Understanding the ABCs of Behavior in Children
(Oh – and in everyone else)

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Behavior – what is it?

“The way in which an animal or person acts in response to a particular situation or stimulus.”
Dispelling the myths about behavior…

• Behaviors are not singular events
• Behaviors do not occur at random
• Behaviors do not “come out of nowhere”
Behaviors

Behaviors are always part of a larger chain
The ABCs

- **Antecedent**: anything that happens before a behavior/skill
  - The triggers or set-up
- **Behavior**: actions
  - What was said or done? OBSERVABLE and VISIBLE
- **Consequence**: anything that happens right after a behavior/skill
  - Reaction/response to the behavior/skill
  - Makes behavior/skill more or less likely to occur again over time
Parent Behavior Chain:

ANTECEDENT B BEHAVIOR

CONSEQUENCE
Behaviors

What are they?

• Observable ACTIONS
Behaviors

Wanted/Desirable

Unwanted/Undesirable
Behaviors

• When we talk about behavior, we need to be specific…
  ▪ SPECIFIC: what happened? what was said?
  ▪ DETAILED: describe what the action looked like
  ▪ MEASURABLE: consider intensity, duration, frequency
Behaviors

Where do they come from? Why do they occur?

• All behaviors have a purpose or goal (FUNCTION)

• They do NOT occur at random.
Behaviors

BEHAVIORS OCCUR BECAUSE THEY WORK!

If a behavior does not work, IT WILL NOT CONTINUE!

This is true for BOTH desired behaviors/skills and undesired ones.
Behaviors

If we want undesired behaviors to change (or go away), two things must happen:

1. That behavior must no longer WORK

2. A new, desired (more appropriate) behavior works better

These are known as replacement behaviors.
Behaviors

SO LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT

I DON'T HAVE TO CRY AND YELL TO GET MY COOKIE?
Behaviors

How do we teach good replacement behaviors?

It depends on the original behavior’s goal, or FUNCTION.

ALL BEHAVIORS HAVE A FUNCTION!
Functions of Behavior
Functions of Behavior

**Obtain/Get…**
- Things you want (tangibles, power)
- Attention from others (does not matter if it’s positive OR negative attention)
- Self-stimulation

**Avoid/Escape…**
- Something you don’t like/want (pain, overstimulation, boredom, aversive)

Communication… then habit
ABC Chain

• Behaviors arise due to ANTECEDENTS, and are maintained by CONSEQUENCES
Antecedents:

What are they?

- The triggers or set-up that elicits the behavior
- Without this initial context, the behavior may not occur
- Can immediately precede the behavior, or be a contextual influence
Behavior

**People, Relationships**: their actions, words, expressions, tone

**Environment**: physical setting, weather, system, activity

**Internal state**: hungry, sleepy, nausea, etc.

**Sensory**: sights, smells, sounds, etc.

**Medical**: pain, illness, seizures, etc.

**Mental health**: depression, hallucinations, anxiety, ADHD, etc.

**Time of day**

**Skill deficits**: profile of strengths/weaknesses

**Expectations**
Behavior

XY CHROMOSOME DISORDERS
Consequences

What are they?

- The responses/reactions that occur after a behavior/skill
- These determine whether a behavior/skill will occur again over time (in future)
- They relate directly to the goal or underlying function of the behavior

What was gained? What did the child get from the behavior/skill?

What was avoided? What did the child get out of?
Consequences:

**Punishment**: prevents behavior/skill from meeting its goal
- Makes the behavior LESS LIKELY to occur
- Decreases/discourages behavior over time

**Reinforcement**: the goal of behavior has been met!
- Makes the behavior MORE LIKELY to occur
- Increases/encourages behavior over time
Consequences:

**Punishment**: behavior is LESS LIKELY to occur
- NEGATIVE: Taking something prized away
- POSITIVE: Adding something aversive

**Reinforcement**: behavior is MORE LIKELY to occur
- NEGATIVE: Getting out of something aversive, escape
- **POSITIVE**: Adding something the child likes, reward
Consequences:

Verbal: praise
Attention: eye contact, words, body language
Ignoring
Physical actions: hugs, high fives
Tokens: stickers, stars, coins
Time out
Objects: toys, money
Edibles: candy, treats, etc.
Alone time
Corporeal punishment
Chores
Consequences

DID YOU SAY "THOSE REINFORCERS DON'T WORK"?

UH... THEN THEY AREN'T REINFORCERS!
Consequences

• The consequence we choose (how we respond) depends on the behavior’s FUNCTION, not the behavior itself.

It's all fun and games until someone figures out the function of your behavior.
Behaviors

Positive (wanted)
- Brushing teeth
- Using manners
- Doing chores

Negative (unwanted)
- Tantrums
- Aggression

Neutral
- Sleeping
Behaviors

Positive (desirable)
- Brushing teeth
- Using manners
- Doing chores

Negative (undesirable)
- Tantrums
- Aggression

Neutral
Let’s Review!

• Which parts of the ABC framework can we DIRECTLY change?
  (the antecedents and consequences)
• What is the most powerful form of behavior change?
  (positive reinforcement)
• What are the main functions of all behavior?
  (attention, getting things you want, avoiding things you don’t want, self-stimulatory)
• What form of consequence makes behavior LESS LIKELY to occur in the future?
  (punishment)
WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE BEHAVIOR?