



FACT SHEET | U of M LEND Program

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS SERIES

Communicative Alternatives to Challenging Behavior

When should I teach a communicative alternative to a challenging behavior?

- When deciding to teach a communicative alternative to challenging behavior, it is critical to decide whether or not the function of the behavior can be honored. Some functions can be honored and some cannot. For example, if the function of a child running away and hiding under a table every time she needs to take her seizure medication is to avoid the medication, then clearly the function cannot be honored. The child must instead be taught self-regulatory strategies to cope with the discomfort of bad-tasting medicine. However, when a team decides to replace the challenging behavior with a communicative alternative, there must be general consensus that the function of the behavior is acceptable and can be honored. To illustrate, if a teacher's analysis of a Functional

Behavioral Assessment revealed that a child engaged in throwing his materials to escape from small group time, she could decide to honor that function and allow the child to have a break from his activity. He could be taught how to request a break appropriately through word, sign, or gesture. If the child had a mechanism for communicating his need for a break appropriately that was as successful as the challenging behavior, he may no longer feel compelled to throw his materials to achieve an escape.

What makes a child use a communicative alternative instead of the challenging behavior?

- Socially acceptable communicative alternatives that are taught need to be functionally equivalent and more efficient than the challenging behavior. A functionally equivalent behavior serves the same purpose as

the challenging behavior. For example, if a child screams to get attention, the new communicative alternative of saying, "Come here" must result in gaining the teacher's attention as immediately as the scream. The communicative behavior should also be efficient and one the child can produce with ease. If a child engages in tantrumming behavior to avoid circle time, it is reasonable to conclude that teaching her to touch a symbol that indicates I want to take a break would require less effort than the challenging behavior. The use of this new response would also make it possible for the child to escape the activity sooner than the demonstration of the old behavior. In the final analysis, you want to teach a communicative replacement that will meet the same function as the challenging behavior and be performed with greater ease and convenience by the child.

What are the steps involved in teaching a communicative alternative?

- Clearly define the function of the challenging behavior by completing a functional behavior analysis.
- Decide whether or not the function of that behavior can be honored. When the child uses this new communicative alternative, it must be reinforced. For example, if a child is taught to ask for attention, attention must be delivered immediately. If the communicative alternative is not reinforced appropriately or is reinforced inconsistently, then the child will not associate this new behavior with the desired outcome and they may revert back to their challenging behavior to meet their needs.
- Decide on an appropriate communicative alternative to the challenging behavior. Be sure to consider the child's primary mode of communication. Remember you want the communicative alternative to be more efficient than the challenging behavior so it must be easy and convenient for the child to use. Communicative alternatives can be verbal, gestural, or graphic.
- Arrange teaching opportunities to introduce the new communicative alternative. It is not appropriate to teach the new communicative alternative during an episode of challenging behavior. In this agitated state, the child will not be receptive to new learning and the communicative alternative may become associated with the challenging behavior. Organize situations where the child can be prompted to use the communicative alternative in a natural context where the behavior will be reinforced appropriately.
- When teaching the communicative alternative, carefully plan how you will introduce it and prompt the child.
 - » For example, if you are in a circle time activity and you want to teach the child to request a break by touching a "break" symbol, you will need to designate a staff person to be by the child to prompt them through touching the symbol and then releasing them to the designated "break area" before any challenging behavior occurs. (See the Request a Break Tip Sheet for more information on this strategy.)
- Finally, keep data on how successfully the child is independently using the communicative alternative instead of challenging behavior. Give the child time to learn the new skill and generalize it across situations and settings. If the child is not using the communicative alternative consistently, you may need to reevaluate the chosen communicative alternative and its effectiveness for the child. Three critical points to evaluate are: Did you teach the strategy effectively? Did you provide practice opportunities? Have you reinforced the new communicative alternative appropriately and consistently? Have you stopped reinforcing the challenging behavior?

This Fact Sheet of the Challenging Behaviors Series has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to children with autism spectrum disorders in their home and classroom. This Fact Sheet was originally titled Positive Approaches to Young Children who Engage in Challenging Behavior and was published by the Center for Early Education and Development at the University of Minnesota. Funding provided via IDEA Part B, sec. 619, Preschool, by a grant to the University of Minnesota from the Minnesota Department of Education. Co-authored by Joe Reichle, Ph.D., Carol Davis, Ph.D., Shelley Neilsen, Ph.D., and Lillian Duran. These materials have been further edited by Joe Reichle, Ph.D. and LeAnne Johnson Ph.D. for use by the University of Minnesota LEND Program (Leadership Training and Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities). The information contained does not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education or the Minnesota Department of Education.

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