Maladaptive Behaviors

Maladaptive behaviors are a common occurrence in children with ASD. It is usually caused by a characteristic of their diagnosis and not necessarily directly caused by the diagnosis. For example, a non-verbal child with autism may tantrum when he wants a drink. The tantrum behavior is not a symptom of autism, but it is a cause from the child not being able to communicate they want a drink (characteristic of autism).

Behavior is a way for children with autism to communicate their wants and needs. It can take many forms - aggressions, tantrums, self-injury, eloping, self-stimulation. If we give into the maladaptive behaviors, we are telling the children this is an appropriate way to communicate. It is important to teach the child appropriate ways to communicate. For example, if the child tantrums to avoid doing work, you can teach them to request a break. If they have a tantrum at work time, it is very important to make them do some of the task. Otherwise you run the risk of reinforcing the tantrum as a way to get out of work. Instead, reinforce the work which was done without the maladaptive behavior.

We must gain an understanding of what is causing the behavior to occur and figure out the best strategy to handle it. When a child keeps repeating a maladaptive behavior, that behavior must be serving some sort of purpose or function for the child – otherwise he/she would not keep repeating it. It is best to think about what happened immediately before the behavior and treat it accordingly.

There are four functions of behavior.

- Escape/avoid a task or demand
- Get something they want (tangible)
- Get attention
- Self-stimulatory (sensory input)
Functions of Behavior

Escape

- Children will exhibit behaviors in order to escape something or get out of doing something. Behaviors can vary greatly. They may tantrum when you ask them to do work or in an over-stimulating environment they want to leave. They can also want to escape due to anxiety over a task. It is important to stay consistent and follow through with what they were asked to do. You do not have to expect the entire thing, but they must at least do some of the task without behaviors. Each time make them do a little bit more. If the child needs to leave an environment due to over-stimulation, it is important to teach him/her appropriate ways to communicate.

Gain something

- When an individual is unable to communicate what he/she wants it leads to extreme frustration causing maladaptive behaviors. The easiest way to deal with this is to develop a communication system for the child. Simple picture boards in a book to make a choice are easy to make and use. Have your child practice asking for things by using the book and encourage them to use the book every time they get something so they make a connection. If the behaviors are due to a communication issue it is crucial, once they have calmed down, to have them communicate what they want and then give it to them. The faster they learn to communicate what they want, the faster the behaviors will decrease.

- Another cause is not being allowed to have something they want. If a child asks for some candy and are told no, they can become upset and exhibit maladaptive behaviors. This is due to frustration of being denied what they want. If you give a child what they ask for when they are exhibiting behaviors they are very likely to exhibit behavior every time they are told “no”. It is important to teach your child to handle hearing the word “no”. This can be done by reinforcing them with an alternative reinforcer for not exhibiting maladaptive behaviors when you say “no”. You reinforce the appropriate behavior, or reinforce the absence of the maladaptive behavior. For example, if the child wants candy and you tell him no, if he does not exhibit any maladaptive behaviors you can reinforce him with a sticker.
Get attention

- Children can exhibit behaviors in order to gain attention from an adult or peers. This may be caused by a lack of ability to appropriately interact. Children also may associate some type of social activity with you that they act up in order for you to interact with them. Any kind of attention either when they are doing something good or getting in trouble is still reinforcing for the child. It is important to not give them verbal interaction if this is the cause. Do not make eye contact and redirect them to what they are suppose to be doing. Ignore the behavior, but not the child! Reinforce frequently for doing what they are supposed to be doing and do not attend to them when they are exhibiting maladaptive behaviors. Sometimes this means leaving the room or turning your back to the child and engaging in something else.

Self-stimulatory

- Self-stimulatory behavior is different than the other three. The others involve tantrums, self-injury, and aggression. Self-stimulatory behavior is a bit different. It can involve vocals, hand/arm flapping, jumping, rocking. Although they may seem harmless, they are not socially acceptable and it can interfere with other activities. It is important to reinforce the child for NOT exhibiting the behavior; also blocking the behavior when it occurs. These behaviors can happen often when the child is bored; it is important to keep your child engaged in activities. Self stimulatory behaviors can also occur during times of stress or anxiety.
Similar Behaviors Can Have Different Functions

“If you’ve met one child with autism, you’ve met one child with autism”

Multiple children may display the same behavior; however the underlying causes of the behavior can be very different. A behavior shown by one child may be maintained by attention while second child exhibits the exact same behavior in order to avoid something unpleasant. Therefore, focusing on the behavior only will usually give little information about effective interventions. Identifying the underlying cause(s) of a child’s behavior, however, or, more specifically, what the child "gets" or "avoids" through the behavior, can provide the team with the information necessary to develop positive behavioral strategies that are created to address behaviors that interfere with the child’s life.

Examples:

- John is sitting doing homework and begins to hit himself in the arm. Staff asks John if he needs a break. He says yes, and stops hitting. Staff allows him to have a 5 minute break. John hits himself again next time Staff have him do homework.
- Sarah is sitting doing homework and begins to hit herself in the arm. Staff asks Sarah if she needs a break; the hitting continues. Staff asks if Sarah would like a snack; she stops hitting. Sarah begins hitting more often with Staff.
- Eric is sitting down doing homework and begins to hit himself in the arm. Eric is also staring right at staff. Staff tells Eric to stop, and places their hand over his. Eric laughs and stops. They continue with the work; Eric begins to hit himself again, staring at Staff.
- Rachel is sitting down doing homework and begins to hit herself. Staff offers a break, food, and attempts to place their hand over hers to have her stop hitting herself. Rachel ignores Staff and continues; she seems to enjoy when her hand hits her arm. Staff offers Rachel a weighted blanket to put around shoulders and arms.

All these examples have the children exhibiting the same behavior, but with different underlying causes. By knowing the correct function of the behavior, staff can react in the appropriate way so the behaviors will not occur again:

*John is escaping homework, so Staff would have him complete some of the task without hitting before he is allowed to leave.

*Sarah would be taught to use an appropriate form of communication (picture board, ipad, sign language, verbal request) to gain access to her wants - food.

*Eric’s Staff would not give him any verbal indication of acknowledgement of the hitting; they might block the behavior but not attend to Eric, then give him attention and praise in the moments he is not hitting.

*Rachel’s Staff would teach her how to communicate when she needs her weighted blanket to give her the self stimulating sensory need she is seeking.
ABC Form

Antecedents (what happened before the behavior)

- Where does the behavior happen?
- With whom does the behavior occur?
- When does the behavior happen?
- What activity is the behavior occurring during?
- What are other people doing when the behavior begins?

Behavior (what the behavior looked like)

It is important to record as much information about the behavior of concern during your observations. Rather than writing, "aggressed", your notes may be enhanced by more detail, such as, "kicked peer", "hit staff with fist", "pinched peer's arm". Documentation of behaviors needs to be objective and measurable.

Consequences (what happens after the behavior or as a result of the behavior)

When identifying consequences, it may not be as clear as "time out", "reprimand" or "ignore". Often times when observing behavior one may find that multiple events will follow the behavior of concern. All consequences should be recorded and evaluated for their influence on the target behavior.

* Equally important is to document the conditions that surround positive behaviors. By documenting these, we can identify effective strategies that can be replicated.
**Case Study**

Peggy is clearing the table with her brother. Her brother whispers, “You’re so stupid”. In response Peggy throws the utensils she is holding at him. Mom comes over and shouts at Peggy before sending her to her room. The brother turns towards Peggy and laughs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antecedent</th>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:15 am</td>
<td>Peggy throws utensils at brother</td>
<td>Mom approaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kitchen</td>
<td></td>
<td>Mom reprimands, &quot;That is not how 12 year olds are supposed to act!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearing table</td>
<td></td>
<td>Peggy sent to room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother helping</td>
<td></td>
<td>Brother laughs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother insults Peggy</td>
<td></td>
<td>Utensils on floor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>