UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOR

Behavior is communication. When children act out, they are **trying to meet a need.** Behavior is their way of telling us something they can't say with words.

WHY BEHAVIOR HAPPENS

Behavior is how children either get something they value or escape/avoid something they find unpleasant.

To get something **or** **To escape/avoid something**

Sensory
(automatic internal response)

- *Covering ears in a loud environment*
- *Chewing shirt or paper*
- *Spinning or rocking*
- *Removing uncomfortable clothing*



Attention
(connection w/ peer or adult)

- *Interrupting for adult attention*
- *Blurting in class to make peers laugh*
- *Hiding under a table to escape adult attention*



Tangible
(item, activity, or place)

- *Arguing to avoid cleaning room*
- *Sneaking an electronic device*
- *Ripping paper to avoid academic task*
- *Biting sibling to get toy*



The behavior may be communicating:

To Get:

Attention from peers or adults - "I need connection or someone to notice me."
Tangible items or activities - "I want something that's important to me right now."
Sensory stimulation - "My body is looking for something to feel right or stay calm."

To Escape/Avoid:

Tasks or demands - "I don't want to do this or I want this to stop."
Social interactions - "I need some space from people."
Sensory discomfort - "Something doesn't feel right in my body and/or the environment and I need it to stop."

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How to Identify the Need

- Look for Patterns: When does the behavior happen?
- Notice Triggers: What happened right before?
- Watch for Signals: Fidgeting, withdrawing, or frustration



What You Can Do

For Avoid/Escape:
Break tasks into smaller steps to make them feel more manageable.
Offer choices to give the child a sense of control, like: "Do you want to start with this or that?"

For Access:
Provide attention for positive actions, such as waiting patiently or sharing.
Use "first-then" statements, like: "First clean up, then you can play."

Prevention Is the Best Tool

The easiest behavior to handle is the one that never has to happen. Meet the need before the behavior has to ask for it.

- **Fill the attention cup first**: Give a few minutes of one-on-one time or quick check-ins throughout the day.
- **Give a heads-up**: Preview what's coming and warn about changes, like "In five minutes we're going to clean up."
- **Offer choices early**: Let them pick the order or the way, before it turns into a power struggle.
- **Plan for sensory needs**: Build in breaks, a quiet spot, or something to fidget with before the noise or crowd gets to be too much.
- **Practice when calm**: Rehearse asking for a break/help and using coping skills when nothing is going wrong.

It's important to remember: While behavior analysis focuses on what we can observe, internal factors and feelings also play a big role in why behaviors happen. Understanding these different layers helps us see the full picture and respond with empathy.

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