



Understanding Functions of Behavior in Autism

Have you ever wondered why kids do the things they do? Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is based on the belief that all behavior serves a function, or in other words, it happens for a reason. Understanding the function, or reason, behind your child's behavior is the first step in helping your child grow.

Four functions of behavior:

- 1. Attention:** A person might act in a certain way to get attention from other people. This could be positive attention, like praise, or negative attention, like being scolded. If you've ever walked up to someone you wanted to talk to, you've done this.
- 2. Escape/Avoidance:** A person might do something to avoid or prevent an unwanted situation. If you've ever turned your ringer off at night to avoid phone calls or left a party early because you weren't having fun, you've done this.
- 3. Tangible:** A person could behave in a certain way to get something that they want (e.g., a toy, snack or activity). If you've ever showed up to work on time so that you get a paycheck, you've done this.
- 4. Sensory Stimulation:** A person might do something because it feels good. If you've ever gotten a massage because you like the way it makes you relax, you've done this.

If your child has dangerous or concerning behaviors, your behavior analyst will work with you to identify their functions. This may involve you writing down information about the behaviors when they occur. Usually, this is done by using the ABC (Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence) model. When using this model, focus on the consequences your child receives for their actions. Do they get attention, whether positive or negative? Do they get access to something they like, such as candy or a toy? Do they avoid something unpleasant, like chores, homework or taking a bath? Or do they simply enjoy the action itself, like spinning in circles and feeling dizzy afterward? Identifying these patterns can help identify the function or goal of the behavior. Once you know the function, you and your behavior analyst can create a plan to teach different behaviors that serve the same function in a safer, more appropriate way.



Meet Jimmy | Jimmy is a 12-year-old boy who doesn't talk and has no way of communicating what he wants to his family. His mother says that every afternoon he gets upset and

starts hitting her. She has tried numerous ways of calming him down, but nothing worked until she started giving him cookies. Recently, he started hitting her shortly before bedtime. Jimmy's behavior analyst noticed a trend: Jimmy starts hitting his mother about three hours after each meal. She realizes that he might be hungry and trying to let her know that he needs something to eat. He has learned that when he hits his mom, he gets cookies. The behavior analyst realizes that the function of his behavior is access to a snack. She begins teaching him safer ways to ask for a snack. Over the next few weeks, Jimmy learns to point at the snack that he wants, and he stops hitting his mother.

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