4 Why Is She Doing That? The Relationship between Behavior and Communication

At a parent meeting, Sara described her current problems with her son, Adam. She knew that he enjoyed playing in the back yard. Her problem was knowing exactly when he wanted to go outside. She told the group that sometimes Adam would stand by the back door and start to scream. If no one came quickly, he would flop down and bang his head on the floor. Once that happened, Sara believed that the only thing that would calm him down was to open the door and let him go outside. Once outside, he quickly stopped crying, and Sara could go back to whatever she was doing.

As we saw in Chapter One, some behaviors are communicative, while others are not. We should add that some of the communicative actions of children, especially those with disabilities, often are not exactly what we adults would like to see! For example, Adam's way of indicating that he wanted to go outside was not a form his parents enjoyed.

A child's behavioral difficulties, including tantrums and aggression, often remain first and foremost in our minds. At the end of a long school day, we teachers are far more likely to talk emotionally to our partners about the trouble we had today (e.g., "He bit me again") rather than talk calmly about the positive things that occurred (e.g., "He took a bite of yogurt"). Understandably, the natural tendency of teachers and parents is to try to eliminate these problems immediately. However, we actually arrive at the best solutions by determining why the child is behaving as she is and then replacing that behavior with one that is more acceptable to us and yet accomplishes her goals. In this chapter we will look into the relationship between different types of behavioral problems and their link to communicative alternatives.

Which Behaviors Should We Aim to Eliminate or Reduce in Frequency?

When educators choose specific behaviors with an eye to eliminating them or reducing their frequency or severity, they refer to them as "behavior management targets." In the field of applied behavior analysis, we refer to these as "contextually inappropriate behaviors" to remind everyone that the context in which the behavior occurs is part of the problem. For example, yelling may not fit a classroom environment but is expected while watching many sports events. Hitting someone else is not tolerated within school but is exactly what is expected while boxing. So, when we want to eliminate a behavior we should consider the context as well. That is, for virtually every behavior there is a time and place in which we would consider that action to fit the situation. Trying to teach a child to never do a particular behavior would prove to be extremely difficult.

Furthermore, we need to guard against trying to change a behavior simply because we don't like it! If we want to eliminate or reduce a behavior we should be sure that it is due to one of the following reasons:

a. The behavior causes harm to the individual or someone else.
b. The behavior results in significant property damage.
c. The behavior results in significant social sanctions and thus would lead to fewer contacts with peers and others.
d. The behavior interferes with learning or completing one's job.

So, for example, if your child has a tendency to twirl her hair around her finger when she asks questions, this is not a behavior you would ordinarily try to eliminate, even though it drives you crazy. However, if your child has a tendency to pick her nose when she asks questions, you would want to eliminate the behavior because it satisfies criterion C, above. Likewise, you may be annoyed at your child's slow, side-to-side rocking motion, but if music is playing in the background, you may simply think of this as a type of dance. However, if the rocking prevents your child from completing a vocational task, you may choose to work on that behavior, since it violates criterion D.

If at least one of the conditions above is associated with a behavior, then a systematic behavior management plan should be put into place. It is beyond the scope of this book to describe the details

necessary for a comprehensive plan, but one essential element involves determining how the behavior problem is functionally related to the situation, including considering whether the behavior is serving some type of communicative function. In other words, we must determine *why* the child is behaving a particular way and teach a new way (a new behavior) for the child to use to serve the same need.

For detailed information about determining the function of a behavior, you may wish to refer to *Functional Behavior Assessment for People with Autism* (2003) by Beth Glasberg.

Behavior Management Problems That Act as Communication

Some of the behaviors we target for elimination or reduction may serve particular needs of children or adults, such as helping them gain access to concrete outcomes. For example, acting a certain way may result in going outside to play, getting cookies at the check-out counter in the supermarket, getting food that someone else is eating, etc. Each of these behaviors results in access to some type of outcome.

On the other hand, some problematic behaviors result in increased attention from other people. For example, what would you do if you walked into a room and saw a very young child screaming and slapping her face? Our tendency would be to pick up the child to soothe her as quickly as possible and then to try to find out what was wrong. However, what if the child had no systematic and effective communication skills? In that case, she would not effectively communicate about the problem. Still, she may have enjoyed being picked up. What will happen the next time she sees the person who picked her up? If she is not quickly picked up, she very likely may start crying and slapping her face. From her point of view, that is what "worked" last time—crying and slapping seemed to result in getting picked up.

In such cases, the child's actions depend on a person's presence and serve a communicative function—requesting a desired outcome. It is important to note that we can identify a communicative function only if the child primarily engages in the action when someone else is present. If the child engages in the action when we are present as often as when we are absent, then we could not say that the child's action was directed toward a potential communicative partner. As

discussed earlier, the essence of communication involves behavior directed toward another person.

Other actions of children and adults may serve a different communicative function—namely, escape or avoidance. For example, when given a difficult task, a child may begin to scream and hit herself.

I met Lisa while visiting a school for teenagers with severe cognitive limitations. At the time, Lisa was sixteen years old and had no speech or other formal communication system. I had been asked to observe her because she was reportedly becoming increasingly aggressive and self-injurious.

I observed Lisa sitting in her classroom. A teacher approached and said, "Lisa, it's time to work." The teacher showed Lisa a box filled with vocational materials. Lisa immediately began screaming while forcefully punching her thighs with her fist and biting the back of her other hand. The teacher calmly walked away with the box. Twenty minutes later, the teacher returned with another box of materials and the same message. Again, Lisa screamed and hurt herself. The teacher removed herself and the materials. After another twenty minutes, the teacher returned, issued her direction, and showed Lisa a box containing a comb and brush. Lisa calmly took the comb and brush and started brushing her hair. Lisa was a very effective communicator!

In trying to understand Lisa's actions, several factors are important to consider. First, when Lisa was left alone, she sat quietly and did not engage in screaming or self-injury. Next, she did not begin the tantrum until she looked at the materials that her teacher offered. When she liked the materials and associated activity (i.e., the hairbrush), she calmly proceeded with the activity. When she did not like what she saw, then she screamed and hit herself (and the teacher if she approached). The teacher then removed the materials and Lisa gradually calmed down. Her action was communicative because it occurred when the teacher approached and it served as an effective way to have her teacher remove the unwanted items. That is, Lisa avoided working on activities she didn't like because her teacher would remove things after Lisa started the tantrum. If Lisa had formal functional communication skills, she would have communicated that she did not want to do certain tasks (e.g., "I don't like that job"; "No thanks!" etc.). Then her teacher could have discussed why it was an important activity or offered a better incentive for Lisa.

In addition to learning how to use behavior to avoid certain activities, many children and adults learn how to escape from some activities. These activities may be:

1. difficult,
2. boring,
3. too long in duration,
4. associated with too little positive feedback (as in, "Hey, the pay around here is terrible!"),
5. in environments that are too noisy, crowded, chaotic, cold/hot, etc.

As an adult, it is likely that you have had to work (or study) in situations or environments in which one of these factors was in effect. Most adults, however, have learned certain communicative skills that may help in such circumstances. Instead of simply screaming and running away (which we have all considered!), we may ask for a break—some time away from the job. We could also communicate about issues that may help improve the work situation—such as asking for help, asking for more supervision, increasing the number of scheduled breaks each day, opening a window, etc.

Behavior Management Problems That Are Not Communicative

So far, we have reviewed that certain behaviors may serve a communicative function related to:

1. obtaining a reinforcing outcome,
2. escaping from or avoiding a person, item, or activity.

However, not every behavior management target serves one of these communicative functions. Remember, as Chapter One discusses, not all behaviors are communicative. Sometimes, we simply act on the world without any communicative involvement of another person. Furthermore, sometimes we do things that are not viewed as purposeful or rational. That is, some of our actions are best viewed as emotional reactions to the circumstances at hand.

One day, I (AB) walked into the empty lobby of a large office building, intending to visit the state office on the thirty-fifth floor. I had visited this office many times over the past few years. As in the past, I calmly pushed the elevator button. On this day, however, nothing happened. I stood for a moment and noticed that the elevator had not arrived. I pushed the button again. Still no response. Now I pushed the button in several quick, hard bursts. Still nothing happened. I began pounding on the button with great effort. I also noticed, without a sense of pride, that I was muttering a series of unspeakable curses. Suddenly, my boss approached. I stopped cursing and pounding and calmly said that the elevator seemed to be out of service.

We imagine that each of you has had a similar experience. Clearly, the type of behavior is not communicative. Although I did say a few choice words, they were not meant to be heard by anyone else, as demonstrated by my change in behavior when I saw my boss. Was this behavior rational and learned from experience? No. Not only does pounding on the button rarely work, this type of reaction occurs the first time we encounter a recalcitrant piece of machinery. Furthermore, I don't recall any lessons from my mother in which she said, "Now, here is what to do if the elevator gets stuck…." The question remains, why do we have this type of explosive reaction or outburst?

For me, getting to the thirty-fifth floor was important because it was the only way to get to my job, which meant it was the way to get my pay (no work, no pay). When you and I, and our children, encounter situations in which we expect to get a rewarding outcome, and that outcome is delayed or removed, we react in this emotional manner.

One other circumstance that may elicit similar emotional reactions is being in pain. Studies with laboratory animals have indicated that if an animal is paired with another animal and is given unavoidable pain (via electric shock), then the animal that is shocked is very likely to become aggressive to its companion. This aggression does not help reduce the rate of the shock but it is still a reliable outcome to this circumstance. Other research has indicated that if an animal is alone, and receives unavoidable shock, it may begin to injure itself. For obvious reasons, such work has not been done on children (with or without disabilities). However, Ray Romanczyk (Romanczyk & Matthews, 1998) has collected data regarding some children who forcefully hit their own heads, demonstrating that when they were in pain (as

measured by pressure on their eardrum during an infection) they were much more likely to hit themselves than when they were not in pain.

In short, there can be many possible explanations for any given behavior we observe. Some may involve communication, such as when a girl hits her head to indicate that she does not like something or wants attention or to leave the area. However, that same behavior may also occur without any communicative intent when reacting to the loss of an expected reward, or to pain. How we explain the head-hitting will influence the type of intervention we design for the girl. If we decide her actions are communicative, we can use some of the techniques described in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to teach her a better way to communicate. If we decide her actions are noncommunicative, we can use strategies in Chapter 8 to help her better handle her frustrations.

What Is Functional Communication Training?

One reason we emphasize the *why* associated with a behavior and not just its form (the *how*) is because we assume that there are several ways to achieve the same goal. That is, if a child is trying to gain attention, then we will assume that there are many different actions that she could use to achieve the same outcome—gaining attention. If this is a safe assumption, then our plan may be to teach the child another way to gain attention—one that does not involve self-injury or other disruptive actions.

An area of study called *functional communication training (FCT)* is devoted to investigating this general strategy of determining the reasons underlying behavior and then teaching different ways to achieve the desired outcome. In one of the first studies of FCT (Carr and Durand, 1985), two researchers worked with children displaying aggression or self-injury. They found two distinct reasons for these behaviors. Some children seemed to act out when they were given work that was very difficult. Their problematic behaviors appeared to communicate their need for help. A second set of children seemed to become upset if the teacher was not paying attention to them, whether the lesson was easy or difficult. Their problematic behaviors appeared to communicate their need for encouraging feedback from the teacher. The question was, what should each group of children be taught?

The children who appeared to need help were taught to request help using a simple phrase. Once they communicated this request,

help was provided. After learning this skill, these children showed clear improvements in their difficult behaviors. The other children were taught to say, "How am I doing?" When staff heard this question, they immediately praised the child for working on the lesson. Again, once this skill was learned, significant improvements were noticed. Interestingly, these researchers also studied what would happen if a child were taught the skill that did not fit his or her problem. That is, children who needed help with a difficult task were taught to say, "How am I doing?" Staff would respond to this statement but not the child's need for help (since the child did not ask for help). Learning statements that did not result in the needed outcome did not help the children behave more appropriately.

Therefore, if we are to teach a new communication skill to replace a problematic behavior that the child uses as a communication strategy, then we must be certain that the new skill accomplishes exactly what the child was trying to accomplish. That is, children who need help must be taught to ask for help, while those needing more feedback need to learn to request feedback. Similarly, children who need to take a break from a boring or difficult activity must learn to request a break. The function of the new skill must match the function of the old behavior management target. Research has suggested that it should not take the child any more effort to use the new skill than it does to perform the action being replaced (Frea & Vittemberg, 2000).

How Do We Determine the Functional Control of a Behavior?

There are several strategies to help us figure out why someone is engaging in a particular behavior. (This is referred to as the *functional control* of the behavior by behavior analysts.) In general, the idea is to identify the *antecedents* of the behavior (i.e., what occurs before it), as well as the *consequences* (i.e., what the child gets out of the behavior).

A functional *assessment* can be conducted by interviewing teachers, parents, and other helpers in a systematic fashion using a structured checklist (Charlop-Christy & Kelso, 1997). A more intense form of assessment can be conducted by carefully collecting data regarding the relationship between the behavior and various factors, including

1. time of day
2. activity

3. people present
4. length of activity
5. presence of demands (including a high rate of instructions, new instructions, etc.)
6. removing or denying access to reinforcing items

Knowledgeable staff can add other factors. Once sufficient occurrences of the problem behavior have been observed, it is possible to correlate the potential factors with the likelihood of the behavior occurring. While such correlations do not prove the relationship, they can help point out factors that are most likely to be contributing to your child's problem behavior.

The most precise information on the causes of behavior can be collected via a formal *functional analysis*. In this type of study, staff trained in behavior analysis make specific environmental modifications (i.e., adding demands, ignoring the behavior, providing a stimulating environment vs. a boring environment) and then monitor corresponding changes in the child's target behavior. While this procedure yields the most accurate information about the potential causes of the behavior in question, it also is quite demanding.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) your child's school must agree to conduct a functional behavior analysis if: 1) she has behaviors that are interfering with her learning at school, and 2) if she is receiving special education services. Parents can arrange for a behavior analyst to conduct this assessment, but a school team can choose to develop a plan independent of recommendations from the parent's consultant.

When Is the Best Time to Teach Alternative Communication Skills?

After you have recognized that your child is having a behavior problem related to difficulty in communicating, and have determined what her behavior is communicating, you should look for opportunities to teach her an alternate way to communicate to achieve the same outcome. As the story below illustrates, not every moment is a "teaching moment" for children with autism.

I watched Amanda playing with several toys. She picked up one piece and tried to fit it into another piece. She pushed and pushed but the parts would not fit. She began to rock, then whimper, and then scream. She threw down the piece and then scattered every piece within reach. She was now in the midst of a full-blown tantrum! I walked over to Amanda and calmly said, "You need to ask for help!" Amanda whimpered, "Help!" I guided her to connect the pieces and she continued to play quietly. However, I reminded myself that Amanda and I had gone through this same sequence yesterday, and the day before that, and the day before that, and ….

Early in my career (*AB*), I used this strategy and watched many other people using similar tactics. We would observe a child's problem and then encourage her to "use her language" to solve the problem. However, I found that when I used this strategy, the child continued to have tantrums in difficult situations, and only asked for help when I reminded her. It took me many years to figure out that the child had learned precisely what I had taught. From her perspective: a) If you have a broken toy, start screaming, then … b) Andy will come over and tell you to say something, then ... c) Say what Andy wants and he will help you.

The reason that Amanda was not learning to request help was that I was not teaching her to recognize the situation as one in which she should spontaneously request help. I had taught her that I would recognize that she needed help (by watching her have a tantrum) and then would remind her to use her words. I realized that if I wanted to teach Amanda to ask for help, I must teach her to ask for help before she has the tantrum. That is, when I am watching Amanda having a tantrum, I must prepare to start a lesson after the tantrum has ended.

In general, teaching any new skill in the midst of a tantrum or other type of emotional display is very difficult. A better long-term solution is to recreate the problem situation and guide the child through an effective alternative. In this way, we are striving to prevent tantrums from starting rather than emphasizing how to eliminate them once begun. Just as it took me years to learn how to effectively teach this lesson, most children require many opportunities to acquire a skill. A teacher must have patience to know that there will be more opportunities in the future, and need not teach a lesson that will make the child more dependent. Teachers must create situations in which the child becomes more independent in her use of spontaneous communication.

In our example with Amanda, a more effective strategy would be to first give her a toy that didn't work as she expected. As soon as she noticed the problem, and before she started the tantrum, she would be helped to communicate, "Help!" (See next section.)

How to Begin Teaching a Child to Communicate "Help!"

Materials needed:
A favorite toy that you have sabotaged so that it doesn't work.

Teachers needed:
One teacher to create the problem situation;
Another teacher to manually assist the child

Background:
Harry, who does not speak and is just learning to communicate, likes to play with a motorized fire truck that has a flashing light and a siren. His mother, Lily, has observed that if the fire truck isn't working properly (i.e., the battery has run down, the wheels get stuck, the siren doesn't sound, etc.) then Harry throws down the truck, screams, and starts to fiercely slap his head. When Lily has seen this happen, she has quickly fixed the truck to stop Harry from hurting himself.

Teaching scenario:
Lily has asked her daughter, Doris, to help teach Harry to calmly request help. Lily asks Doris to sit behind him. When Harry isn't looking, Lily takes the battery out of the fire truck and then hands the truck to Harry. He quickly takes it and turns on the switch to make the siren sound and the lights flash. Nothing happens!

At the earliest signs of agitation, Doris quickly helps Harry pick up the truck and give it to Lily. Lily immediately says, "Oh, you need help!" while giving Harry the battery and helping him put it into the truck. Harry then tries the switch again and is very happy that the truck now works.

During the next few days, Lily and Doris repeat this lesson with Doris gradually reducing her assistance. By the end of the week, when the truck doesn't work, Harry picks up the truck on his own and gives it to his mother. His mother and Doris switch roles so that Harry quickly learns to ask for help from whoever is nearby. Over time, his mother

creates new problems for Harry to solve with his new skill, including a container that won't open, a juice box without a straw in it, and a small radio that isn't working.

Long-term strategies:

This initial strategy—giving your child things that don't work right—is similar to what everyone observes typically developing children do at a very young age. Just as these children learn to refine their ability to ask for help over time, so, too, will Harry learn to adjust his skills. For example, he may learn to use a "help" symbol within a visual communication system. The strategies to teach him how to use such a symbol will be the same as described in Chapter 6. The benefit of using two teachers for the initial aspects of this lesson will hold true whether Harry uses visual symbols, sign (formal or informal), or speech.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we've reviewed many types of behavioral difficulties your child may display. The best solutions will involve:

1. Determining what is causing the behavior,
2. If the behavior is communicative, what is your child trying to communicate?
3. Determining a good alternative communicative behavior.
4. Determining if your child can already use this alternative. If not, teach your child the new communicative alternative behavior.
5. Creating many opportunities for your child to use this new alternative.

In our next chapter we will review several communication modality options. After that, we will focus on using one of those methods (PECS) with children with autism.

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