



This tool kit was prepared with assistance from Rachel Avner Torrance, MEd BCBA, Behavior and Curriculum Intervention Specialist, Cuyahoga Board of Developmental Disabilities.

Milestones provides coaching services to all family members, professionals, and self-advocates. Services include connecting participants to resources and providing general information and assistance. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us at (216) 464-7600 or info@milestones.org.

1. What are Problem Behaviors?

A behavior is defined as the way a person acts or conducts themselves. Behaviors can be almost anything we can see someone do or say. Behaviors can be desired (things you want the child to do, such as asking for help), or not desired (such as tantrums and yelling out).

Problem (or challenging) behaviors are defined as behaviors that can be threatening to an individual or people around him. Problem behaviors can interfere with the person's learning and development and access to the community. An adult or child with autism with these types of behaviors can struggle with having successful relationships, accessing activities and learning, and they can be dangerous to themselves and others.

This tool kit covers the functions of challenging behaviors, offers an understanding of how to analyze these behaviors, and provides valuable hands-on resources.

It's important to note here that some behaviors should not be corrected solely through online research. It is crucial that parents and caregivers consult a specialist who can help define the behavior, determine why it is happening, and develop a consistent behavior plan. You can share your concerns with a behavior therapist, developmental specialist, pediatrician, psychologist, or members of your child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team at school. If you need assistance in finding a specialist in your area, you can consult the Milestones Resource Center on milestones.org or email Milestones for help.

2. So, Where do I Start?

To begin to understand how to treat a problem behavior, the function of the behavior must be determined. This tells you WHY your child is acting that way. By observing your child and tracking his behaviors, a pattern that tells you why the behaviors happen may emerge.

First, you should rule out any medical conditions that may be causing or contributing to the individual's behavior (such as an ear infection causing an individual to hold their ears). Once you rule out a medical condition, you can start tracking your child's behavior.

A great strategy for tracking behavior is to create an ABC Chart. We've attached two sample charts to use, or you can create your own.

The chart is divided into columns. In each column, you write down as much information as you can. The columns are identified as:

Antecedent: What just prompted this behavior? What was happening right before the behavior occurred?

Behavior: What did the behavior look like? Be as specific as you can – instead of writing “tantrum”, use words like “hitting, kicking, screaming, biting.”

Consequence: How did I (or others) respond to this behavior? What outcome did it have? Note that this does not mean a punishment. It means what was the reaction of others when the behavior occurred, or what happened immediately after the behavior.

Function: Which of the functions of behavior does this fall under? The different functions are defined later in this document.

Once it is complete, this chart can illustrate patterns, both in the antecedent for the behavior and the consequence or reaction of others. These patterns can help a professional assist you in creating the best plan for modifying behavior. Since the chances of your child exhibiting their challenging behavior in front of the therapist may be slim, your charts will come in handy to show them what you are experiencing.

Regardless of the behavior, think about any potential obvious causes for your child acting out. Could there be a sensory issue (too loud, too bright, strange smells, itchy clothing)? Are you changing activities in your child’s routine without giving them time to transition? Are you expecting them to sit still or stand somewhere for a while without taking a break? All of these can trigger problem behaviors. The solution could be as simple as addressing sensory sensitivities, modifying the environment, or letting your child move around. You also might try offering them a visual schedule (www.iidc.indiana.edu/?pageId=394) to help them transition more smoothly throughout their day.

3. What are the Functions of Behavior?

To better understand how to tame problem behaviors, you need to understand their four possible functions. An easy acronym to remember the four functions of behavior is SEAT:

Sensory – the person finds the behavior satisfying or self-soothing (e.g., rocking back and forth, flapping their hands).

Escape – the person wants to get out of their current situation (e.g., running away, destroying property).

Attention – the person wants the undivided attention of a parent, teacher, or other person

Tangible – the person wants to attain a particular object

Once the function of your child’s problem behavior is determined, you and a professional can introduce interventions. This might take some trial and error. Sometimes the professional can determine an alternate behavior that may be more “socially appropriate” (such as asking for help instead of throwing a tantrum). Other interventions include modifying what happens in the environment before and/or after the behaviors (such as giving a snack before doing homework to avoid a meltdown, or introducing a reward after finishing a chore). Certain modifications may involve several steps to achieve the final result, others will just be one subtle change.

Consistency is also key for a behavior intervention to be successful. The plan must be followed at all times by all family members and professionals working with the individual across all settings.

Here's an example: Mom needs to drive Bobby to school but Bobby protests and throws a tantrum every day because he doesn't like the car. After working with a behavior consultant, Mom tries a suggested strategy – she lets Bobby pick the music; that doesn't work. Next, Mom tries letting Bobby choose a toy in the car to bring in the car, and it works smoothly! But Mom is not the only one who drives Bobby to school – when Dad or Grandma drive him, they also need to let him bring a toy in the car, to continue to reinforce the positive behavior.

4. What is a Functional Behavioral Assessment and do we need one?

A Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is a process used to analyze a person's behavior with the intent to address problem behaviors. It is a helpful tool, as it can expose the cause for problem behaviors. Professionals often use an FBA in a school environment. You can request an FBA from your school for any problem behaviors happening there.

Once the FBA is completed by a school or therapist, a document can be developed, called a Behavior Intervention Plan, or BIP. A BIP will define a consistent plan for how to handle different problem behaviors throughout his/her day. The BIP will often go into great detail, and offers a variety of tactics to be used to help modify the behaviors. It defines the predictors for the behaviors, as well as behavior goals and teaching strategies.

5. A Note about Self-Injurious and Aggressive Behaviors

When your child is behaving in a way that hurts himself or others, causes destruction to property or puts someone's safety at risk, it is even more important to get professional help as soon as you are able to.

Until you are able to successfully change what is occurring, make sure that your child and people around him/her are safe. Avoid situations that might be a trigger to your child's behaviors, and take steps to protect your child. We have listed some sites below that offer other safety suggestions.

6. Additional Information Websites

Listed below are websites, separated by category, that can offer assistance in understanding and dealing with challenging behaviors. Remember that some behaviors should not be corrected solely through online research. Consult a specialist who can help you develop a consistent behavior plan. Additionally, there are many different behaviors that are considered challenging, and every child is different. Therefore, there is no cookie-cutter solution (thus the encouragement to work with a specialist to see what works best with YOUR child). While interviewing new professionals, use our Guided Questions for Behavior Specialists (milestones.org/resource-center/need-to-find-a-new-resource/) to decide if they are a good fit for your family.

General Information

- Autism Speaks Challenging Behavior Tool Kit:
www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/tool-kits/challenging-behaviors-tool-kit
- Challenging Behaviour in Children with an ASD – The National Autistic Society (UK):
<http://www.autism.org.uk/about/behaviour/challenging-behaviour.aspx>

- Webinar: Using an Interdisciplinary Approach to Managing Challenging Behaviors Exhibited by Individuals with Autism – The Monarch School

ABC Data

- Observing Behavior Using A-B-C Data – Indiana Resource Center for Autism: www.iidc.indiana.edu/?pageId=444
- How Do We Determine the Function of a Behavior? www.positivelyautism.com/aba/mod6H_3.html

ABC Chart samples

- www.positivelyautism.com/downloads/datasheet_abc.pdf
- www.positivelyautism.com/downloads/datasheet_abc_2.pdf

Behavior as a Form of Communication

- Five Facts Every Family Should Know: Challenging Behaviors – PBS.org: www.pbs.org/parents/inclusivecommunities/challenging_behavior2.html
- Communication and Behavior – Autism Community: www.autism-community.com/communication/communication-and-behavior/

Crisis Management and Safety

- Crisis Intervention Resources : www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/crisis-intervention-resources
- Autism Safety Project: Safety Resources: www.autismspeaks.org/family-services/autism-safety-project/safety-resources
- Big Red Safety Tool Kit: nationalautismassociation.org/docs/BigRedSafetyToolkit.pdf

Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs)

- Write Your Own Behavior Plan – AboutParenting.com: www.specialchildren.about.com/od/specialeducation/qt/behaviorplan.htm
- PBISWorld.com: www.pbisworld.com/tier-2/behavior-intervention-plan-bip/
- ProjectStay.com: <http://www.greenbush.org/stayresources/>

Functions of Behavior / Positive and Negative Reinforcement

- Educate Autism: www.educateautism.com/behavioural-principles/functions-of-behaviour.html#.U1QewOZdV3c
www.educateautism.com/behavioural-principles/positive-reinforcement.html
www.educateautism.com/behavioural-principles/negative-reinforcement.html
- Behavioral Consulting of Tampa Bay: bcotb.com/the-difference-between-positivenegative-reinforcement-and-positivenegative-punishment/
- autism-help.org: www.autism-help.org/behavior-positive-reinforcement-autism.htm

Functional Behavioral Assessments

- New Mexico Public Education Department: www.ped.state.nm.us/Rtl/behavior/4.fba.11.28.pdf
- Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice (CECP): cecp.air.org/fba/default.asp
- WrightsLaw.com: www.wrightslaw.com/info/discipl.fab.starin.htm
- NYU Child Study Center: www.aboutourkids.org/files/articles/nov_dec_2.pdf
- Pacer Center: <http://www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c215a.pdf>