



FACT SHEET | U of M LEND Program

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS SERIES

Challenging Behavior

What is challenging behavior?

- Challenging behaviors “result in self-injury, injury to others, cause damage to the physical environment, and/or interfere with the acquisition of new skills and/or socially isolate the learner (Doss & Reichle, 1991).

What is meant by the form and function of a challenging behavior?

- The form of a challenging behavior is the observable manifestation of the behavior. Examples include yelling, biting, hitting, screaming, running away, self-injury, etc. The child may engage in a single form of challenging behavior per episode (e.g., just hitting) or a sequence of behaviors (e.g., hit, yell, spit, and pinch).
- The function of a challenging behavior is the “why” behind the behavior. The function is the outcome that results from engaging in the challenging behavior. Some functions that a

behavior may serve are to avoid/escape undesired outcomes, to obtain a preferred item or activity, to gain attention, or to fill a sensory need.

What is socially motivated vs. nonsocially motivated challenging behavior?

- Challenging behaviors that require the mediation of others in the environment are socially motivated. A child may engage in socially motivated behavior to gain access to attention, objects or activities, or to escape or avoid nonpreferred situations. For example, Mary throws materials around the room in order to communicate her desire to end an activity. Or Kayden runs up and hits another toddler in the room to gain the teacher’s attention during free play.
- Challenging behaviors that do not require the mediation of others are nonsocially motivated. These behaviors may serve the function of obtaining or gaining internal stimuli. None of these behaviors require any interaction with

others in his or her environment in order to be reinforced. For example: A child may bang his head in order to escape the pain of an earache. Or the same child may enjoy the feeling of his/her body in motion and therefore rock back and forth.

- Nonsocially motivated behaviors can become socially motivated over time. Consider a young child who bangs his head to alleviate the pain of an earache. The first few times his mother noticed him banging his head, she picked him up and offered him his favorite toy. She noticed that there was drainage from his ear and took him to his pediatrician. Once the infection was gone, the child would still occasionally bang his head and his mother still immediately picked him up and offered him his favorite toy. The child had learned that banging his head brought him immediate attention and a preferred item. This behavior began as nonsocially motivated, but through reinforcement became socially motivated.

Do a child's challenging behaviors influence how family, peers, and teachers interact with him or her?

■ Family, peers, and teachers may unwittingly change routines, alter demands and defer from causing any conflict with a child to avoid an episode of challenging behavior. This could lead to social isolation, lower expectations, and less stimulation of a child's development. The following example illustrates how children can affect the way care providers and peers interact with them.

» Example: Attention-Motivated. George is a young child who acts aggressively toward peers in order to obtain his teacher's attention. As a result, the teacher's instructional strategies have changed considerably since George became a member of the class. She always sits next to George, assigns him to her play group, and spends most of her time interacting with him. George's peers move cautiously around him and do not include him in their play. The time that she does spend with the other children is often interrupted while she diverts her attention to George. It is apparent the teacher has adapted her teaching style by providing George with an abundance of attention in order to decrease the likelihood that he will engage in challenging behavior, but she has not been able to teach him more socially acceptable behavior to receive the attention that he is seeking. It is important not to just avoid episodes of challenging behavior but to sufficiently analyze the behavior to determine what the child is trying to communicate so that you can use this as an opportunity to teach more appropriate and effective social skills.

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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