

“Will You Stop That?!”

Behavior strategies that work!

By Marcy Hemminger

When I first began teaching, eons ago, I worked in an early intervention center for children with special needs. Since the children were under five years old, most of the children had moderate to severe disabilities that were easily identified at young ages. Often these young children display inappropriate behavioral and my class was no different. I had one child in particular; a cute button of a girl that eventually was diagnosed with autism. As a young teacher, fresh out of college, I did not have much experience in dealing with behavior problems and so, when my director offered the assistance of the “Behavior Management Team”, I jumped at the chance for their help. Whew! I did not realize what I was getting into! The BMT definitely had specific (and very complex) plans to change behavior. Before I knew it, I was charting, graphing, monitoring, reinforcing and rewarding...every five to ten minutes. I was quickly exhausted and cursing behavior modification programs, though I was eventually able to change her inappropriate behaviors.

The value that I did receive from that experience was that I learned some powerful tools and strategies to help me deal with inappropriate behaviors, but I also found ways to streamline the process to make it practical for me so that I actually wanted to implement them. I learned that it boils down to three steps.

1. Identify the cause of the behavior
2. Understand the effects of those inappropriate behaviors
3. Create an effective plan to move the behaviors from inappropriate to appropriate

It often is that simple.

What are inappropriate behaviors? Well, inappropriate means “unsuitable” and behaviors are “ways in which one conducts oneself” so, inappropriate behaviors are unsuitable ways in which one conducts oneself. But I add; “relative to situation or place”. One problem with identifying inappropriate behaviors is that inappropriateness is often subjective. What is appropriate to one person or situation may be totally inappropriate to another person or situation. Think of a Broadway show. Before the show begins, it is appropriate to stand up, chat with friends, eat, laugh aloud, and walk around. Once the lights are dimmed and the curtain goes up, the only real appropriate behavior is to sit in silence for three hours. What, just moments before, was appropriate, is now deemed inappropriate. It can be difficult at times for adults to recognize when and how to behave, imagine how difficult it is for young children to pick up and learn these varying situations and expectations.

Interestingly, most behavior, good or bad, results from one or more of the following causes: attention, power, revenge and self-confidence. Unlocking the cause of the behavior can lead us directly to the creating the rewards and consequences that will change the behavior. Let’s look a little more closely at each cause.

Attention:

For many children, acting inappropriately is the only way to get attention

Common characteristics:

- Speaking without permission, interrupting, or talking incessantly
- Making strange noises, banging, tapping, etc.
- Constant complaining and/or tattling
- Exaggerating, making up stories, changing the outcome or their responsibility/role in events
- The “show off” or entertainer

When dealing with a child that is after our attention, we often feel annoyed (“They are interrupting/talking/pushing/crying/being silly again!”)

It is important to remember that a child that seeks attention may, or may not, already receive a lot of attention. It is the imbalance between what they get and what they feel that they need.

Revenge:

Some children find their place in this world by being disliked, feared, or hated

Common characteristics:

- Seems to enjoy being mean with words or actions
- Appears to enjoy having children and/or adults angry with them
- Likes to threaten or “pick on” younger or more vulnerable children
- Appears to have little respect for feelings or property
- Uses name calling and derogatory statements meant to hurt

In dealing with a child that feels the need to be revengeful, we often feel angry. (“Stop hurting/name calling/hitting/pinching/breaking!”)

The sad realization is that this child is usually the one hurting inside and wants to pass that hurt on to someone else.

Power:

If they cannot gain power in appropriate ways, they will fight to get it

Common characteristics:

- Refuses to follow orders, defiant
- Like to have the final say, argumentative
- Think that they “know-it-all”
- Likes responsibility and to have privileges
- Appears to be very competitive, wants to be first
- Wants to control, be in charge, be the “boss”

When dealing with a child that wants power, we often feel threatened (“No, I am the boss here, not you!”)

This child likes the fight and wants to argue as a way to get or maintain power in a given situation.

It is important to remember that many children feel powerless in their environments - giving simple choices throughout the day can help.

Self-confidence:

Children who lack self-confidence often expect failure

Common characteristics:

- Cries easily, feelings hurt frequently
- Follows other’s behaviors – especially inappropriate behaviors
- Says “I can’t” “I don’t know how” or “I don’t care” frequently
- Likes to call others names or other derogatory statements meant to hurt

In dealing with a child that has issues with self-confidence, we often feel frustrated. (“Please stop crying honey it’s going to be just fine.”)

This display of the lack of self-confidence may be a personality trait such as being shy or introverted or it may be a signal of a child that feels worthless for one reason or another.

Please recognize that we ALL display ALL of these behaviors SOME of the time. You can clearly think of a time that you wanted to gain attention, wanted control of a situation or person, acted in revenge for a wrong committed against us and had a lack of self-confidence in trying something new or speaking in front of others. What makes behaviors cross that line into “inappropriate” is due to the frequency and/or intensity in which they are displayed. For example, tapping on a desk in of itself is not inappropriate, but if it is done 100 times every few minutes, it becomes inappropriate. The frequency of that behavior has made it intolerable. On the other-hand, one violent temper tantrum is considered inappropriate, even dangerous, and needs to be dealt with immediately. The intensity of this behavior is what has made it intolerable.

What are the effects of these behaviors? These behaviors affect three groups within the classroom:

1. For the teacher, inappropriate behaviors:
 - a. Create stress and anxiety
 - b. Can create negative feelings about the child or the child’s family
 - c. May cause the teacher to respond with inappropriate behavior
2. For the “problem” child:
 - a. The reactions of the teacher or other students often aggravates the inappropriate behavior
 - b. The interactions and responses may cause negative feelings about school, the teacher or the other classmates
 - c. The interactions and responses may feed the child’s negative feelings about themselves
3. For the other children, witnessing the behaviors and interactions/responses:
 - a. Cause fear and anxiety
 - b. Create stress and tension
 - c. Can trigger their own inappropriate behaviors (modeling, retaliation, avoidance)
 - d. Can cause children to withdraw
 - e. Often cause negative feelings about school, the teacher or the classmate

Understanding behaviors and their cycle helps us to determine solutions! Here is the cycle of most behaviors:

1. Something triggers the behavior – not enough sleep, parent yelled at them on the way into school, they made a mistake. We may or may not have seen or know the trigger, but it happened.
2. The behavior is displayed or acted out
3. There is a response to the behavior – either from you the teacher or from fellow classmates. This response is the critical point in which we can change behavior for the responses will either escalate or deescalate the behavior

Now you are ready to create a plan. The plan should be made up of **five** parts:

1. **Our goal** – how do we want the behavior to change? Not just, “I don’t want them to hit anymore” but “They must keep their hands to themselves during circle time.”
2. **The environment and/or schedule** – the easiest way to make changes is to look at the class environment and schedule. Are there too many transitions which some children have difficulty with? Have you alternated active and passive activities? Is the room too hot? Is there too much clutter? Are there enough materials so that the children don’t feel competitive or possessive? All of these factors can push some children into acting inappropriately.
3. **Our responses** – our response to the behaviors is extremely important. Here are some questions you should ask yourself to know if you are on the right track:
 - a. Am I consistent?
 - b. Do I tell the children what to do rather than what not to do? (“Please walk”, instead of “Don’t run”)
 - c. Do I react negatively when I see this behavior or this child?

- d. Do I dislike this child?
- e. Does my tone convey my feelings?

Remember that everything you say and do, or don't do, is a lesson!

- 4. **Positive consequences** – what positive ways can you provide feedback to change this behavior?
 - a. Praise
 - b. Acknowledgment
 - c. Tokens or rewards
 - d. Privileges
 - e. Responsibility
 - f. Your time

- 5. **Negative consequences** – what negative consequences can I utilize to change this behavior?
 - a. Deny access to people or things
 - b. Take away privileges
 - c. Take away responsibility
 - d. Take away choice

Remember to “make the punishment fit the crime”! Use the negative consequences when you can't gain results with positive consequences, not as the first choice. Many use “time-out” and, although it can be an effective form of a negative consequence, it should not be used for all inappropriate behaviors. If a child wants to control a situation and not get involved in an activity, what better way to accomplish this than to be “removed” for time-out? Do you want to make a child that already feels like a failure or worthless removed with the signal that they have failed and are not worth our investment of time and energy to help?

I once read a refrigerator magnet that has since become my motto for consequences, it went something like:

You break it – you fix it (even feelings I say)
You get it out – you put it away
You build it – you tear it down
You tear it down – you build it back up
You mess it up – you clean it up
You turn it on – you turn it off

And so on... it makes sense to me and it is a logical way to plan consequences. Now, I do not need to wonder what consequence should be used and this helps me to be consistent and impersonal. “Oh honey, I'm sorry that you knocked down his tower, you'll have to tell him you're sorry and then you need to spend some time building it back up.” As soon as that child rebuilds the tower, he then needs to walk away and play with something/someone else.

Just as in that example, having a plan for dealing with difficult behaviors is critical to handling them properly and effectively. Too often we react instead of act and this can make us vulnerable to making poor choices ourselves. If our emotions get involved, we may not be consistent or the behaviors we witness may tap into our anger, frustration, annoyance and fear. These are natural and expected feelings, but ones we should not act upon.

Another way to plan both positive and negative consequences is to think about what each behavior needs and then give it as a reward or take it away as a consequence. For example:

Attention seekers want attention. Rewards should be of attention; from the teacher or the class. “Look at how nicely Tanya is playing today!” The consequence is then the removal of attention through ignoring or physical presence from either the teacher or of classmates.

Some final points:

1. Stay calm
2. Always treat the child with respect and compassion
3. Listen to them
4. Give choices only when there really is a choice
5. Speak to them privately and eye-to-eye when possible
6. Give simple and clear directions
7. Always think, how would I want someone to treat my child if they did the same thing?

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