

# *Understanding Challenging Behavior in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder*

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# New York Center for Infants and Toddlers, Inc.



For over 20 years, NYCIT has provided therapeutic and educational services for young children with special needs and their families. We offer services in homes, community locations, and our specialized school-based settings. Backed by research, in partnership with UCLA, conducted within our own Early Intervention program, we've improved outcomes in the development of language, social communication, and play skills for young children diagnosed with Autism.



# *Understanding Challenging Behavior in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder:*

**WHY DOES  
CHALLENGING  
BEHAVIOR  
HAPPEN?**



# Basic Principles of Behavior

(Bambara & Kern, 2005)



- **Behavior is communicative**
  - Challenging behavior often arises from difficulties in relating, communicating, or thinking flexibly
  - These behaviors are often used as a form of communication.
    - It is effective & efficient!
- **Behavior is functional**
  - All behavior serves a FUNCTION (there is always a reason for it!)
- **Behavior is lawful**
  - No behavior is random!



# Behavior = Communication!





When challenging behavior happens,  
ask yourself...



What is my  
child trying  
to tell me?



# Behavior is functional!

In order to figure out HOW to address a challenging behavior, you need to find out...

What is the FUNCTION of the behavior?





When challenging behavior happens,  
ALSO ask yourself...



Why is this  
behavior  
happening?





## Behavior is Communicative and Functional

The next time you see a child engaging in a challenging behavior, **ASK** yourself:

What is the child trying to tell me?

Why is this behavior happening?

ESCAPE/AVOID  
THE TASK?

TO GET SOMEONE'S  
ATTENTION?

Hmmm...

TO ACCESS/AVOID SENSORY  
STIMULATION?

ACCESS TO PREFERRED  
ACTIVITY/ITEM?



**Let's be a behavior detective!**

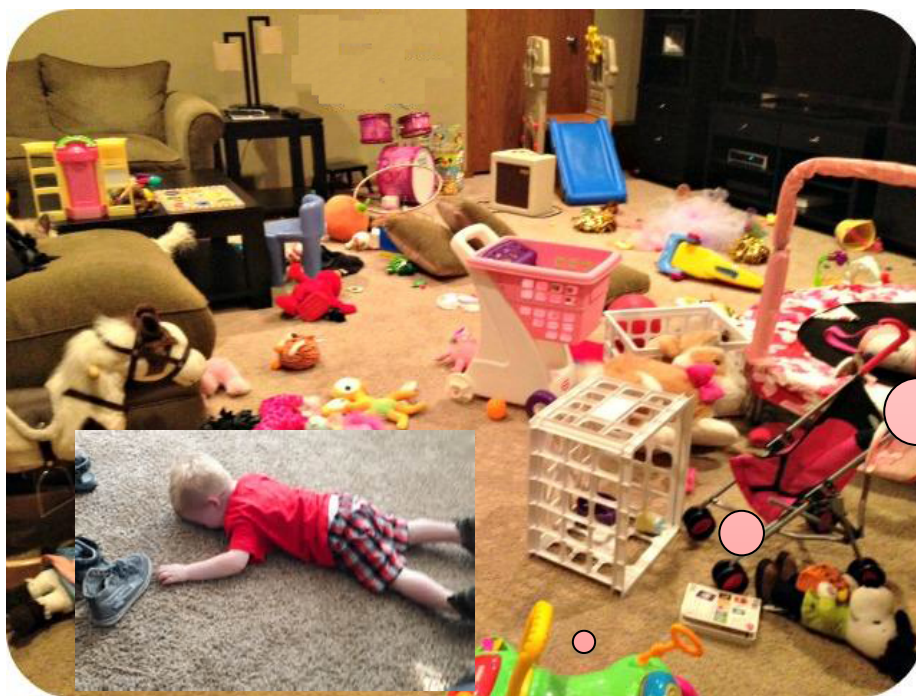




Ask yourself...

“What is this child trying to tell me?”

“Why is this behavior happening?”



“I don't want to!!!”

Escape/Avoidance  
of a task



Ask yourself...

“What is this child trying to tell me?”

“Why is this behavior happening?”



“Pay attention to ME!!”

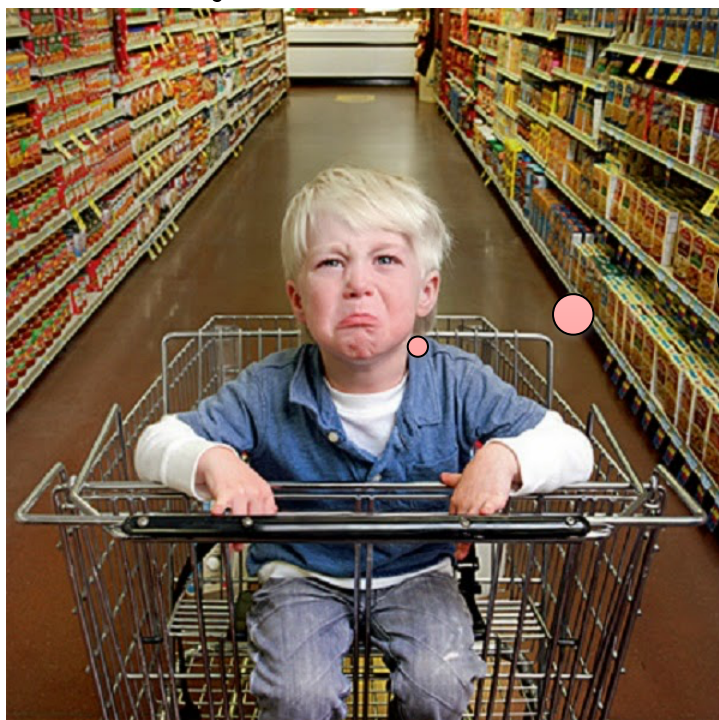
Attention



Ask yourself...

“What is this child trying to tell me?”

“Why is this behavior happening?”



“I want it  
NOW!!!”

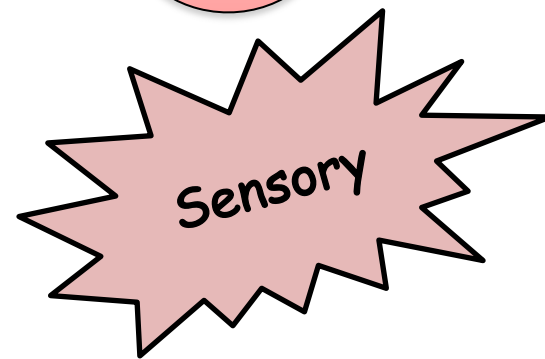
Access to  
Item/Activity



Ask yourself...

“What is this child trying to tell me?”

“Why is this behavior happening?”





Ask yourself...

“What is this child trying to tell me?”

“Why is this behavior happening?”



“Ouch! I’m  
in pain!!”

Medical



“What is this child trying to tell me  
AND  
Why is this behavior happening?”

- “Pay attention to me!!” ATTENTION
- “I want it now!” TANGIBLE/ACTIVITY
- “I don’t want to!!” ESCAPE/AVOIDANCE
- “This makes me feel good!!” SENSORY
- “Ouch! I’m in pain!!” MEDICAL





# 5 "functions" of behavior

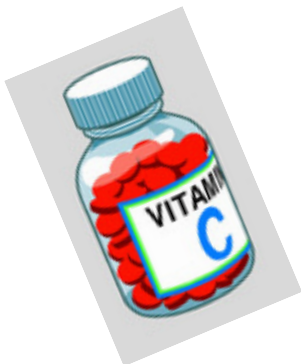
1. To get attention
2. Access to items/activities
3. Avoid/Escape demands or situations
4. Sensory stimulation
5. Medical issues/Pain



# A way to remember...



+



- **M**edical
- **E**scape/Avoidance
- **A**ttention
- **T**angible/Activity
- **S**ensory

Pay attention: sometimes it can be a **C**OMBINATION of factors!!



When we know the  
**FUNCTION** we can  
better treat the  
behavior!

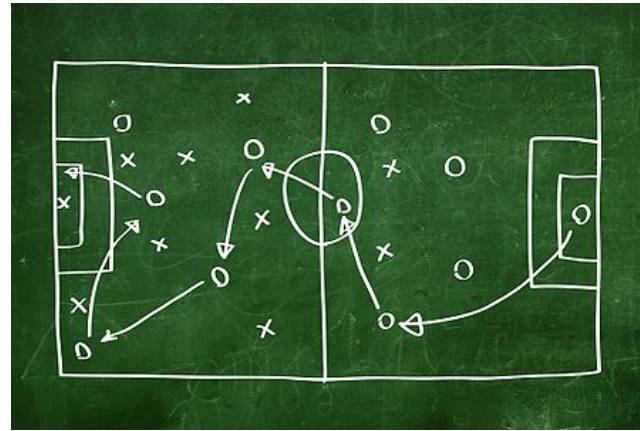


# FORMULA FOR TREATMENT

1. What is the child trying to **COMMUNICATE** ?
2. What is the **FUNCTION**?
3. **CREATE A STRATEGY TO MATCH THE FUNCTION!**



# STRATEGY



1. How will you **PREVENT** it?
2. How will you **TEACH** a replacement behavior?
3. How will you **RESPOND**?



“

WHEN WE UNDERSTAND HOW  
A CHILD'S  
**challenging  
behaviors**  
SERVE AS  
**communication,**  
WE CAN DEVISE STRATEGIES  
THAT TEACH THE CHILD TO  
COMMUNICATE IN MORE  
DESIRABLE WAYS.



From *Prevent-Teach-Reinforce for Families*, by Glen Dunlap et al.

**BROOKES**  
PUBLISHING CO.



# RESOURCES

## Facebook Groups:

- "The 7 Steps to Successful Parenting"
- "Parenting with Science"

## Books:

- "Overcoming Autism: Finding the Answers, Strategies and Hope That Can Transform a Child's Life" by Lynn Kern Koegel (2014)



# NEW YORK CENTER FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

**An Early Intervention and Private Service program for young children with special needs and their families.**

***Services provided through our programs:***

- Service Coordination
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- Speech Therapy
- Physical Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- ABA Services
- Social Work
- School for young children with Autism (ABA and JASPER interventions)
- Family Coaching
- Clinical Consultation

For more information or to make a referral, please call (212) 561-5300 OR via email at [info.nycit@nycit.org](mailto:info.nycit@nycit.org)



***"[The Center] saved our lives. It is the most amazing school. The teachers and supervisors are kind, dedicated, encouraging and supportive." — Parent***

*The Early Intervention Program (EIP) is a public program for children under the age of three who have or are suspected of having a developmental delay or disability. EIP is funded by New York State and county governments. Potentially eligible children must be referred to New York City's EIP by calling 311 to receive EIP services. New York Center for Infants and Toddlers is an approved provider of EIP services and under contract with NYS/NYC EIP to provide EIP services. All EIP services are provided at no out of pocket cost to parents. Health insurance may be accessed for reimbursement for EIP services provided. A child's eligibility for the program can be determined only by state approved evaluators under contract with NYS/NYC EI. If a child is found eligible for EIP services all needed services are identified in collaboration with the parent and must be authorized by NYC EIP. NYC EIP will arrange for service providers, considering the individual needs of the child and family, to deliver services authorized by the municipality. When EIP services are delivered in child care settings or community locations that require a fee, the parent is responsible for paying any associated costs with such access to child care or community locations.*





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