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Autism Agenda



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POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT AND AUTISM

Positive reinforcement is generally the most effective behavior management strategy in dealing with challenging behaviors of children with autism or Asperger's syndrome. It can also be used to help autistic children to learn new behaviors, from life skills through to alternatives to repetitive behaviors.

Positive reinforcement underlies the majority of all human behavior. We act in certain ways to obtain desirable consequences, whether it is going to work to get our paychecks, or treating others nicely in the hope they will do the same to us.

Positive reinforcement is an incentive given to a child who complies with some request for behavior change. The aim is to increase the chances the child will respond with the changed behavior. Positive reinforcement is given immediately after the desired behavior has occurred so that it will shape the child's future behavior.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REINFORCEMENT AND BRIBERY

The difference between reinforcement and bribery is that reinforcement comes after a task is completed whereas bribery is offered before. That is not to say that you can't show your child the reinforcer he or she is working for during trials. In this case, it would be a visual cue. If you offered a treat before even making a request, you would be using bribery.

CHOOSING POSITIVE REINFORCERS

When choosing reinforcers for people, remember that each individual will respond to different things.

- Looking at what has motivated the child in the past
- asking the child what they like and dislike
- Look at their deprivation state – what do they want, that they cannot easily get?
- Try to make sure the reinforcer is practical, ethical and valid for the behavior being targeted.

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POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT CONTINUED...

Some examples of positive reinforcement include:

- Preferred activities (e.g., specific job; coffee with a friend; concert; sporting event)
- Free time
- Verbal praise
- Food-related activities (special treats - not food they have the right to access anyway)
- Desired objects (if affordable)
- Privileges (e.g., team leader for a day or week; certificate; badge; choice of outing)
- Tokens (e.g.: a special trip when the child earns five gold stars on the fridge).

You can also give your child positive attention by:

- Leaning toward and/or looking at your child
- Smiling
- Making a comment; asking a question
- Conversation with your child
- Joining in an activity.



POINTS TO CONSIDER

Timing is critical to the effectiveness of positive reinforcement. It is important for an individual to feel that the goal is achievable and that reinforcement is attainable.

It is also important that the reinforcer is not something the child already has free access to. When setting amounts of positive reinforcement, do not give as much as the child would want given free access, as this would leave them nothing to work towards. Ensure the reinforcer can be continual and enhanced. A visual system can work well with autistic children, where they can see their progress as well e.g. ticks on a behavior chart.

RULES FOR USING POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

- When starting out, you will reward the child every time the target behavior occurs
- Quickly fade reinforcers by offering less and less as the desired behavior emerges
- Always pair edible, social or toy reinforcers with verbal praise
- Eventually you will be giving only verbal praise and your child will learn your pleasure is a reinforcer
- Make sure you model the desired behavior (e.g. Don't lose your temper if dealing with [tantrums](#))
- Keep your requests for the desired behavior concise and clear.

Free Access Rule

The maximum amount of reinforcement made available during intervention must be less than what the person would seek, given "free access". No more than 80% of desired access should be given or else the reinforcer will reach satiation levels and no longer be effective.

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POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT CONTINUED....

The 50% Rule

This is used when calculating how long to wait between giving reinforcers. It is recommended that you work out the average length of time between incidences of the behavior, and halve it. For example:

If the behavior is currently occurring once per week, divide 7 days by 2, equaling 3½ days. The individual would receive positive reinforcement every 3½ days if the behavior were not displayed.

Delivery Style

Be aware of the child's possible reactions to reinforcement. Some children are not used to positive attention and may find it so uncomfortable that they resort back to their undesired behaviors in order to receive a known response. There may be a need to be discrete, perhaps allowing the child to overhear you praising them to another person.

Contracts

A written contract may be used if the child has the ability to understand it. If used, ensure that the contract specifies all of the criteria and is signed by all parties.

For example, "If I -----, by -----, then -----."

This kind of visual backup can be very useful for autistic children who may have trouble with verbal information only.



SET YOUR CHILD UP FOR SUCCESS

When your child is having a difficult day, be sure to end on a positive note. You can do this by requesting a skill the child has already mastered, then deliver some nice verbal praise. These mastered skills have a high probability your child will get them right – thereby giving you a chance to reinforce the behavior.

<https://autism-help.org/behavior-positive-reinforcement-autism.htm>

IPAD APPS

These 10 iPhone apps are designed to help you manage and monitor kids' behavior, and can be a tech-savvy parent, educator or caregiver's best friend. (They are suggested apps. Not required or endorsed by LBLESD and Cascade Regional)

Beep & Boop – A free app from JibJab Media, Beep & Boop allows you to reinforce good behavior with Beeps, and issue Boops to signal bad behavior. Each Boop deletes one Beep, helping kids understand that choosing to misbehave comes with consequences. Putting a rewards system in place with pay-out contingent upon receiving a specified number of Beeps can also be effective if you're using a 'rewards versus consequences' model of behavioral modification.

BeGOOD! – At \$1.99 from Cloudlark, LLC, BeGOOD! is an inexpensive, effective and fun way to manage and keep up with kids' behavior with your smartphone, especially considering that most people have their phone on them at all times. Earning rewards based on the point system put in place by the app is as simple as behaving well. Think of this app as the tech-forward version of sticker-based reward charts.

Behavior Counter – This \$0.99 app is a very simple, no-frills offering that's easy to use if you're in need of nothing more complicated than a bare-bones tally system. There is some statistical support for data collection, which will allow you to determine triggers for bad behavior and their underlying causes.

Behavior Breakthroughs – The game-based technology of the free Behavior Breakthroughs app allows you to model your child's behavior back to him through a digitized avatar on your iPhone. Seeing his own behavior reflected through the avatar can help him understand why certain choices are bad ones, encouraging him to choose more wisely next time.

For more suggestions on Apps to help with Behavior go to: <http://www.fulltimenanny.com/blog/10-iphone-apps-that-help-with-managing-kids-behavior/>

WHAT IS HELPFUL TO KNOW ABOUT BEHAVIOR

From Autism Speaks: **What is Helpful to Know about Behavior?**

Before considering challenging behavior in isolation, it is helpful to think about human behavior in general. Some behavior is biologically driven (we eat when we are hungry) or reflexive (we cover our ears when a noise is too loud). But for the most part, behavior occurs because it serves a function and/or produces an outcome. Eating serves the function of satisfying hunger, and covering our ears softens the impact of the loud noise. Behavior also serves as a form of communication. Seeing someone cover his ears, even when we did not find a noise to be offensive, can communicate that he is particularly sensitive to sound.

It is critical to remember that any individual is doing the best he can do in each situation, given his skills, education, physical and emotional state, and past experiences. We classify certain behaviors as challenging because we as individuals or a society find them to be difficult to accept. It will be important for you to become a careful observer, working to understand the purpose of behaviors. Taking a step back and considering why a person might behave in a certain way is the first important step toward understanding and learning how to help. It is also essential to reducing your own frustration. In fact, it is often helpful to think of an individual's actions as a response, rather than a pre-determined or willful behavior.

However, there is a difference between understanding behaviors that we or society might not find appropriate and accepting those behaviors. For example, determining why a child needs to kick, and then developing his skills for communication should be the objective (e.g. 'I need a break.'). Instead of allowing kicking as a form of speech. Similarly, working to understand and treat biological conditions that might cause challenging behaviors is essential.

"Sam's teacher moved to another city, so he entered his second year of high school with a familiar but less skilled instructor. Soon he was headed to the nurse's office each morning and spending first period on her bed. Clearly the new teacher had anxiety, and the school staff believed that this was being reflected in Sam's behavior and increasing his anxiety as well. Or perhaps it was task avoidance, as there were a lot of language demands in that first period social skills class. Then one morning, he actually gagged and vomited, but once he got home it was clear that Sam was not sick. Soon after, other staff noticed that he would turn his head to the side and his eyes would roll during the period immediately after lunch. We also noticed a tendency to retreat to the couch at home after dinner. That's when we consulted the gastroenterologist, and sure enough, he was diagnosed with reflux. All of these odd behaviors and the trips to the nurse's office subsided once he was treated." – ED, mother

When thinking about your loved one with challenging behaviors, it is also important to consider his positive features and strengths. Show respect for his thoughts, feelings and the likelihood that he understands far more—or alternately, perhaps far less—than you might consider. Take care not to speak about him in his presence, for it is likely that he understands more than he is able to show. Talk to him and provide him with information, even if you are not sure that he understands what you are saying. It is important to build your child's trust in your support, and shape his motivation and purpose into more acceptable behaviors.

You can read more of this article at: https://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/section_1.pdf



How to Get Children With Autism to Lower Their Voice

By Julie Christensen

One of the ironies about children with autism is they are often bothered by loud noises or voices, yet seem completely unaware of their own volume. Sometimes children with autism use noise when they're feeling under stimulated. Sometimes, noise can be a sign that they're getting overstimulated. Regardless of the cause, a few visuals and concrete language can help children with autism learn to modulate their voices.



Tactics for Autistic Children

Make a chart on cardstock or posterboard that shows whispering on one end and yelling on the other. In the middle, make a note to show a normal speaking voice. Make cartoon pictures of people yelling, whispering and speaking in a normal voice and add them to the chart.

Laminate the chart and attach a small, plastic clothespin to the edge of it. Move the clothespin to show your child where her voice is. Then, move the clothespin to show your child where her voice should be.

Practice talking in a whisper, a normal talking voice and yelling. Describe settings where each voice would be appropriate. For example, say, "At the library, we use a whispering voice. On the playground, you can yell."

Show your child the visual chart and remind him of the appropriate voice before you go into a certain setting such as a grocery store or church. Say, "Now we're going in the store. We use a normal talking voice here." Reward your child immediately with praise, a sticker or a small treat when he's able to comply.

Teach your child the "Alert" system developed by occupational therapists Sherry Shellenberger and Mary Sue Williams. This program uses a car engine analogy to help children identify when their "motors" are running fast or slow. Learning self-regulation helps your child monitor not only her voice volume, but also her emotional responses.

Write a social story for your child about using the right voice volume in specific settings such as the library, church or at school. Write a few simple, concrete sentences about the problem, why it's important to be quiet and what happens when your child is loud. For example, "I use my whispering voice at the library. Other people are trying to read and study. If I am loud, I will disturb them. They might get angry. The librarian might ask me to leave. When I am quiet, I can stay at the library. The other people can read and study. They feel happy." Add photos or illustrations if you like. Read the story before you go to the specific location.

Things You Will Need

- Cardstock or poster board
- Pens and markers
- Clothespin

Tip

Children with autism sometimes raise their voices as they experience sensory overload. Watch your child for early signs of overload, such as hand flapping or flushed face and intervene early. Remove your child from the circumstance or offer another way to calm down. Companies such as Boardmaker that sell assistive technology software often offer visuals for teaching voice modulation.

<https://howtoadult.com/children-autism-lower-voice-11626.html>

POSITIVE STRATEGIES

What are the Positive Strategies for Supporting Behavior Improvement?

As highlighted in the previous section, there are many possible contributors to the development of challenging behaviors. It is important to investigate and evaluate these, but also to take action sooner rather than later, since many behaviors can become increasingly intense and harder to change as time goes on.

Often a necessary approach to managing behavior involves a combination of addressing underlying physical or mental health concerns, and using the behavioral and educational supports to teach replacement skills and self-regulation. There is no magic pill, but there are a number of strategies that can often be helpful.

The use of Positive Behavior Supports is more than just a politically correct approach to behavior management. Research shows that it is effective. The alternative is usually punishment, which decreases the likelihood of a behavior by taking something away (such as removing a favorite toy) or doing something unpleasant (yelling, spanking.) While punishment might work immediately, it has been shown to be ineffective in the long run and can increase aggressive behavior, provide a model for additional undesirable behaviors, and strain the relationship with the caregiver (you). It is worth noting that to continue to be effective and maintain improvements, positive supports and feedback need to be ongoing as well.

“Withholding reinforcement for problem behavior (i.e., extinction) is technically an example of punishment. Proponents of Positive Behavior Support (PBS) acknowledge that controlling access to reinforcement is necessary when trying to change behavior. What PBS does not condone is the use of aversive (e.g., demeaning, painful) procedures to suppress behavior. Such approaches have been demonstrated to be ineffective in producing durable changes in people’s behavior and do not improve to quality of their lives.” –Association for Positive Behavior Support

If you have made changes to improve your child’s health or happiness, and these have not helped to improve his behavior in a reasonable time frame (a couple of weeks), or you are concerned about safety, help may be needed. Positive strategies and an intervention plan can be developed by a behavioral or educational team, usually in response to what is learned in a functional behavior assessment (FBA) as described in the previous section.

When several challenging behaviors exist, it is important to establish priorities. You may want to first target behaviors that are particularly dangerous, or skills that would help to improve situations across several behavioral scenarios. Remember to set goals that are realistic and meaningful. Start with small steps that can build over time. A non-verbal child is not likely to speak in full sentences overnight, but if learning to hold up a ‘take a break’ card when he needs to leave the table allows him to exit, and keeps him from throwing his plate, that is a huge success.

A plan for you and your team should meet four essential elements:

- Clarity: Information about the plan, expectations and procedures are clear to the individual, family, staff and any other team members.
- Consistency: Team and family members are on the same page with interventions and approaches, and strive to apply the same expectations and rewards.
- Simplicity: Supports are simple, practical and accessible so that everyone on the team, including the family, can be successful in making it happen. If you don’t understand or cannot manage a complicated proposed behavior intervention plan, speak up!
- Continuation: Even as behavior improves, it is important to keep the teaching and the positive supports in place to continue to help your loved one develop good habits and more adaptive skills.



Please recognize that many skills take time to develop, and that changes in behavior require ongoing supports to be successful. In some cases, especially when you are ignoring a behavior that used to ‘work’ for your child, behavior may get more intense or more frequent before it gets better. Your team should keep good records and track progress and responses to intervention to know if the plan is effective.

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POSITIVE STRATEGIES CONTINUED...

Being realistic at the outset is crucial. It can help parents and caregivers appreciate that they are making small yet meaningful changes in their lives and the lives of the individual they care for. Making goals realistic means they are achievable. Being realistic keeps the picture positive. It focuses attention on progress towards a goal, rather than perfection.

Setting Realistic Behavioral Goals: Setting goals allows us to objectively measure progress toward an identified desired outcome. It also allows caregivers and parents to ask themselves, “What behavioral changes would really make the greatest improvements in our lives together?” It allows them to identify what really matters. For instance, it may be more important to address a behavior such as throwing things during a classroom activity than to address that person’s tendency to stand up during meals. p.23 – Targeting the Big Three

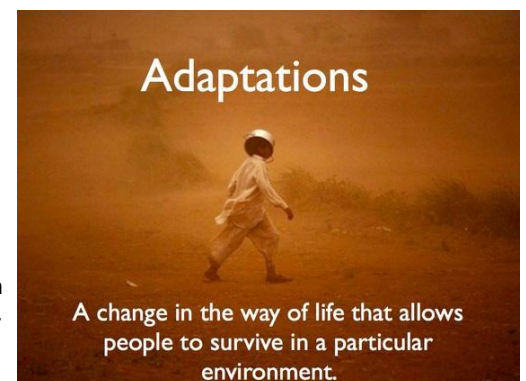
For example, it is possible that you or your team may have misinterpreted the function of a behavior, or that the function has changed over time. A-B-C data often indicates that screaming has the function of attention, because attention from others is a common (and usually natural) consequence. But it may be that screaming is triggered by painful reflux and attention is not the true function. Tracking and interpreting the data is important since it may help to show that more investigation is needed, and the plan may need to be adjusted to be effective. Information on supports for teaching behavior management can be found in the Autism Treatment Network’s *An Introduction to Behavioral Health Treatments and Applied Behavior Analysis; A Parent’s Guide*. In the end, you are trying to teach your child that life is better, and that he can get what he needs, without having to resort to challenging behaviors. The suggestions below are strategies to help make individuals with autism feel more comfortable and more empowered.

Adapt the Environment

As you learn to think like a detective about your child’s behavior, your observations (or the FBA) are likely to show that behavior occurs at specific times, with certain people or in particular environments. You and your team will need to tune in, learning to recognize the signs of increasing tension, anxiety or frustration that eventually lead to challenging behaviors. Often there is a ramping up, or escalation period, and learning to recognize that early and using many of the approaches here can help to calm a situation and prevent behavioral outbursts. Sometimes these signs may be very subtle—red ears, a tapping foot, heavier breathing, higher pitched speech—but it is essential that everyone on the team responds to the importance of tuning in and working towards de-escalation.

Changing the environment can often reduce behavioral episodes. Expand situations, relationships, places and opportunities that are successful. If possible, try to adjust or avoid situations that are triggers for challenging behavior. Incorporate ways to reduce frustration and anxiety and increase understanding. Below are some things to consider when working to create a more successful environment:

- **Organize and provide structure:** Provide clear and consistent visual schedules, calendars, consistent routines, etc. so that the person knows what is coming next.
- **Inform transitions and changes:** Recognize that changes can be extremely unsettling, especially when they are unexpected. Refer to a schedule, use countdown timers, give warnings about upcoming changes, etc.
- **Use Visual Supports:** Pictures, text, video modeling and other visuals are best for visual learners, but they are also critical because they provide information that stays. The ATN Visual Supports Tool Kit provides a step-by-step, easy-to-understand introduction to visual supports.
- **Provide a safe place and teach when to use it:** A calming room or corner, and/or objects or activities that help to calm (e.g. bean bag) provide opportunities to regroup and can be helpful in teaching self-control.
- **Remove or dampen distracting or disturbing stimuli:** Replace flickering fluorescent lights, use headphones to help block noise avoid high traffic times, etc.
- **Pair companions or staff appropriately for challenging activities or times:** Some people are more calming than others in certain situations. If going to the store with dad works better than with mom, focus on that and celebrate successes.
- **Consider structural changes to your home or yard:** These changes might address some of the specifics of your situation to increase independence or reduce the risks when outbursts occur. *Making Homes that Work* includes a range of potential changes that can be made to reduce property damage, improve safety, and increase choice and independence. “



Continued on page 8.

POSITIVE STRATEGIES CONTINUED...

“One of the barriers that we often find for children with autism in toilet training has to do with the condition of the bathroom itself. Often times we find that people with ASD can be very tactfully defensive so the space itself needs to be as neutral as possible. There needs to be enough room around the toilet so people don’t feel too confined. It is really helpful if the space is warm and you address other types of sensations around the toileting experience. For example, is it cold, is there a fan running, is the light too bright, or not bright enough? You can sometimes help encourage people to use the toilet if the bathroom is a friendly place for them to be

– George Braddock, President, Creative Housing Solutions LLC

What else can I do to promote a Safe Environment?

Even the best-laid plans don’t always work in every situation or at the necessary speed. Despite proactive strategies, particularly challenging times and stressful situations can get beyond our control. Aggression or self-injury can get to a point where the situation is dangerous. It is good to be prepared if you think this might happen.

Communicate to Others

Many families have found it helpful to communicate to those around them about their child’s special needs and some of the behavioral situations that might arise. Sometimes it is helpful to let others know what is going on so that they can also be observers and help provide helpful input about your child. Some families have found it helpful to talk to their neighbors, or to communicate with others in the community using stickers, cards, or other visuals.

Preparing for an Autism Emergency

Because autism often presents with special considerations, tools have been developed to help families prepare ahead of time for some situations that might arise. The following resources have suggestions for families, as well as information that can be shared with local law enforcement and first responders:

- Autism Speaks Autism Safety Project
- First Responders Tool Kit
- Community and Professional Training Videos for First Responders
- National Autism Association’s Big Red Safety Boxes
- Autism Wandering Awareness Alerts Response and Education Collaboration (AWAARE)
- Making Homes that Work



Use Positive Behavior Supports

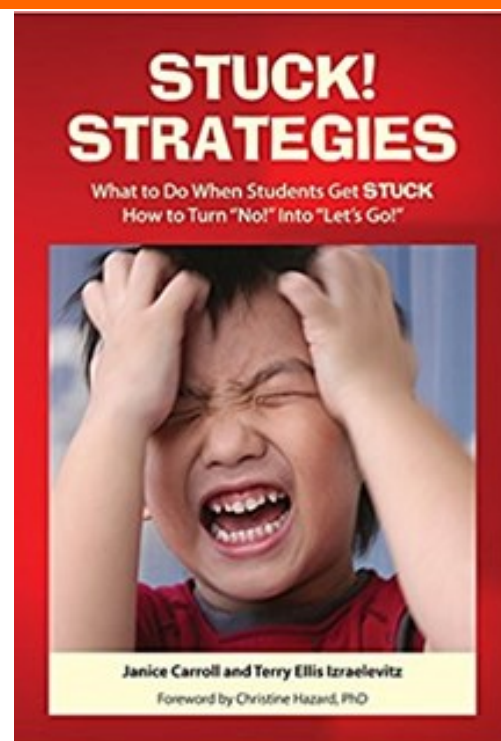
Your team should develop strategies for you to use to increase the behaviors you want to see in your child. These will need to be individualized to his particular needs and challenges. They can often be helpful in building a sense of pride in accomplishments and personal responsibility, and a sense of what is expected. This will reduce the anxiety and reactivity that results in aggression or other behaviors.

We are sorry we can only include the beginning of this article. To read the rest of this article please go to http://www.autismspeaks.org/sites/default/files/section_5.pdf

Stuck! Strategies - What to Do When Students Get STUCK: How to Turn “No!” into “Let’s Go!”

by Janice Carroll and Terry Ellis Izraelevitz

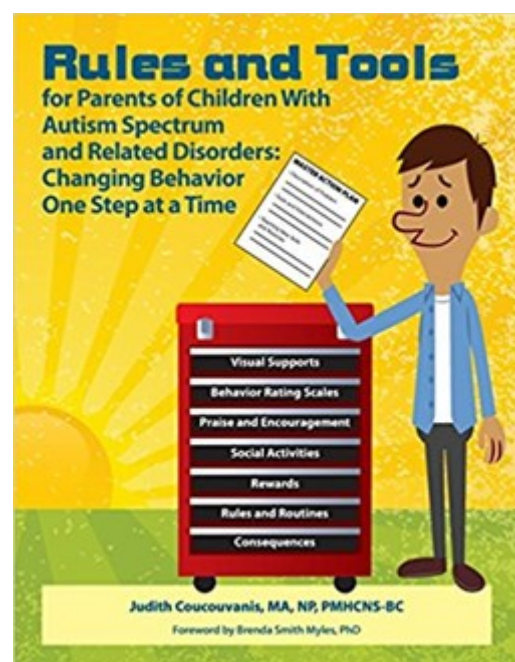
With illustrations, visual supports, and simple instructions, this book lays out 15 proven strategies for supporting students with disabilities such as autism spectrum disorders, connecting challenging behavior to the students’ underlying support needs. The strategies address the need for predictability and structure, helping students be flexible, make transitions, and begin tasks. The first seven strategies are preventative, but the authors understand that whatever you do, “stuck” moments may still happen, so the last eight strategies involve ways to redirect students who are stuck. ***Stuck! Strategies*** is an absolutely wonderful resource for parents and educators who support inflexible thinkers.



Rules and Tools for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum and Related Disorders: Changing Behavior One Step at a Time

by Judith Coucouvanis

Through a simple and structured approach to behavior planning, this book guides parents to understand why behaviors occur, to identify patterns of behaviors, and to use appropriate, evidence-based strategies. This resource contains 119 easy-to-use rules and tools addressing visual supports, behavior rating scales, praise, rewards, rules and routines, and consequences. Using checklists, forms, and other practical tools, parents of children with ASD will be able to understand their child’s behavior and track their progress.





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VISUALS

How I Feel

