

## **7** | **Dealing with Difficult Behaviors**

*After a long day at the office, Mary comes home and asks Bob how the day went with their son, Vince. Bob immediately tells her that Vince pinched his arm several times and points to the new dent in the wall that Vince made when he threw a chair. He asks Mary if she knows what they can do to get Vince to stop these outbursts. She asks Bob if he knows why Vince is doing these things and he admits that he's not sure. Mary and Bob realize that it will be hard to plan for a change without better understanding their son's actions.*

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### **Context and Magnitude**

All children, including those with autism spectrum disorders, at least occasionally engage in actions that we adults are not happy to witness. In general, there are a host of behaviors that we wish would either disappear, or, at a minimum, would decrease in severity or frequency. Part of the difficulty parents face in determining which problem behaviors to address is deciding which behaviors are truly problematic. We may feel that certain behaviors are always inappropriate, but a more careful review of this issue reveals that the setting for an action may influence how we view that action.

For example, we observe a young boy shouting loudly. If he were screaming in his home kitchen, then we might feel confident that this behavior is not appropriate. However, if the boy is at a baseball game

and is rooting for his brother's team, then shouting support may be perfectly acceptable—and even encouraged. Similarly, slapping my own face may be inappropriate—unless I am trying to stop a mosquito from biting me. In other words, the setting—or context—will influence how we view a behavior. To remind us of this issue, we will refer to *contextually inappropriate behaviors (CIBs)* when we are dealing with actions that we hope to reduce or eliminate.

Just as we consider context of a behavior, we must also consider issues associated with the frequency or intensity of an action. Asking people how they are feeling is an appropriate skill, but asking the question every minute for an entire hour is not appropriate. Knocking on a door to see if someone is home is fine, but punching your fist through the windowpane is not reasonable.

We must also consider the severity of the problematic behavior. If you simply watch someone else over a length of time, it is highly likely that you will notice some little actions that you wouldn't do or that even bother you to watch. For example, why does she play with her hair? Why does he tap on the tabletop? Why does she have to double knot her shoelaces? While these actions may be irritating, they really do not rise to the level of concern that you must work hard to eliminate them.

***Behaviors that we want to eliminate include:***

- actions that are harmful to the child (i.e., self-injury), to other people (i.e., aggression), or to the environment (tantrums, property destruction, etc.);
- actions that significantly interfere with routine activities (e.g., self-stimulation, disruptive noise, etc.), either for the child or for others; or
- actions that may bring social sanctions against the child or caretakers (e.g., disrobing in public, speaking in a weird or bizarre manner, certain lengthy rituals, etc.).

It is important to note that the mere presence of self-stimulatory actions is not a sufficient justification to seek to eliminate that behavior. Self-stimulatory behaviors may include odd actions such as flicking fingers and hopping on toes but they also include rather common actions such as twirling hair and chewing gum. In fact, everyone engages in self-stimulatory behaviors, and it is likely impossible to eliminate all of them. Instead, we should focus on the impact that such actions have on other important behavior. That is, if Hank rocks his foot under the table but pays complete attention to everything happening around

him, then his foot rocking does not need to be addressed. On the other hand, if he flicks his fingers before his eyes and does not pay attention when his name is called or other important things are said to him, then finger play poses a serious problem and should be addressed.

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## Why Did He Do That?

Once your family has decided that something your child does needs to be addressed, several key factors must be considered. Now that you have your focal point—your “target behavior”—you will need to act as a news reporter and determine: Why is this happening? What can we do about it? How can we make a change? Do we have the resources to make this change? And finally, was this a good change?

Let’s consider Rosalie’s situation. Her daughter, Natalie, often screams while they are shopping in the local mall. First, Rosalie must consider why this may be happening. To simplify the possibilities, we will consider three main factors. One, Natalie may be screaming in order to *gain something*—possibly her mother’s attention or something material. Perhaps in the past, when Natalie screamed, Rosalie bought her some candy to calm her down. In this case, Natalie has learned that the best way to get candy is to scream. Another broad possibility is that Natalie is trying to *avoid* or *escape* something. For example, maybe Rosalie leaves the mall whenever Natalie screams and that is precisely what Natalie wants—to get out of the noisy, crowded situation. The final general possibility we will consider is that Natalie’s screams are *elicited* in a manner similar to reflexes. These actions are somewhat different than actions that reliably lead to a predictable outcome and are often thought of as “emotionally driven.” Think about not only how you feel but also the often useless behaviors you engage in while waiting for an elevator to arrive or when you’ve just been told that the baseball or football game you’ve been waiting to watch has been cancelled due to rain. You might even scream at the TV, knowing full well that this will not help the situation. Similarly, Natalie may scream because she is frustrated over waiting to get to her favorite store, or because her shoes are too tight and hurt.

Why is it important to figure out what is leading to the contextually inappropriate behavior (CIB)? Let’s assume that Natalie is screaming because she wants candy. Now, suppose that we magically eliminate her

screaming. What does she still want? Right, she still wants candy and may not have calm communication skills that would help her get candy when she wants it. So, even if we could magically get rid of her screaming, she now will have to figure out some other way to get candy while at the mall. And it is not likely that her next solution to this problem will be more pleasant. Furthermore, her mother doesn't think that having candy is a bad thing for Natalie—it is the screaming that she doesn't like.

Similarly, if Natalie were screaming to leave the mall, even if we could magically get her to stop screaming, she would still want to leave and may not have another calm way of indicating that to her mother. Finally, if she is screaming because she is frustrated about how long it is taking to get to her favorite store, then her mother must either rearrange her shopping schedule or teach Natalie to improve her ability to wait for things she likes.

In each scenario, Rosalie must first determine what is leading Natalie to scream in order to determine the best course of action.

To summarize, **functions of behavior** are often categorized as:

1. to obtain a desired object or activity, including social outcomes;
2. to escape or avoid someone or something;
3. elicited by the properties of the situation.

We cannot go into great detail here about how you determine what function is controlling your child's behavior. Briefly, you need to not only monitor the behavior itself but also important factors that occur both before (e.g., location, time, activity, people present, and other types of relevant stimuli) and after the behavior (e.g., consequences introduced or removed, both social and materials). It may be helpful to try to guess at which of the three key functions the behavior seems to be serving for your child on each occasion it occurs and see if there is a pattern over time. For more information on determining the purpose of your child's behavior, you may want to read *Functional Behavior Assessment for People with Autism* by Beth Glasberg.

### **Choosing a Replacement Behavior**

The best course of action will not focus just on eliminating the problematic behavior, because that leaves the root cause in place. We must also focus on teaching the child a more appropriate way to meet

his or her goal. For example, Natalie’s mother will have to help Natalie learn a more appropriate way to achieve her own goal—whether it is to get something she likes, such as candy; to get away from something she doesn’t like, such as the noise level; or to improve her ability to wait for things she likes, and thus improve her emotional responding. Unless Natalie learns these replacement skills, when the old needs arise, she will likely revert to her old ways or try something else that her mother will not be pleased to witness.



Notice that the potential replacement behaviors for Natalie involve those critical functional communication skills that we stressed teaching and supporting earlier in this book. In general, we advocate teaching functional communication skills as early and as strongly as possible. This way, when CIBs do arise, their potential alternatives are skills that the child has already acquired. If your child has not learned the replacement skill for a particular CIB, then you will have to spend time on developing that skill, as opposed to more simply making sure your child uses the skill.

Another important point—although some replacement skills involve expressive communication, such as asking for a favorite item, a break, or help, other replacement skills involve receptive skills, such as learning to wait. Simply being able to express needs, such as, “I want to go to the music store *now!*” or even pointing out the problem, such as, “I’m getting upset that it’s taking so long to get to the music store!” may not solve the problem. That is, no matter what your child is able to express, getting to the music store will take some time.

There are several things you’ll want to consider when selecting replacement behaviors. For example, it is easier to pick a replacement that your child can already do as opposed to needing to teach a new skill. The replacement should be relatively easy and efficient to perform so that there is no natural preference for the original behavior. Of course, the replacement also should be one that is socially acceptable.

If waiting is the issue, then remember to plan for something that your child can do while waiting for the main goal. Rosalie needs to consider what Natalie can do while waiting to get to the music store. She should not expect her daughter to simply not get upset. That would be a hard goal for anyone. Depending on Natalie's skill level, Rosalie might ask her to try to find five people with red hair, or find the letter "Q" in five store signs, or simply talk to her about what happened at school that day. What Natalie is asked to do while waiting should be relatively easy—not a new or difficult skill—just something to help pass the time.

It is also important to support replacement skills that truly meet the child's needs, rather than being something that you want to see instead. For example, while Mandy is watching TV at home, her son, Frank, frequently runs around the room, often knocking things over and making a mess. Mandy would prefer that he sit in a chair while she watches her TV show. She knows that he likes licorice so she tries to make a deal—if he sits, she'll give him some licorice.

Although this type of arrangement may work for a short time, Mandy has not determined why her son was running around in the first place. It is very unlikely that Frank has been running around to get licorice. It is more likely that other factors are at play. He may run around to get her attention. And even though he likes licorice, when he really wants her attention, he will run once more. He may be running because he does not like her show and he is trying to get her to turn it off. He may be running because he is bored and frustrated that, from his point of view, nothing worthwhile will happen until after the TV show. Therefore, Mandy cannot just pick a replacement behavior for her son and an arbitrary reward for that behavior, but must figure out why Frank is running around before she tries to intervene and help him to change his ways.

Determining the function of the CIB and the best possible replacement that will meet the same needs may require the assistance of a specialist— especially if the behavior is particularly dangerous. The field of applied behavior analysis (ABA) provides training and support to help families and schools make this type of determination in complex cases. The Association for Behavior Analysis International ([www.abainternational.org](http://www.abainternational.org)) has a Special Interest Group (SIG) for autism and this group can help families find competent specialists to help in this endeavor.

Whether or not you consult with a specialist in behavior analysis in selecting a replacement behavior, your family should involve your child's school (or other program). You and the school staff need to coordinate what you are doing since it can be confusing to children to have to cope with different rules in different situations.

Once you have selected a replacement behavior, you also will need to implement a plan to assure that this replacement meets with success. That is, you must plan to reward your child when he use the replacement behavior, and even encourage him to practice the particular skill when the CIB is not occurring, to be certain that it is well developed and readily used. In Chapter 2, we described several ways of "catching them being good." Use these strategies whenever you are trying to improve the likelihood that your child will use the replacement skill instead of the CIB. Remember, if you do not adequately reward your child for the replacement skill, then he will use whatever CIB has been effective.

In general, **the key to long-term successful intervention with contextually inappropriate behaviors** rests with:

1. identifying the function of the behavior, and
2. systematically replacing it with a socially appropriate and functionally comparable alternative.

If a child screams to get attention, he can be taught to communicate via words, pictures, or signs that he wants someone to interact with him. If a child is hitting his head because he sees a toy that is out of reach, he can be taught to communicate to request the toy directly or to ask for help to get to the toy. If a child slaps his face when the toy he is playing with stops working, he can be taught to communicate to ask for help. If a child is putting his head down on the dining room table midway through setting the table, he can be taught to ask for a brief break. And if a child is punching the wall when he is told he cannot go outside to play right now, he can be taught how to wait for gradually longer and longer periods of time. In each of these examples, the solution—including choosing the replacement behavior—depends upon understanding why the target behavior is occurring.

### ***Altering the Environment vs. Teaching Replacement Behaviors***

Many people try to avoid situations that provoke the problem behavior. For example, if the child with autism does not like noisy

or visually stimulating environments, then they avoid going into such settings. Some families and schools have their children work long hours alone in cubicles that visually block the typical stimulation of classrooms or rooms within the house. While these types of strategies will lead to fewer behavior problems, they will not teach the child how to cope with noisy or stimulating environments when they are unavoidable.

Sometimes a better strategy to help the child pay attention to critical parts of the environment is to increase the motivation (positive outcomes) for paying attention. Let's examine a fairly common experience for adults before we think of applying this strategy for our children. Imagine that you are at a noisy party talking to someone who is rather boring. Most likely, you are having problems hearing that person talk because of the surrounding (and distracting) noise. Suddenly, the person you've been waiting to talk to comes over and starts a conversation—the very thing you've been hoping for! Do you now have any trouble hearing what is being said to you? Of course not. And not because the room really became quieter but because it is now much more rewarding to hear what is being said to you. In the same manner, rather than always trying to turn down the noise of the room for your child, you may want to design a system that strongly rewards him for paying attention and doing whatever it is that you are aiming for. These aims can include substituting replacement behaviors for those unwanted CIBs.

For example, your child may be able to set the table when only the two of you are in the room but you want to improve his ability to complete the task in the face of distractions. We'll also assume that you've successfully used a token system to reward your child when he has successfully set the table. Once your child begins to set the table, ask someone else in your home to come into the room and begin talking to you. As long as your child continues to set the table, give him tokens. If he stops setting the table, remind him about what he is working for—the reward you've set up. Once he is able to set the table in this circumstance, gradually add other distractions—other people coming into the kitchen, turning on the radio or TV, turning on noisy appliances like the dishwasher or a blender, and other similarly distracting but natural events. Notice that you should not introduce all of these at once but rather teach your child to pay attention by gradually increasing distractions while continuing to use the powerful reward system.



We are not saying that you should never try to reduce annoying circumstances. For example, many people use noise-attenuating headphones on airplanes and in other noisy environments, and those with autism can well adopt these same strategies. Our main point is to try to prepare the child for situations in which the headset doesn't work, or when being in a noisy, visually distracting situation is unavoidable, without the child having to resort to a CIB.

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## **Should We Use Punishment?**

As noted, the most important aspect of any behavior intervention package is identifying why the contextually inappropriate behavior is occurring and then implementing a plan to assure the child will use a better replacement behavior. Preventive and ameliorative strategies also will be helpful. Still, even with the best of prevention and replacement strategies, we should recognize that if a child has frequently spat at people for the past several years, it is highly likely that another spitting episode will occur before significant progress is seen.

### ***Ignoring Behavior***

What, then, should parents and others do when the contextually inappropriate behavior does take place? Many people automatically think, "Ignore it!" This strategy may be helpful if the CIB is motivated by some type of reward that you can eliminate. However, if the CIB is related to your child's desire for escape or avoidance, ignoring him may be precisely what he wants! So, we first must understand that how we react should be related to why the behavior is taking place.

If the CIB is related to getting attention, then ignoring the child should be helpful. Of course, ignoring screams or tantrums is not easy! Rather than simply trying not to respond, you may do better if you plan something specific that results in the equivalent of not attending to your child. For example, one parent took out a specific notebook and began to write her thoughts (including angry ones!) while her child was screaming at her. Because she was intent on her writing, she did not pay attention to the screaming. Another parent put on a headset and listened to classical music whenever her son took all the pots and pans out from the cabinet. Again, she

engaged in something that helped her not attend to the noise of the crashing pots and pans.

If you decide to try to use ignoring (more formally called *extinction*), you must be certain that you can follow through on your plan. To make this happen, you must be able to assure that your child will only receive the reward connected to the CIB with your permission. For example, if you are trying to withhold attention for screaming but you know that your other children will likely provide some attention, then your strategy of ignoring the behavior will not truly be implemented. If you cannot completely control the reward for your child's CIB, then you risk rewarding the CIB after your child has escalated his efforts, essentially making the reduction or elimination of the CIB more difficult. If the potential reward—social attention, for example—can be provided by more than one person—every adult in the home, in this case—then everyone must use the strategy or it will not be effective for anyone.

### **Time Out**

Another commonly used strategy is time out (TO). This strategy works best when the CIB is associated with receiving some type of reward and may be helpful in situations involving elicited actions. For example, if your child starts to scream because he wants you to take him outside or because he simply wants you to play with him, time out can be part of an effective strategy. It is not as likely to be effective for escape- or avoidance-related behaviors. If your child is smiling on the way to the TO area, then you are not using the right intervention!

To implement time out in your home, you will most likely want to designate a specific location that is boring (*not* the child's room), but not scary (*not* a small, closed closet). When you observe your child engaging in the CIB, calmly and matter-of-factly tell him to go to time out. Most likely, you will have to firmly guide your child to the area, where you may have placed a chair. Have a kitchen-timer (or similar device) by the chair and set it for one to two minutes. Setting the timer for longer periods of time has not been shown to be more effective and reduces the child's opportunities to learn appropriate alternatives.

While your child is in the TO area, try not to interact in any manner—no eye contact or facial reactions to anything your child does (short of seriously hurting himself). If he attempts to leave, firmly and

physically guide him to stay in the chair but try to do this without talking or explaining what you are doing. When the timer rings, announce the end of TO and immediately point out what reward your child can earn for some appropriate action—the same rewards you had made available before you started the activity. This last step is crucial: time-*out* works only if time-*in* is rewarding. From your child's point of view, if there are no benefits to being out of TO, then why bother to leave?

You can use TO in the community, although implementing it away from your home can be a little trickier. If you routinely go to a park, then pick a spot that will serve as the TO area—somewhere that you can reasonably assure the other children will not play with your child. If you visit someone else's home, pick a location as soon as you arrive—even the bottom of a staircase may serve the purpose. If you are in a community setting such as a store or the mall, then you may want to use a ribbon or light necklace to signal time out. That is, if your child engages in a problem behavior, place the ribbon or necklace around your child's neck and set a timer.

During the timed period, try to ignore everything your child does. Your child may well escalate his inappropriate behavior, but as long as it is not dangerous to him or others or particularly destructive, it is best to continue to ignore his attempts to force interactions with you. Once the timer rings, signal the end of TO by reminding your child about the potential rewards for appropriate actions—for example, going to his favorite store for calmly walking with you, picking out a piece of candy for holding onto the box of cereal while in the supermarket, etc. Remind others with you about the rule associated with wearing the ribbon.

### **Verbal Reprimands**

When your child is engaging in a problem behavior, you also may want to say, “No” or “Stop,” or use some other type of quick verbal reprimand. Your child is very likely to hear these words at school or in the community, so it is a good idea to teach him what they mean. There are a few simple rules for using verbal reprimands:

1. Use a matter-of-fact tone of voice and speak loudly enough that you are sure that you've been heard. Screaming, yelling, or shouting will not make the message more effective and may generate reactions that will be counterproductive.

2. Avoid using a singsong manner: “no, no, no!!” This style will diminish the serious intent of the message.

You may want to teach your child what “no” and “stop” mean in situations when everyone is calm and the likelihood of any CIB is remote. For example, you may set up a game in which your child is searching through various closed boxes for a treat or favorite toy. You calmly say, “no” as your child approaches an empty box and immediately encourage him to try another box. In this manner, “no” comes to provide useful information to your child as well as informing him not to proceed with an action.

Similarly, you may set up a game of tag, or some equivalent game involving chasing. It is important to try this game in a safe situation—a hallway or room where the exits are already secured. When you say, “run,” you will chase your child when he runs and make the chase exciting. When you say, “stop,” the rule is that if your child stops, you will walk over and then restart the game. However, if your child does not stop, then you end the game (possibly by just walking away). This type of game teaches your child the value of responding to “stop” in a safe setting before you need to try it in a more difficult situation.

### **Fines**

If you are using a type of token or other visual reward system (e.g., collecting puzzle pieces or letters that spell out the name of the reward) you will be tempted to use fines if your child behaves inappropriately. We advise that you not take away tokens that your child has already earned by good learning or other positive actions. Instead, you may want to create a separate system that builds in a type of countdown strategy. For example, your daughter may enjoy playing on the computer but she also has a rude habit of yelling to get your attention. You give her a card that has five pictures of the computer game she likes to play. You also remind her to use her “inside voice” when she begins to speak to you. Of course, you will reward her with attention whenever she uses an appropriate tone. But when she does yell, you remind her of what she should do (speak quietly) and remove one of the pictures.

After an hour (or whatever your goal is), if she has at least one computer picture remaining, then give her access to her favorite game for some time. This way, you can have a deal in place for good

“work”(your token system related to the learning goals you have established for her) and a separate deal for good “behavior” (your count-down system connected with the computer).

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## **Don't Forget to Evaluate What You're Doing!**

Let's be realistic. Although you probably know it is important to evaluate the strategies you are using, it is not easy to do so while you are dealing with an inappropriate behavior. However, we want to stress the importance of this type of evaluation. We should never scold, reprimand, ignore, or use time out if it is not producing the outcome we are hoping for—reducing or eliminating a contextually inappropriate behavior. Therefore, if you are willing to put in the time and effort to use some type of intervention, then you also must be willing to put in time and effort to collect information to assure its success. How you collect information may depend upon what it is you are trying to modify. In Chapter 8, we will describe ways that you can collect this type of information at home and in the community.

We know that data collection and evaluation can seem like a daunting task, but we also are sure that significantly reducing your child's inappropriate behavior is important to you and your family. You may want to set up some type of reward for yourself and the entire family for your successes—that is, remember to treat yourself (and anyone who has been helpful) well! Changing CIBs requires a lot of planning and dedication, so take time to celebrate when things are going well.

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## **Review**

Within this area of the Pyramid Approach, we've talked about many aspects of dealing with contextually inappropriate behaviors. First, you must determine why the behavior is taking place. Next, you must identify a replacement behavior that is directly related to what you've figured out in the first step. Then, you need a system to assure that the replacement will be effective in getting your child what he wants and that he will be rewarded for using the new behavior. Next, you need to measure changes in the CIB and the potential replace-

ment behavior, and then decide whether the change is appropriate or whether you need to modify your strategy. Finally, if things have improved, enjoy the fruits of your labor!

The next critical area of the Pyramid Approach addresses how to best evaluate whether our teaching and behavior intervention plans are truly effective.