

Children with Autism and Behavior Challenges

What Families Need to Know

Overview of Behavior

Every child has behavior challenges at times. Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are no exception. Some of the challenges you may face if your child has ASD include relating to and communicating with other people. Children with ASD may try to communicate through their behaviors instead of their words. Children with ASD may also do things without thinking. They may be sensitive in different ways to their environment or to touch, sound, or other senses. They may not understand why another child might not want to play exactly the way they do.

Children with ASD may also have repetitive behaviors or want things to always stay the same. So, when a change in their routine happens, behavior challenges may appear. Every child's behavior is unique, but learning these behavioral principles can help.

Behavioral Basics

Basic behavior principles can help you figure out how to respond to help you get more of the behaviors you want and face less of the challenging behaviors. Understanding them can help support your child in interacting with others, and participating in learning or social interactions.

Some problem behaviors that might happen include throwing a tantrum to get something they want or to get attention, avoiding a request by doing something else instead. Repetitive

behaviors or habits, like nail-biting or behaviors that come from frustration, because a child might not be able to say what they need.

A child with ASD may use “stimming behaviors” like rocking back and forth or flapping their hand to help them show excitement, adapt to the environment, or deal with stress. These stimming behaviors should not be discouraged unless they are a safety hazard or get in the way of learning. A child may show tics or hyperactivity.

Challenging Behaviors

Challenging behaviors that are more common in children with ASD can be harmful. Some of these behaviors can be treated with medications, but it's helpful to understand if there is a reason behind the behavior first. Treatment works better if those reasons are also addressed. Some behaviors may begin for one reason and then continue because they help get the child what they want. Self-harm, eating things that are not food (pica), smearing feces, running off, and wandering are all examples of problem behaviors. Talk with your child's pediatrician, a school behavioral specialist, or a psychologist if your child has behaviors that are hard for you or your family.

Managing behaviors is hard and means that you need to be both consistent and flexible.



What You Can Do About Challenging Behaviors

Taking action consistently or trying to always have the same response when the behaviors occur can be helpful in addressing challenging behavior. Your child's behaviors and your expectations will change as your child grows up.

Rewarding Behaviors You Want More Of

Teaching a child how to behave in the way you want is the most important part of a behavior plan. It might take awhile for your child's behavior to change because you will need to teach them the behaviors you want - praising or rewarding when this behavior occurs is helpful! Rewards are different for each child. They can include smiles, praise, or earning special privileges. The type of reward and how often it is given depend on the child's age and developmental level.



Make sure that the reward is given in a time that makes sense for the child. For example, it is best to reward younger children right after the behavior (sticker, high five, praise). Older children may be able to understand time, so you can use a star or sticker chart. Teenagers may work towards weekly rewards. Remember, a reward is not the same as a bribe.

Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics Family Handouts: Behavior Challenges, *Caring for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Practical Resource Toolkit for Clinicians*, 3rd Edition toolkits.aap.org

Privileges

Your child can earn privileges for behaviors you want and get them taken away for behaviors you don't want to reinforce. This can help teach new behaviors. Note that "time-outs" will work only if "time in" is positive. Sometimes children act up because they find the behaviors you want stressful, so a time-out may be a relief. Figuring out what is stressful for your child about the activity is important. See the article titled "How to Give a Time-Out" on HealthyChildren.org for more information.

Consequences

Sometimes, consequences are necessary for challenging behaviors. What counts as a consequence looks different from child to child, and does not always need to be something big. It might be as simple as helping to clean up a mess they made. Do not ever spank or harm your child. Violence toward any child is not only not recommended, it can also teach your child to be violent when they are angry.

The ABC Method

Thinking about your child's behavior in this order can help you understand why it happened and how to stop it in the future:

- *A = antecedent, or what happened before your child's behavior*
- *B = behavior, or what your child did*
- *C = consequence, or what happened after your child's behavior*

The goal is to avoid situations that can lead to problem behaviors and to reward good behaviors. Schools can also help. Ask your child's school about a functional behavioral assessment (FBA), a special test where a behavioral specialist watches your child at school or at home to understand the ABCs of their behavior. The specialist can then use this information to make a behavioral intervention plan (BIP). BIPs show the behaviors you want, the behaviors that need to be changed, and what should be done when a behavior happens. The best plans are positive and include rewards to encourage behaviors you want.