

# Functions of Behaviour

**Function of Behaviour:** *Why* your child is engaging in a particular behaviour.

## Why is Function Important?

All behaviour serves a purpose (Alberto & Troutman, 2003). It is important to know *why* your child is engaging in a problem behaviour so that you know how to react to it. Assessing the function helps us learn what they are getting from engaging in that behaviour. We want to teach the child a more appropriate alternative behaviour instead.

## How Do I Determine the Function of the Behaviour?

### Antecedent



What happens right **before** the behaviour

### Behaviour



The behaviour itself

### Consequence



What happens right **after** the behaviour

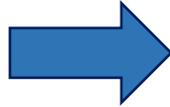
**ABC'S**

Collecting information on the ABC relationship will help you to understand **why** the behaviour is occurring. Observe your child and when you see a problem behaviour occur, think about and **write down** what happened **right before** that problem behaviour, and what happened **right after**.

### Quick Tip

## Break it Down:

You tell your child to clean up and they begin screaming and crying. You try to soothe your child by picking them up, and you end up cleaning up the toys yourself.



- A. The **antecedent**, or what set off the behaviour, is you telling your child to clean up (a demand).
- B. The **behaviour** is the crying and screaming.
- C. The **consequence** or what happened after, is that your child received attention and they were able to escape the demand (didn't have to clean up).

## Quick Tip

The problem behaviours you are seeing will likely follow a **pattern**. For example, every time you tell your child to put on their coat (a demand your child does not want to do), he/she begins yelling and the child falls to the ground.

**Some behaviours require a full assessment, or a functional behaviour assessment, to determine the function. Consult a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst (BCBA) to complete this assessment if the function is unclear.**

## The Big 4

1. **Sensory** (Automatic)
2. **Escape/Avoidance**
3. **Attention**
4. **Tangible**

### Attention-Seeking Behaviour

The child engages in a problem behaviour because he/she wants your attention and/or the attention of their peers/siblings. Attention can be both positive and negative.

Attention can include surprised facial expressions, gasps, reprimands, verbal interactions to distract or sooth, as well as physical attention like hugs or being picked up, etc (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007).

E.g. Your child jumps from the slide at the park because it usually results in you rushing over to talk to him about why he shouldn't do that



### Try Doing:

Planned ignoring: do not give attention (do not engage in verbal conversation, do not make eye contact) for problem behaviour.

**Give lots of praise and attention for the behaviours you DO want to see**

Teach and practice a more appropriate way for your child to get your attention (E.g. make eye contact, tap you on the shoulder, sign the word "Look", give you a picture card that says, "Look", say "Look"/"Come here" etc), individualized to your child's level of understanding

### Escape Behaviour

The child engages in a problem behaviour because he/she wants to **avoid or postpone** a task he/she does not want to do (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007).

E.g. The child starts crying and lays on the ground when you ask him to wash his hands, something he doesn't like to do

### Try Doing:

Follow through with your demand even though your child may engage in problem behaviour. You may need to reduce your demand initially to gain compliance. For example, if you want your child to clean up all her toys, and she start to yell, reduce your demand by telling her that she needs to clean up one toy and then she can have a break. You may need to prompt her through the task (you guide her hand to pick up the toy and put it in the bin) in order for her to comply (Fisher, Piazza, & Roane, 2014).

**Tip:** *Ensure* you come back to this task later and have her clean up all the toys so she does not learn that she can escape the entire task by engaging in problem behaviour

**Give lots of praise when your child is complying with a task (even if it is something very small)!**

Teach and practice a more appropriate way for your child to request a break (E.g. signing the word "Break", giving you a picture card that says "Break", verbally requesting by saying, "Break"/"I need a break", etc), individualized to your child's level of understanding.

Visual aids: "First-Then" board, visual schedules, social stories (See the Visual Supports Handout)

### Access to Tangible Item

The child engages in a problem behaviour because he/she wants access to a preferred item (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007)

E.g. You are grocery shopping with your child and he asks for a chocolate bar. You tell him “No” and he begins screaming and hitting his head. Other shoppers begin to stare as your child gets louder and louder. You give him the chocolate bar so that he will stop crying and hitting his head.

### Try Doing:

**Do not** give the child the item he wants when he is engaging in a problem behaviour.

Teach and practice a more appropriate way for your child to ask for the item (E.g. gesturing/pointing at the item, signing for the item, giving a picture card of that item, or verbally asking), individualized to your child’s level of understanding.

Give the child lots of praise and reinforcement and **give** them the item they want **when they ask appropriately** (whether this communication is through gesture, sign, picture exchange or verbally).

Offer **choice**: If the child cannot have that item they are wanting, give them other options which they can have. For example, your child wants cookies, you respond with, “You can have a cracker or a strawberry”.

Visual aids: “First-Then” board, visual schedules, social stories (See Visual Supports Handout)

### Automatic/Sensory Behaviour

Your child engages in a behaviour because it feels good for him/her (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). Automatic or sensory behaviours can also continue because they relieve pain for the child (Alberto & Troutman, 2003).

**Tip:** This behaviour happens whether or not others are present.

E.g. Scratching an itch.  
E.g. When your son is upset, he goes into the corner of the room and begins to rock back and forth.

### Try Doing:

Seek medical advice, rule out medical problems (dentist, optometrist, doctor, etc)

Redirect inappropriate behaviours (try to engage your child in something that has the same sensory output, but is more appropriate)

E.g. If your child is playing with her spit, provide opportunities where she can play with something that has the same sensation, but it is more appropriate (water play, foam, gel, etc)

**Reward** and give lots of **praise** to your child when they are **not** engaging in the problem behaviour.

Teach an appropriate or more socially acceptable time/place to engage in the behaviour.

*Please note that some automatic or sensory behaviours can serve as a way your child to self-regulate themselves. Strategies to eliminate sensory seeking behaviour should only be implemented if the behaviour is interfering with the child's daily functioning and/or social development*

## References

Alberto, P. & Troutman, A. (2003). *Applied behaviour analysis for teachers* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New Jersey: Merrill Prentice Hall.

Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2007). *Applied behavior analysis* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.

Fisher, W. W., Piazza, C. C., & Roan, H. S. (2014). *Handbook of applied behavior analysis*. New York, NY: The Guildford Press.

