

# Behavior Problems

by  
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## What if the child cries to get what he wants?

### Counting Procedure

This procedure lets the child know that reinforcement is currently not available (S-Delta). It can be used when a child wants something that he can have, but not for inappropriate behavior. Child exhibits a negative behavior (crying, kicking, screaming etc.) in order to get something he wants.

Instructor: "No crying." (*Begins counting as soon as the child takes a breath but stops as soon as the crying begins again.*)

Instructor: Repeats, "No crying" (*Starts counting again each time the child stops crying.*)

STUDENT: <Eventually stops crying for a count of 10.>

Instructor: Prompts the child on his current level (imitative, hand-over hand sign, "what do you want?") to request (mand) for what he wants.

For some children, this procedure may actually escalate the tantrum. If so, it is possible that the presence of the instructor or parent still suggests that he can get what he wants (discriminative stimulus for reinforcement). This can be especially true early in teaching if the parent or instructor has reinforced the tantrum in the past. If this is the case, the parent/instructor should leave the room, ignoring the tantrum (assuming the child is doing nothing that could cause injury or destruction). As soon as it is over, return and prompt the child to request what he wants appropriately.

Be aware that some children, especially those who are highly echoic, may begin to chain the counting into their requests (mands). If this is the case, use your fingers to mark the passage of time instead of counting out loud.

## What if the child starts crying or screaming but doesn't appear to want anything?

In this case, the negative behaviors may be a request (mand) for attention. Parents have a natural tendency to run to their child when he's in distress. We consider it our "job" as parents to figure out what's wrong. Unfortunately, the child may have figured out (learned) that whenever he wants his parents to pay attention to him, he just has to scream. Does this mean you have to ignore your child when he is hurt or upset? No, not entirely. If the child has fallen and hurt his knee, by all means comfort him and put a band-aid on his knee. But, if your child is frequently crying and when you go to him, nothing appears to be wrong, he may be crying to gain your attention. In this case, it is important that you stop reinforcing the behavior by giving attention to your child. Instead, **give lots of attention when the child is engaged in appropriate behaviors**. For example, approach him when he is looking at a book quietly and offer him lots of hugs and kind words (if he likes hugs and kind words!). Never give attention to the problem behavior again. Timeout or ignoring will work if the problem behavior is an attempt to gain attention. If the child is using self-injurious or destructive behavior to gain attention, don't leave the child alone. Block the behavior and protect the child but do not say anything and do not provide any "soothing" touches.

Teach the child to use "words" to tell you he needs attention. For example, teach him to say, "I want a hug", or "come play with me" and be sure to give lots of attention when he uses these words!



**What if the child is able to say the word but refuses to ask for what he wants?** It is rarely the case that a child is actually refusing to say a word when he has a strong desire for an item. Just because a child can say a word to name something doesn't mean that he can request the item using the same word. Even if a child is able to inconsistently use a word to request things, it can be very difficult for some children to recall which word to use, especially under pressure. For example, many children with apraxia may be able to say a word just fine imitatively and even produce it correctly without a model on occasion but when asked, "What do you want?" the child may not be able to "come up with" the word. The best thing to do is to go ahead and prompt the child, even if you think he "knows" the word. Give him a small amount of what he has requested then try to get an unprompted response. Example:

Parent: "What do you want?" (child reaching for cookie) "Cookie."  
 STUDENT: "Cookie." (parent gives a small piece of the cookie)  
 Parent: "What do you want?" (transfer from echoic)  
 STUDENT: "Cookie."  
 Parent: "What are you doing?"  
 STUDENT: "Eating."  
 Parent: "That's right! Something you eat is a \_\_\_\_\_." (FFC fill-in)  
 STUDENT: "Cookie."  
 Parent: "That's right smartie! What do you want?"  
 STUDENT: "Cookie."

**What if the child begins screaming to get out of a place or situation?**

This is, in essence, escape behavior. When a child exhibits negative behavior to serve this function, it is important to never allow the child to escape or avoid the demand that has been placed on him. Once a demand is made, it is important that the instructor/parent follow through even if it is necessary to physically prompt the child to comply. We then need to examine our teaching strategies to determine if the demands are reasonably based on the child's skill level. We also have to look at the environment to see what the child may be escaping from (lighting, noises, smells, etc). It is important to teach the child a replacement behavior. For example, you can teach the child to ask for a break. Give the child a break whenever he asks at first. Later, when the child asks, let him know when a break will be available.

**What if the behavior has been reinforced with self-stimulation (things that feel good to the child)?**

In this case, you want to physically prevent the behavior from occurring. Self stimulating behaviors reinforce themselves. If a child is allowed to continue, the behavior will increase. Teach the child to enjoy social interactions (by pairing) and other activities that provide the same sensory input in more appropriate and less harmful ways.

