

Functions of Behaviour

Rationale:

All behaviour occurs for a reason. Sometimes the reason will be clear, but at other times it may not be clear. What can be said with certainty is that your child is demonstrating a challenging behaviour because it meets a specific need for him or her. Understanding *why* the behaviour may be happening is necessary in order to select more appropriate behaviours to replace the challenging ones and also, to create an effective, long-term plan. For the purpose of this information sheet, we will be focusing on understanding the functions of challenging behaviours. Please note that the function of the behaviour needs to be further investigated and a function cannot be determined by a single occurrence.

Behaviour may occur for one of these 4 reasons: Escape, Attention, Tangible, and Automatic Reinforcement

Escaping Situations, Tasks, or People

Sometimes children may engage in challenging behaviour to escape from situations, tasks or people. For example; your child throws food on the floor and is told “dinner is over” then your child may learn that throwing food on the floor means that he does not have to eat it.

Attention: Adult or Peer

Sometimes children may engage in challenging behaviour to get attention from others (e.g., parent, sibling, teacher, peer, etc.). Attention can take many forms (e.g., looking at your child, talking with your child, giving help, laughing at the child, and even using a firm voice with the child). Sometimes your child may be looking for attention in any way possible. This could mean praise or even getting angry with them. For example, a child cries whenever you are on the phone, and then the parent yells, “stop crying, I’m on the phone!”. The child may learn that crying when you are on the phone will result in attention from their parents.

Tangible Items

Sometimes children may engage in challenging behaviour to receive a tangible item or a desired activity. Tangible items can include: food, toys, computer time, turn at a game, etc. For example, your child goes up to his sibling at home, pushes them, and as a result gets the toy car; your child may learn that pushing others will result in gaining an item.

Automatic

Sometimes children may engage in challenging behaviours because it is internally reinforcing. It is important to note that what the behaviour looks like does not give an indication of its function. For example, if your child flaps his hands, he may not be doing so to meet an automatic need; rather it will depend on what *happens after* the behaviour and *where the behaviour occurs*. For example, behaviours that serve as automatic function will occur across all environments, with a variety of different people and even when others are not there.

OK, I know the function. What now?

Now that you have an idea of why a challenging behaviour is happening, the next step is to look at what strategies to use to eliminate this behaviour from being effective.

As an example, Raphael hits his brother with a closed fist. Does he hit his brother because he wants to leave the grocery store and go sit in the car (escape)? Does he hit his brother to gain access to a toy his brother is playing with (tangible)? Does he hit his brother to gain attention from his parents (attention)? Does he hit his brother because this fills an automatic need (automatic)? As you can see, a single behaviour could look the same but serve a different function

Escaping Situations, Tasks, or People

If your child is avoiding a demand or task, some strategies that may be effective are:

- Using a first-then board
- Using a visual schedule
- Establishing a good rapport
- Using social stories™
- Offering choices
- Clear expectations
- Follow through

Attention: Adult or Peer

If your child has the intent to socially engage or get a reaction from another person some strategies that may be effective:

- Teach your child new and more appropriate ways to seek attention (e.g., tap on shoulder, “look at me”) and reinforce when these new behaviours occur
- Give positive attention many times throughout the day
- Ignore when undesired attention seeking behaviour occurs

Tangible Items

If your child has an activity or item they want some strategies that may be effective:

- Increase the variety of activities/items your child is interested in so there are more things to help motivate your child
- Teaching your child to accept 'no'
- Control access to tangibles
- Teach your child to request
- Transitional warnings

Automatic

If your child has behaviours that are internally reinforcing that could provide a need for relief, a calming sensation, or a pleasing sensation, here are some strategies that may be effective:

- Introduce your child to self-management techniques
- Redirect inappropriate behaviours to more functional ones and reinforce those behaviours (e.g., tapping fingers on a table ☞ tapping keys on a piano)
- Reinforce behaviours that are incompatible with the self-stimulatory behaviour (e.g. a child that flaps their hands would be reinforced for keeping their hands folded)
- Physical exercise may decrease behaviour
- Seek medical advice