



# Empower Autism

## Managing Behavior

Almost all kids display undesirable behavior some of the time. We expect that kids will display undesirable behavior at a young age, and that they will learn to make their behavior more acceptable as they grow older.

Behaviorism says that all of us (adults and children) have learned to act the way we do because we like the *results* of our actions. As adults, most of us have learned to do things we do not like at the time, because we will receive rewards later. For example, we might not like our jobs, but we go because we like to get paid. We may not enjoy washing the clothes, but we enjoy wearing clean clothes.

On the other hand, children are not always ready to comprehend delayed rewards, and they often base their actions on immediate feedback. (Adults do this too—think about the last time you ate some delicious but unhealthy food—you knew it was a bad idea in the long run, but you wanted the immediate taste). Many children (not just children with autism) do the things they do because they like the results of their actions.

### **Kids learn how to act by:**

- Experiencing a reward or punishment immediately after doing something
- Watching other people experience a reward or punishment immediately after doing something

**The tricky part:** different things are rewarding to different people. Even if you think something should be rewarding to your child, it might not be. Even if you think something is a punishment for your child, it may not feel like a punishment to them.

**The good news:** people can learn to change their behavior.

If your child is displaying a behavior that you find undesirable, you may be able to change that behavior. Usually this means changing the circumstances surrounding the undesirable behavior or changing the reactions of the people near the undesirable behavior. In other words, behavior doesn't occur in isolation, and in order for one person's behavior to change, everyone's behavior must change somewhat.

### Changing Someone Else's Behavior

1. Specifically name the behavior ('grabbing other people's food' or 'spitting' or 'running away')
2. Ask yourself if you are willing to change parts of your own behavior in regards to the issue. Write down your concerns about addressing the behavior directly
3. Get a notebook and pen
4. Write down the specific situations in which the behavior occurs (you're not allowed to write 'everywhere' or 'all the time'. Write things like 'in the car, in the grocery store, in the bathroom, in the kitchen, at mealtimes, right before bed')
5. Write down the specific things that happen right before the undesirable behavior and right after the undesirable behavior. For example, if running away is the undesirable behavior, you might write: *At the park, he got off the swing, looked at the trail, and ran down it. I ran after him and called his name*
6. Keep track of where the behavior occurs, and what happens right before and right after the behavior for about a week.
7. Look back at your notes from the week and ask yourself the following questions:
  - a. Are there any patterns?
  - b. Does the person seem to enjoy doing the behavior?
  - c. Does the person seem to enjoy the thing that immediately follows the behavior (within 3 seconds of the behavior)?
  - d. What could I do differently?
8. Read the 'Options for Changing Behavior' below
9. See if any of them are applicable to your situation. Which could you try?

## Options for Changing Behavior

Almost all of the options for changing behavior involve the minutes/seconds right before the behavior, or the minutes/seconds right after the behavior. That's why keeping track of what happens literally right before and right after the behavior is so important.

### 1. Reward the stuff you like

Noticing and acknowledging when your child is behaving well is the unsung hero of behavior change. The noticing part is entirely up to you. When your child is doing what they are supposed to be doing, it is tempting to get your own tasks done, and take time for yourself. However, before you head off to finish the dishes or laundry, take the time to NAME and REWARD the good behavior. Rewards can happen in lots of different ways. Different kids find different things rewarding, and your child may not feel 'rewarded' by the things you think are fun. So, when you see your child doing something you like or something you want them to keep doing, name the behavior and do something that is rewarding (for the child). Here are some ideas to get your started.

- a. Praise
- b. Physical touch (hugs, snuggles, high fives, spinning)
- c. Smiling
- d. Favorite jokes
- e. Specific foods (feel free to keep a stash of 'limited access snacks' that are only available for certain behaviors)
- f. Outings
- g. Songs
- h. Specific toys (feel free to keep a few favored toys out of reach until the child does something you really want—such as using the toilet)
- i. Playing outside
- j. TV time
- k. Movies (or parts of movies)

To work, a reward must be something your child likes and truly desires. Make yourself a list of things your child really enjoys. Include everything from food to favorite subjects to favorite characters. If you can, ask some leading questions to get ideas:

- "If you could do some special things with mom or dad, what would they be?"
- "If you could go somewhere with a friend, where would you like to go?"
- "If you had a dollar, what would you buy?"

### Some Notes about Praise

Some kids really like praise and compliments. Praise is a valuable shaper; many children want to please you and keep your approval. To be most effective, praise the behavior, not the person. Praises like "good girl" or "good boy" are too vague. Better is: "Good job saying please!" or "I like the way you used lots of color in this picture." Being specific when you praise helps to show the child which action you care about. Praise (IF THE CHILD ALREADY ENJOYS PRAISE) can highlight or spotlight behaviors that you really want repeated. If your child doesn't respond to praise yet, you may have to pair your praise with a more tangible reward at first (give them the 'limited access' food, and praise at the same time).

Shaping through praise works well if you have a specific behavior goal that you want to reach, for example, stopping whining. Initially, you may feel like you are acknowledging nearly every pleasant sound your child makes ("I like your sweet voice"). Eventually, as the whining subsides, the immediate need for praise lessens (of course, a booster shot is needed for relapses) and you move on to shaping another behavior.

### *Change praises*

To keep your child's attention, change the delivery of your compliments. As you pass by the open door of the cleaner room, say: "Good job!" Show with body language a thumbs-up signal for the child who dresses herself. Written praises are a boon in large families. They show extra care. Private praises help, too. Leave little "nice work" notes on pillows, yellow "post-its" on homework, messages that convey that you noticed and that you are pleased.

As an exercise in praise-giving, write down how many times you praised and how many times you criticized your child in the last 24 hours. We call these pull-ups and put-downs. If your pull-ups don't significantly outnumber your pull-downs, you are shaping your child in the wrong direction.

### **Earning Rewards**

If you want to teach a child a specific behavior, you can start having them earn rewards for performing the behavior. Here is how you do it:

1. Fill out the 'changing other people's behavior sheet'
2. Name the specific thing you want to teach (make it bite-sized—for example, don't choose 'room cleaning' because it involves multiple steps. First choose 'put dirty clothes on floor into hamper' because it is very specific. Later, you can move on to 'put toys on shelf')
3. Make a big list of things that motivate your child
4. Decide which motivating thing they are going to earn first
5. Decide how you will give them the motivating thing (praise and an M&M after each item of clothing goes in the hamper? 30 min of TV immediately after putting all the clothes away?)
6. Decide how you will communicate the plan to your child. You have to get your point across to the child or the whole plan is blown. Try writing them a simple note (see our Using Written Explanations handout), or using a reward chart to explain what the behavior is, and what the reward is
7. Take a step back, and ask yourself if you can be consistent (respond in the planned manner EVERY TIME) for about 2 weeks. If this is not logistically feasible, back up and make a new plan

8. Set a starting date in your mind, and tell the other relevant people in your child's life about your plan and the date you will start it
9. Have a sit down with your child and explain the new deal, as simply as you can. Don't drag this out if they aren't paying attention. Check for understanding (ask 'what will happen when you put your dirty clothes in the hamper? Will you get TV if you don't put your clothes away?')
10. Start the plan.
11. If your child becomes less motivated by the reward, change it to something else on your list (make sure you tell your child about the change).
12. After two weeks of consistency, assess your progress. Are you seeing more of the behavior you wanted?

### Reward charts

Charts are a helpful way to motivate young children. They see their progress and participate in the daily steps toward the reward. The chart stands out as a testimony of good behavior for all to see. Charts work because they are interactive and fun. Even the business world uses charts as profit motivators. Throughout life many children will be surrounded by performance charts, so they may as well get used to seeing them in their home. When nothing else seems to be working, behavior charts help a child get over the hump of extinguishing an undesirable behavior. As you weed out undesirable behaviors one by one, your child gradually gets used to the feelings that come with good behavior, and these feelings become self-motivating. The need for charting lessens as your child grows, and you will need to find new clutter for your kitchen wall. In making reward charts, consider these tips:

- Follow the basic rule: KISMIF – Keep it simple, make it fun.
- Work with your child. Let your child help construct the chart and make daily entries.
- Construct the chart so that the child has a visual image of closing in on the reward. We have gotten best results from a "connect the dots" chart. Have the child draw a picture of what she wants. Then outline the periphery of the picture with dots several inches apart. With each day of successful behavior (e.g., each time he remembers to take out the trash) the child connects another dot. When all the dots are connected, the child collects the prize.
- Display the chart in a high visibility location. Giving the chart a high profile and high visibility gives the child easy access, serves as a frequent reminder of the desired behavior, and lets her proudly exhibit her progress.
- Make the chart interactive: connecting dots, pasting on stickers or different colored stars, anything more interesting than a check mark. Put pictures of the child's favorite stuff on the chart, so they will want to look at it.
- Charts can contain **positive** and **negative** entries, reminders of both types of behaviors. In my office we use daily charts to correct bedwetting in children older than five. The child puts a happy face sticker on the chart every morning he wakes up dry and a sad face sticker on the chart on mornings he wakes up wet. If the happy faces outnumber the sad faces at the end of the week, the child gets to choose where he wants to go for lunch on Saturday.
- Keep the time until the prize is collected **short**. Frequent, simple rewards keep motivation high. For a toddler, use end-of-the-hour rewards; for the preschooler, end-of-

the-day rewards; for the school-age child, end-of-the-week rewards. A month is an unreachable eternity for any child. For the preschool child, rather than set a calendar time, refer to an event such as "dinner time" or "after Sunday school." Novelty wears off quickly for children. Change charts frequently.

### **Creative rewards**

Besides charts, design your own clever motivators. Because her six-year-old's toy of the month was a doll house, a mother chose a piece of furniture or clothing for the doll as a weekly reward for the child keeping her room tidy. And she related the reward to the behavior: "When you show me you can keep your room tidy, then we'll furnish your doll house." She used periodic reminders: "Let's keep your room as nice as you do your doll house." Children with autism need the expected behavior to be very concrete. A child on the autism spectrum, for example, might need a list of the specific tasks involved in keeping a room 'tidy' (make bed, put clothes in hamper, put away all toys and books).

To keep order among the seven-to-nine-year-old boys at our twice-monthly Cub Scout meetings, we use the "**good behavior candle**." The object is to burn the candle all the way down so the whole group can have a treat. At the beginning of the meeting we light the candle. The candle stays lit until a disruption occurs. The disrupter has to blow out the candle. The sooner the candle burns down (e.g., the fewer disruptions), the sooner the boys get a prize. Consider what's going on in their impressionable minds. Each time someone snuffs out a candle, they halt the progress toward the prize. Since children don't like to delay gratification, they're motivated to snuff out their own disruptive behavior.

Tina and her four-year-old daughter Haley were very connected. Haley had been a high-need baby and turned into a strong-willed child. Here is how Tina channeled Haley's obstinate behavior in the right direction and had fun doing it:

*Haley and I were butting heads, and it seemed like our whole day was becoming increasingly full of negatives. All the techniques I'd tried before weren't working. So I tried what we fondly refer to as the ticket system. This took incredible stress off me as a mother, and I was no longer the bad guy. I give her three 'free' tickets to start the day. She earns tickets for helping without being asked, for doing assigned chores, for having a good attitude, etc. She loses tickets for whining, complaining, refusing to obey (which eliminated the on-going 'By the time I count to three' line that I was always using). The tickets became like gold, and after a while she became more and more eager to please. At the end of the day or the week Haley got a special treat that was prearranged according to the number of coupons she had collected (frozen yogurt, a movie, a hamburger, etc.).*

*With Haley, it was very difficult to see the 'positive' in her behavior. The ticket system forced me to 'catch' her at being good, as opposed to just seeing the bad. I found myself saying things such as, 'I liked the way you smiled when you woke up this morning' or 'Thank you for waiting your turn on the swing without screaming or crying.' Delayed gratification was not Haley's strong suit, so I would carry tickets with me everywhere we*

*went, so that she not only heard my words of praise, but saw tangible evidence of her good behavior. This also enabled me to take them from her just as quickly to show the immediate consequence of her unacceptable behavior. This game helped her to understand that I still loved her and that she was a good person, but there were guidelines that needed to be followed. It helped me not to yell and continually feel the need to raise my voice. It was also a system my husband Steve could quickly pick up after a hard day's work and on the weekends without feeling left out. We've also allowed baby-sitters to use it to reward Haley for cooperating.*

*For us, the ticket system has eliminated the need to spank, and 'time-out' is reserved for those really trying times when separation is best for both us and Haley. Altogether, it has greatly lessened the power struggle that I have felt with Haley since she was very young. This is not a system for everyone's problems. It's very time-consuming for us, and Haley because it constantly keep us informed if we're slipping up on our duties. It is, however, a lot of fun and well worth the effort.*

## **2. Ignoring and Redirecting**

Ignoring undesirable behaviors really works if you can really ignore them. An ignorable behavior is anything that but doesn't harm humans, animals, or expensive property. These annoying but not dangerous childish behaviors have a good chance of fading out if you can act casual about them.

Specific Methods for Ignoring (for best results, switch these up instead of using the same one every time):

- a. Quietly turn your head and your whole body away from the child.
- b. Pretend to get engaged with something in a different direction that the child
- c. Keep your expression neutral, or, if that's hard, put a bored look on your face
- d. Leave the room
- e. Walk away from the child
- f. Start talking to someone else
- g. Pick up a book and read to yourself

You want to be pretty casual about ignoring. It is very tempting to tease and torment someone who is very obviously saying with their body language 'I'M IGNORING YOU, I'M IGNORING YOU'. To avoid this, carry something else to do for yourself such as a book or magazine to read.

Ignoring behavior will work best when there is something else that the child is supposed to be doing. Sometimes a child will engage in annoying behaviors because they don't know what they should be doing instead. If you aren't already using a schedule with your child, see our 'Structure in the Home' and 'Teaching a Schedule' handouts.

Keep a sneaky eye on your child while you 'ignore' them. As soon as they start doing something that is not annoying, immediately switch to rewarding them (remember to make sure that what you're doing is actually rewarding for them).

### **Redirection**

Ignore and Redirect is the one-two punch of behavior changing. When your child is doing something annoying-but-not-dangerous, you can sometimes just tell them to do something else instead. Again, it's best to have a schedule or to-do list already set and written down. Failing that, you can try redirecting with a clear choice. For example if your child is crashing their toy truck into the table over and over again, you can turn away for a few seconds and then say 'Do you want to draw a picture, or go outside for a few minutes?' Or, you can choose to give just one different direction 'drive the truck over to daddy—he's got a truck ramp over there'.

The whole point of redirecting is that it avoids a power struggle over a small thing. We want to conserve our power struggles for non-negotiable issues like safety and independence.

### **3. Teach a Replacement Behavior**

If you can find something for a child to do that is incompatible with the undesirable behavior, you may be able to stop the unwanted behavior. For example, a child who pinches when they have to wait in line might be asked to hold something in each hand, so that their hands are busy holding stuff, and they can't pinch. Or, a child who wanders off in the grocery store might be asked to 'keep two hands on the cart' because that is incompatible with wandering off.

You may have to strenuously reward a replacement behavior to make it motivating for the child. Use the different methods of rewarding a child listed above to reinforce the new behavior until it is solidly established as routine.

### **4. Punishment**

Technically, a punishment is an event that makes a behavior less likely to occur. So, anything that discourages a behavior is a punishment. We can't tell if something is a true punishment until we know if it decreases a behavior. For example, if a child who routinely scratches people doesn't like loud noises, then an airhorn blast right after they scratch MIGHT be a punishment, but we won't know unless we take data and we know if the scratching decreases. If a child who enjoys being alone is disruptive at school, and gets a time out, then the timeout might not be a punishment, but we won't know unless we take data and find out if the disruptive behavior decreases.

To effectively use a punishment, you have to specifically name the undesirable behavior, and then choose the specific method that you will use to enact the punishment before the behavior occurs. It's best if the child understands what the undesirable behavior is, and what the punishment will be as well.

A punishment has to be something that you can actually make happen. If you decide that a child has to clean the kitchen as a punishment, and they refuse, you're in pickle. You know your child, so pick something that you have full control over, or that they are might be able to do when they are upset, or something that you can physically prompt.

Worthwhile punishments might include:

- a. Temporary loss of favorite toys (you have to decide beforehand how long they will lose it, and then stick to your guns. If it's going to be an hour or some other time amount,



- use a timer to measure it. Or, use an event like 'dinnertime'. DON'T just take it away for an undisclosed amount of time, and then give it back randomly).
- b. Time out (again, decide ahead of time where a time out will be, and how long they will be. A time out really should be a room alone, and should only be a few minutes long)
  - c. Chores (see the note above)
  - d. Boring worksheets
  - e. Loss of TV time/electronics time
  - f. The word 'NO'
  - g. A loud noise
  - h. An unpleasant (but not dangerous) sensation. For example, a child who dislikes the feeling of touching chalk might have to pick up several pieces and put them in a cup.

### **Summary**

Changing other people's behavior isn't easy. It usually involves changing around your own priorities and behavior for a period of time. It can be truly frustrating when a child misbehaves and it's very difficult to think clearly or clinically when you are frustrated. Be patient with yourself too. If one method of changing behavior doesn't work (after you try it for about two weeks), try something else. You and your family deserve to live in a safe environment where the rules are clear and enforced.