

Understanding Behavior: A Guide for Parents



A resource to help today's parent understand child behavior.

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Principles of Behavior

The principles of behavior are used to understand a child's behavior through a process called Applied Behavior Analysis or ABA. ABA works to completely understand a behavior by looking at the action or skill and everything that happens before, during, and after the action. Using all this information, children's behaviors can be predicted.



Glossary

Antecedent

What happens right before the action.

Behavior

An action or skill performed by the child.

Consequences

What happens right after the action or what the child gets for his/her action.

Consistency

Giving the same response for the behavior every single time and in the same way for everyone.

Modeling

Showing your child how you want her to act, by acting that way yourself.

Principle

A defined rule or belief.

Punishment

The action of an adult used to decrease the child's behavior.

Reinforcement

The way that others react to the child's behavior – can be positive or negative.

Rule One: Consequences Control Behavior

What It Means → The way a child behaves is caused by what he gets in return.

What It Might Look Like → Domenic asks his mother for a bowl of ice cream. She tells him no, explaining that it will ruin his dinner. Domenic begins to throw a temper tantrum – crying and kicking his feet against the floor. To get Domenic to stop screaming she gives him a bowl of ice cream.

How It Works → Most behaviors work in two ways: to get something or have something taken away. In Domenic's case it was to get a bowl of ice cream. But what if you gave your child broccoli for dinner and told her she needed to eat it. She begins to cry and put her head on the table so you excuse her from the table even though she never ate the broccoli. That behavior worked to have something taken away – the broccoli. When trying to understand your child's behavior it's important to look at the *function* of the behavior or what your child is trying to make happen with his actions.

How It Can Be Used → While it is certainly easier said than done, the way to get Domenic's behavior to stop is to stop giving him what he wants. If Domenic's mom does not reward Domenic's tantrum by giving him a bowl of ice cream, eventually he will learn that tantrums don't get him what he wants. A word of caution here: behaviors can get worse before they get better. So be realistic about what you can tolerate, and make sure everyone is on board with trying to change the behavior. If Dad eventually decides to give in even though Mom says not to, then the behavior will never change.

Rule Two: Behavior Is Strengthened By Reinforcement

What It Means —→ Rewarding behaviors helps make sure it will happen again.

What It Might Look Like —→ Riley's mom has been trying to get her to pick up her toys. Every night before bed, if Riley picks up her toys she gets to put a sticker on a chart on the refrigerator. Riley's mom tells her that when she gets five stickers, she will get to pick out a special toy at the toy store. Riley really wants a new Barbie, so she makes sure to pick up all her toys.

How It Works —→ Riley will keep picking up her toys because she wants to get stickers. Stickers are Riley's daily reward but she knows if she keeps doing a good job she will get a bigger reward.

How It Can Be Used —→ Rewards don't always have to be toys, they can be as simple as saying 'good job' or giving a child a high five. When a behavior happens that you like, such as picking up toys or using good manners, it's important to draw attention to it and make the child understand that he or she did something good.

Rule Three: Behavior Is Weakened By Withholding Consequences

What It Means → Taking things away can change behavior

What It Might Look Like → During dinner time, Daniel plays with his food. He makes mountains out of mashed potatoes, and acts out scenes using little carrot people. When he does this, Daniel has his whole family's attention. Some people find it funny like his brothers, but his Mom and his Dad yell at him to stop playing with his food.

How It Works → Think back to principle one – what does Daniel get by acting this way? He gets his family's attention. The attention is the consequence. In order to change the behavior, the consequence must be taken away.

How It Can Be Used → If we wanted to change Daniel's behavior, we would encourage his entire family to ignore Daniel when he begins playing with his food, and encourage his Mom and Dad instead to praise Daniel's brothers for sitting nicely at the table and eating the right way.

Rule Four: Behavior Is Weakened By Punishment

What It Means → Giving the child an immediate consequence or taking away a later reward will decrease behavior.

What It Might Look Like → Lily calls her sister a name. Lily's mom immediately tells Lily that she does not like the way Lily talk to her sister, and then she tells Lily that later that night she will lose thirty minutes of TV time.

How It Works → Being given the immediate punishment of being scolded, and having TV time taken away, teaches Lily not to call her sister names.

How It Can Be Used → Verbal reprimands are immediate negative reactions. Behavior also will decrease by taking away something positive that the child wants later.

Rule Five: Consequences Must Be Consistent and Immediate

What It Means —> If you want behavior to change, the consequence must be given right after the behavior and it must always be the same.

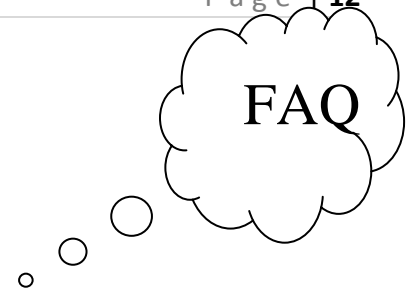
What It Might Look Like —> Let's say we want Sammy to stop hitting. When he hits in school, the teacher places him in time out. Mom and Dad agree to provide the same consequence at home. When Sammy hits his brother because he wants a toy, he is placed in time out. One day at the park, another child pushes Sammy on the playground. Sammy hits him. Dad sees all of this happen but feels that since the other child pushed Sammy it was okay for Sammy to hit and thus Sammy is not punished.

How It Works —> Sammy is unable to understand why he is allowed to hit sometimes but other times he gets in trouble. Sammy's hitting behavior will continue because the consequences are not the same every time.

How It Can Be Used —> What happens after the behavior, must be the same every time, in every place, for everyone.

Rule Six: Behavior Is Influenced Through Modeling

What It Means —→ Your child learns by watching you. Children look to their parents to learn how to act, how to talk, how to play, and how to interact with their world. Showing your child good behavior will help them learn it!



Q: How can learning these rules help me as a parent?

A: Learning the rules of behavior will help you understand why your child behaves a certain way. Understanding the behavior will allow you to figure out how to change it. These rules will give you new ways to think about behaviors and create more effective ways of dealing with them.

Q: When can I start using the rules with my child?

A: Immediately! Try to look at your child's behavior as if you were an outsider. This will help keep any personal opinions out of the way.

Q: There are so many rules. Where do I start?

A: Start with the first rule. Behavior is based on what the child gets. First, figure out what happens right after your child acts a certain way. From there you can begin to use the other principles.

Discussion Questions

- * What behaviors can you work to change with your child?
 - * What are some easy behaviors to begin with?
 - * What are other more challenging behaviors?
- * How can you apply the rules of behavior in your own home?
 - * What are you child's strengths?
 - * What does your child find rewarding?
- * Who in your house can help you change behavior?

-Annotated Bibliography-

- Dunlap, G., Newton, J. S., Fox, L., Benito, N., & Vaughn, B. (2001). Family involvement in functional assessment and positive behavior support. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 16*(4), 215-221. doi:10.1177/108835760101600403
- Glen Dunlap is the director of the Division of Applied Research and Educational Support at the University of South Florida. He is also a principal investigator at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Positive Behavior Support. J. Stephen Newton is a research associate with Educational and Community Supports, his research interests include outcome and quality improvement systems in residential services for adults with developmental disabilities. The additional co-authors of this article all hold professional positions and have research interests in the area of developmental disabilities with regard to intervention effectiveness in increasing quality of life. In the field of autism the use of functional assessments are becoming a requisite step in developing behavioral support plans. It is now recognized that parents serve as the best source of knowledge regarding the child. In addition to being the greatest sources of information, parents and families construct the most influential context that children experience. Children spend countless hours with families in countless settings. By including families, practitioners can assure that the behavior support plan fits personal, cultural, and familial values. The more that families are involved, the more likely that interventions and results will have validity, efficacy, and benefit the children. Practitioners should work to recognize the family's individuality. Each family will differ greatly, especially in their levels of understanding and motivation. Relationships should be formed with the family to increase openness to the family becoming a part of the collaborative team. This article emphasizes that all families are different and that sometimes collaborating also means compromising. What a professional may feel is best for the child, may not be a priority for the family. In working to understand the family and encourage their participation as much as possible, data can be gathered and plans can be created that will greatly benefit the child.
- Heiman, T. (2002). Parents of children with disabilities; resilience, coping and future expectations. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities, 14*(2), 159-171.
- Dr. Tali Heiman is a senior lecturer at the Department of Education and Psychology at The Open University of Israel. She is the Head of Learning Disabilities Research Center and the Head of The Open University Diagnostic Center for students with Learning Disabilities. Her study examined how resiliency develops for parents of children with disabilities. Thirty-two parents were interviewed about their coping styles in the past, present, and future. The interview explored various domains such as parents' responses to the child's diagnosis, patterns of adjustment, family support and services, and parents' feelings and future expectations. It was discovered that most parents react in a negative way, emotionally as well as physiologically, to their child's diagnosis. Three main factors that allowed families to establish resiliency were an open discussion and consultation, a positive bond between parents, and continuous intensive education, therapeutic and psychological support for family members. The results of this study highlighted the importance of social resources and effective intervention programs. These findings are particularly important when considering the evidence-based need and therapeutic effect of parent education. In providing parents and

family members with knowledge of behavior principles, their understanding, management and resiliency toward the diagnosis is strengthened.

- Jull, S., & Mirenda, P. (2011). Parents as play date facilitators for preschoolers with autism. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 13*(1), 17-30. doi:10.1177/1098300709358111
- Stephanie Jull is a doctoral student at the University of British Columbia. She is a Program Manager at the ABA Learning Centre in British Columbia. Pat Mirenda is a professor of special education at the University of British Columbia, whose research focuses on autism, augmentative communication and positive behavior support. This study sought to measure the effectiveness of parent facilitated play dates for preschoolers with autism. Parents were provided with training on how to host a play date involving mutually reinforcing activities and cooperative arrangements. Essentially, to construct play dates with activities that both the child with autism and a typical peer both enjoyed and that required both children to participate. The results suggested that parents can acquire skills required to become play facilitators in their own home. While the article focused on training parents in play facilitating skills, the results provide an important generalization to the theory of parent education. This study shows the skills can be transferred effectively and in a reasonable amount of time. This is important not just for play facilitation but also for important techniques such as data collection, behavior assessment, and intervention techniques. This transfer of skills, through education and training, allows parents and families to work collaboratively with professionals to provide consistent expectations and consequences for children with special needs.
- Ogletree, B. T., & Oren, T. (2001). Application of ABA principles to general communication instruction. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 16*(2), 102-109. doi:10.1177/108835760101600206
- Billy Ogletree is an associate professor in the Communication Disorders program at the Western Carolina University. His research includes the communicative abilities and needs of persons with autism. Thomas Oren is an assistant professor in the Special Education program at Western Carolina University. His research includes pre-service education and educational materials for children with autism. This article reviews the principles of ABA and terms frequently used. The authors review the definitions of stimuli, responses, consequences, positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, punishment, and extinction. The article also reviews techniques used in ABA. The variety of prompts and cues and the appropriate settings to use them are discussed. The authors also explain modeling, reinforcement, and extinction. Due to their research backgrounds, these techniques are explained mostly in regards to communication interventions. However, this article provides a nice and easy to understand overview of the principles of behavior and the techniques used in behavior plans. A strong and thorough knowledge of this information will be important for practitioners' to have in order to educate parents. When educating families, professionals should manipulate their deep understanding of this material and present it to parents in an easy to understand and accessible manner.
- Park, J. H., Alber-Morgan, S. R., & Fleming, C. (2011). Collaborating with parents to implement behavioral interventions for children with challenging behaviors. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 43*(3), 22-30.
- Ju Hee Park is an Assistant Professor in the Special Education Department at Wheelock College. Co-authors Sheila Alber-Morgan and Courtney Fleming are from The Ohio State University Special Education Department, where Alber-Morgan is an Associate Professor

and Fleming is a doctoral student. The article, using research and case vignettes, discusses how practitioners can effectively collaborate with parents to implement behavioral interventions. The article states that understanding a family's strengths and weaknesses is the first step in building rapport with a family. Parents' strengths can be used to address behavior, while identifying challenges will help the practitioner avoid using interventions that could exaggerate the problem. The second step, is educate parents on the behavioral approach. Practitioners should discuss the reasons why the behavioral approach is appropriate for their child. Explaining challenging behavior from the behavioral perspective helps parents understand what specific factors may be contributing to the behavior. By examining behavior in this way, parents gain important insight on how to change those behaviors. Parents should be taught key behavior concepts to help them understand the procedures, particularly the three-term contingency. Parents must also understand how these principles work for their own behavior in response to their child. Providing information will help parents to apply effective behavior procedures. Parent observations using the behavioral approach is essential in providing information for how to change the behavior and maximize the effectiveness of interventions. Using this applicable information, practitioners can avoid trial-and-error in implementing behavior plans. Training parents should involve teaching parents to identify and record behavior, how to properly respond to the behavior, modeling interventions, providing guided practice and feedback, and encouraging skill sharing among family members. This article is important in providing evidence-based reasons for educating parents on the principles of behavior management. It also provides excellent tips and guidelines for working effectively with families in order to create and maintain the most effective and helpful behavior programs. This article reinforces that when parents and professionals collaborate using the same approach and sharing information, outcomes improve for children.