



Four Functions of Behavior

Behaviors occur for a reason

Children engage in all kinds of behavior. Your child may have some behaviors they do again and again. These repeated behaviors often serve some purpose or function, even if they are disruptive. Unless a behavior serves some kind of function for your child, it won't keep happening.

When we say the “function” of behavior we mean the reason why the behavior occurs. While it can be hard to understand why a child does something such as hurt themselves or be aggressive, there is always an underlying function that the behavior serves for them.

Behavior can serve more than one function. For example, a child might hurt themselves during class to get out of having to complete school work. Then they might also hurt themselves on the playground to get attention from the teachers.

Four common functions of behavior

To get attention

A child may do a certain behavior to get some form of attention or a reaction from other people. For example, a child might engage in a behavior to get other people to look at them, laugh at them, play with, hug or scold them.

While it may seem strange that a child would engage in a behavior to get scolded, it can occur because for some children it is better to get bad attention than none at all.

To get an object or do an activity

Some behaviors occur so the child can get a tangible item or gain access to a desired activity. For example a child may scream and shout until their parents buy them a new toy (tangible item) or bring them to the zoo (activity).

To escape or avoid something

Not all behaviors occur so the child can get something. Many behaviors occur because the child wants to get away or avoid something. For example, a child might become aggressive so the teacher stops doing school work with them. Another child may begin to bite their hands or scratch themselves to avoid having to go outside to play with classmates.

To Learn More

- Autism Center
206-987-8080
- Ask your child's
healthcare provider
- www.seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask
your child's nurse.
- From outside the
hospital, call the
toll-free Family
Interpreting Line
1-866-583-1527. Tell
the interpreter the
name or extension you
need.

Sensory stimulation

Some behaviors a child does feel good to them internally and are called “self-stimulating.” Self-stimulation functions to give the child some form of internal sensation that is pleasing or to deal with a sensation that is uncomfortable such as pain.

For example, a child might rock back and forth because it is enjoyable for them. Another child might rub their knee to sooth the pain after banging it. In both cases, these children do not engage in either behavior to get attention, any tangible items or to escape any demands placed on them.

How can understanding the function of my child's behavior help?

Learning the function behind your child's disruptive behaviors can help you understand your child's needs. You can also use the information in a treatment plan to help your child learn an alternative behavior (such as signaling for help instead of hitting or yelling). It is also helpful information to share with your child's day care, school and therapists.

- When you watch your child doing an disruptive behavior, think about what the function might be.
- Is your child trying to escape a task or a situation? Is it happening because your child wants to get a favorite item to activity? Does it happen when your child is not getting attention?
- Focus on problem behaviors that interfere with day to day functioning. These may be the most important to find their function to help set therapy goals and support changes for your child's behavior.

Adapted from “Functions of Behaviour” with permission by Gavin Cosgrave from Educate Autism.
www.educateautism.com

Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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