

## OPINION

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### Dealing with problematic behaviors associated with autism

We all have basic needs ranging from food, water, and sleep, to attention and relief from undesirable situations. We crave amusement and have preferences for different people, places, and things.

From infancy, most typically developing people learn to get their needs met by communicating with others. However, when a communication disorder such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is present, a person may not have the necessary communication skills to convey their needs in a socially appropriate way.

Some of the problematic behaviors associated with ASD include aggression, property destruction, self-injury, running away, and screaming or crying. Others may include repetitive behaviors such as hand flapping or rocking back and forth. People with ASD who are considered “higher functioning” may have less visibly obvious problematic behaviors, but may still do things that impact successful social interaction.

People adopt undesirable behaviors through learned experience. When a problematic behavior occurs (such as screaming for treats at the grocery store) and is reinforced, the chances of it occurring again increase because it is working for the individual in some way.

It can be helpful to consider why a problematic behavior is happening – what purpose does it serve? Let’s say a child really wants candy from the store. The parent says “no,” the child throws a tantrum, and the parent buys the candy. The child has just learned that throwing a tantrum is a way to get candy.

There could be other ways to get candy, but if “tantrumming” is the easiest and most effective, it



will likely happen again. Now, add ASD to the mix – perhaps the child does not have the language skills to ask for a treat verbally and/or does not understand when the parent says “no, it’s almost time for dinner.” Now, it’s even easier to see how the tantrum becomes the path of least resistance.

Consider what happens leading up to and immediately before the behavior, and even more importantly, what happens right after. Is the person given something, or does he gain attention from someone? Is an unpleasant activity avoided? Or, is it possible that the behavior simply feels good physically (e.g., rocking back and forth)? Once we can determine why a behavior is occurring, we are more likely to be able to develop a successful response to decrease the behavior.

Sometimes parents, teachers, and caregivers mistakenly respond to a problematic behavior in a way that causes more harm than good in the long run. For example, consider a child struggling in class. The work is hard, he gets scolded frequently, and he is not well received by the other kids, in part because he causes frequent interruptions. He disrupts class and is sent to the principal’s office. Maybe he takes the long way and has a nice stroll

in the hallway, sits outside the office and listens to office gossip for a few minutes, receives a mild talking-to and is sent back just in time for the bell.

This child has just learned a way to escape class, so the teacher’s well-intentioned consequence will probably have the unintended effect of increasing his disruptive behavior.

A better approach for this child might be to break his classwork down and provide more assistance so it is not so daunting, provide ample social praise for participating appropriately and allow the opportunity to earn breaks for on-task behavior.

While problematic behavior is challenging, it can be overcome. Attempting to determine why a behavior is occurring, as described here, is an informal approach that can be used with any problematic behavior, whether it is associated with ASD.

In more serious situations, it may be helpful to seek the services of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, or BCBA. These individuals are trained in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), the science of changing socially significant behavior by manipulating variables in the environment and assessing the effect of those changes. They can conduct more formal assessments to determine the function of a behavior and help parents, caregivers, and teachers develop appropriate interventions.

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