or in tight situations.

Within child factors that put the child at risk for engaging in the behavior include:

- Uses one word verbalizations or gestures to communicate.
- Has sensory problems with movement, noise, tactile, and visual stimuli.

- Responds to some initiations of familiar people.
- Becomes anxious if people he is not sure about invade his space.

External factors that may put the child at risk for engaging in the behavior include:

- People close to him with long hair that smells good.
- Lack of other ways to communicate wants and needs.
- Lack of sensory activities to substitute for the hair.
- Lack of response to the child's attempts to communicate.

Within child protective factors that will help to learn new behaviors and skills:

- Interest in what other people are doing.
- Wants to be with other people.
- Imitates actions of others.
- Has a number of sensory interests.
- Likes praise and has a number of activities he likes.

Protective supports - Ways to teach new skills

- Teach appropriate ways to get attention through rehearsal and scripting and practice. Use peers to demonstrate and practice imitating.
- Provide sensory activities for the child to do when he is in uncomfortable situations or when needing a break. Make sure they are what the child really wants and likes.
- Desensitize the child to be near people with long hair and to keep hands to himself while asking for attention. Practice in steps and reinforce.
- Teach social communication that will work such as putting his palm out and up and saying, "Move".
- Teach peers and adults to respond to the child's interaction attempts and to be a friend and supporter.

Summary

Each child with autism is unique and as the child grows up there will be unique challenges. Teaching appropriate behavior is vital to the child's quality of life. However, the uniqueness of each child requires people to accept some behaviors that may seem a bit "odd" at times. The child may have unique ways to calm down and keep her anxiety level in check. She may engage in these behaviors without regard to who is around or where she is. The teaching in this case would be to teach her where to engage in the behavior or how not to be quite so conspicuous while engaging in the behavior, but accept the need for the behavior.

Tolerance of differences and acceptance of behaviors that are unique and acceptable should be fostered. A child with autism is often corrected so much that his world is small and intolerable. Channeling behaviors, accounting for special needs, and fostering strengths and interests while building skills and successful experiences are the cornerstones of helping the child grow and learn successfully.

Parents often feel they have to shelter their children from people who are mean and intolerant. However, what we hope to do is broaden the child's world and the people in it by having a greater number of people understand the needs of this unique child and be part of providing the supports that will help appropriate behaviors flourish.

Author: Nancy J. Dalrymple 2004

Earlier versions by the author: 1998, 1994, 1993, 1991, 1987, 1983.