

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

Trying to Figure Out the Function for Problem Behaviors? Ask the Child!

Introduction

When addressing problem behaviors in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the first step is to determine the function the behavior serves. The main reason why we need to determine the function for problem behavior is so that we can teach the child replacement skills that are more appropriate that can serve the same function. There are many tools teachers and behavior specialists use when doing a functional behavior assessment to determine the function of a problem behavior. Yet, one of the most effective things we can do first when trying to determine the function of a challenging behavior, however, is to ask the child why he/she is engaging in the problem behavior. You would be amazed at what you can learn about a student's problem behavior if you just ask. This issue of **NASET's Autism Spectrum Disorder series**, written by Deb Leach, Ed. D., BCBA (and reprinted with permission from Doug Goldberg at *The Special Education Advisor* at <http://www.specialeducationadvisor.com/trying-to-figure-out-the-function-for-problem-behaviors-ask-the-child/#more-15324>, will explore the impact and effectiveness of asking children directly about their problem behaviors and why they do what they do.

When addressing problem behaviors in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), the first step is to determine the function the behavior serves. The main reason why we need to determine the function for problem behavior is so that we can teach the child replacement skills that are more appropriate that can serve the same function. There are many tools teachers and behavior specialists use when doing a functional behavior assessment to determine the function of a problem behavior. They conduct functional behavior assessment interviews with caregivers and professionals. They observe and record the antecedents leading up to the problem behavior and the consequences that follow the behavior. They collect scatter plot data in which they document when and where the behavior is most and least likely to occur. And if they are real savvy, they go as far as doing functional behavior analyses in which they actually manipulate variables in the environment to test out the hypothesis for the function of the behavior. For more info on functional behavior assessment, click on this helpful link: <http://cecp.air.org/fba/>

One of the most effective things we can do first when trying to determine the function of a challenging behavior, however, is to ask the child why he/she is engaging in the problem behavior. You would be amazed at what you can learn about a student's problem behavior if you just ask. There was a boy in middle school who cried very often, which was a "contaminating behavior" for him socially because the other kids were turned off by it. Instead of jumping in and doing a full blown functional behavior assessment, his teacher asked him why he cries all of the time. In a heartbreaking tone of voice, he said "I'm just worried all of the time." So within seconds the teacher could rule out that he was crying to get attention or to avoid work. He was crying to regulate his emotions of anxiety and fear. So...the teacher implemented some emotional regulation interventions, and his crying significantly decreased.

National Association of Special Education Teachers

You may be thinking, “What about kids who are non-verbal?” In those cases, you would try to get a response using augmentative and alternative communication (assuming the child has an effective communication system in place). The reality is, many kids who are non-verbal do not effectively communicate in alternative means. However, we can still try to find ways to “ask the student” the purpose of a challenging behavior. A few years ago when I was delivering a teacher training, one of the participants, who was an autism specialist, gave the best example of this: One of the teachers she supports contacted her because a student with autism was regularly running out of the classroom.

According to the teacher “she tried everything” to stop this behavior with no success. So, the autism specialist asked, “Where is he trying to go?” (What a smart question!) The teacher replied, “I have no idea. We just get him as soon as possible and bring him back to the classroom. The autism specialist recommended following the student to see where he was going to be able to determine the function for the running away behavior. It turns out that the student was running to get to the faculty lounge because he would see the man who refills the vending machines pulling into the school through the classroom window, and he wanted to get to the lounge to get a chance to see the man open up the machines and refill the products. Once again, it was quickly determined that the student was not running to get attention or to avoid work: He was running to try to see something he found very interesting. While the student was unable to tell why he was running out of the classroom verbally, he was able to show the teachers why he was running. So the intervention was simple: Allow the student to go to the faculty lounge a few minutes before the vending machine operator was scheduled to arrive, and he would then receive some job training on refilling vending machines each time the operator came to the school. You would think that would be the intervention that anyone would come up with, but I can’t tell you how many times I tell that story at teacher trainings and teachers say the intervention should be shutting the blinds on the classroom window so the student cannot see the truck pulling in! If we are able to determine the function of a challenging behavior, our intervention plan should consist of teaching replacement behaviors that are more appropriate that serve the same function.

About the Author

Deb Leach is an Associate Professor of Special Education at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. Her passion is working with families, educators, and community groups to help support the successful inclusion of individuals with ASD using principles of ABA and other evidence-based practices. Her focus is on finding ways to bring ABA interventions into the everyday lives of individuals with ASD to increase family, community, and school inclusion and reduce the need for segregated services. She provides training and consultation for educators, schools, school districts, caregivers, and community groups related to supporting individuals with ASD. Visit her website www.bringingaba.com for more information.