

Dealing With Behaviors Before They Happen

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When we talk about manipulating the conditions before a behavior occurs (antecedent) we're talking about ways to **avoid** negative behaviors from happening in the first place. This should not be confused with how we **react** after a behavior occurs (consequence) which determines whether or not a behavior will be likely to continue in the future. It is critical to understand that both have the ability to change behaviors but for different reasons. In addition, if we attempt to deal with either one in isolation, we won't be as effective in making significant changes than if we attempt to deal with both. In fact, if we only pay attention to antecedent conditions, the negative behavior will continue if the way we are reacting is reinforcing the behavior.

Antecedent manipulations can include many things but should take into account the knowledge we have about the individual child, his reactions to the environment and the ability he has to understand what is happening around him. It is important to be sensitive to the needs of the child while at the same time teaching him to be able to function in society with other people with as few modifications as necessary to be successful. In other words, we can use whatever tools needed to teach the child based on his current skills but should also include teaching that will allow us to fade prompts and supports as the child learns new skills.

Child Specific Characteristics:

Sensory System - Learn the child. Know his typical responses to sound, touch, smells, movement, tastes etc. While it's important to be respectful of the child's reactions to the environment, we can't keep him from ever experiencing a situation that he finds aversive to his senses. For some children, this would mean keeping them separated from the rest of the world forever! If you anticipate that the child may have difficulty in a given situation as a result of his sensory system, plan to gradually "desensitize" him to the extent possible. To do this, the child is introduced to the situation for small periods at a time and he is reinforced for his ability to tolerate the setting for longer and longer periods of time. Sometimes the child's reaction is so strong that desensitization won't be effective. If this is the case, it will be important to choose learning environments for the child that take into account the way he responds to various stimuli in the environment. It also may be helpful to "pair" mildly aversive conditions with things that the child finds reinforcing such as his favorite toy, book or food. The movie theatre might not be too loud if the movie is about his favorite character and he has his favorite toy with him. Teach the child to be his own advocate by communicating the way he is reacting to the environment (replacement behavior). For example, the child might be taught to say, "It's too loud!", "I don't like that." or "Let's go" when he feels unable to handle the stimulation in the environment.

Anxiety in unpredictable situations/need for "sameness" - Children differ in their ability to deal with changes in their routine or situations that are unpredictable. If your child/student gets extremely anxious in new situations, some negative behaviors can be avoided by letting him know what to expect in a way he understands. If the child understands language, talk to him about what to expect in the situation. Books can sometimes be helpful. For example, frequently read a book about going to the dentist before making a trip. Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations (Carol Gray) can be helpful in letting the child know what to expect in a given situation. In addition, visual schedules can be helpful for children who don't understand verbal language very well. In essence, the pictures tell the child what is going to happen during the day or during a specific period of the day. It is important to gradually fade the "need" for these schedules as the child gains language skills. For example, when the child is able to understand, "First we're going to the grocery store, then to grandma's and



then we'll go to the park." when it is stated verbally, there should no longer be a need for a visual schedule. In addition, children can learn to tolerate some spontaneity in their life! This can be accomplished by adding fun things into the day that aren't included in the schedule. Make sure the "different" activity is one that is highly preferred by the child. In essence, you're teaching him that unexpected things can really be fun! It is also important to teach the child to communicate his need to get information about what's going to happen. For example, children might be taught to ask, "What's next?" or "Where are we going?" if they need information.

Comprehension of Social Situations - Many children with autism have difficulty "reading" non-verbal communications such as body posture and facial expressions. In addition, many have difficulty learning the "rules" of social interactions. As a result, they may say or do things that are inappropriate for the situation. Children can be directly taught these skills. Comic Strip Conversations and Social Stories can be helpful in teaching these skills if the child's language is at a point where he cannot understand explanations given verbally. In addition, we can teach the child to understand social situations by teaching him to look for the things we can "see" that might indicate what people are feeling or thinking. (Public accompaniments) For example, teaching them to look at a person's eyes, or raised arm in order to determine what the person may be feeling or planning to do.

Comprehension of Expectations - Children with autism may not understand what they are supposed to be doing in a given situation. Typically developing kids may observe other children around them and do what they're doing if they are unsure what is expected. Or, they may ask a teacher or parent what they're supposed to do. If the child with autism has not been taught to imitate peers or ask for clarification, they may not understand what is expected. By giving clear expectations in a way the child understands, we may be able to avoid some negative behaviors. In addition, teaching the child to imitate peers and ask (mand) for information are important skills to teach the child.

