

# Behaviour Basics

Does your child have behaviour that you find challenging to deal with? Do these behaviours appear to come out of nowhere or for no reason at all? Behaviour looks different for each child. One child may have tantrums with screaming, kicking, and biting while another child might simply fall to the floor and cry quietly. Challenging behaviour can include anything from ignoring your instructions to being physically aggressive. Challenging behaviour can be stressful and frustrating for both you and your child.



## All behaviour happens for a reason!

Your child engages in challenging behaviour for a variety of reasons. In some cases, the reason might be clear but in others, it may not be. When you spend a little time observing the behaviour, you can begin to understand what your child's triggers (antecedents) are and what responses (consequences) they get after the behaviour that helps them achieve their goal.

Once you understand what the purpose of the behaviour is, you can begin to effectively prevent it from occurring again in the future, teach new appropriate ways to help your child get what they want and create a plan on how to intervene should the behaviour happen again.

## What are the reasons for behaviour?

Every behaviour has a purpose. There are two main reasons why children display challenging behaviour:

To **get/achieve** something.

- attention
- items
- activities
- internal sensations

To **escape/avoid** something.

- attention
- tasks
- environments
- internal sensations



**Your child behaves the way they do because it works. It is the quickest and easiest way to get what they want!**



Attempting to stop or change a behaviour is not an easy task. It takes time, patience, and a lot of information about the behaviour. The information you gather about the behaviour will reveal the circumstances under which the behaviour is most likely to occur.

# What behaviour might look like?

## Get/Achieve Something

When attempting to get access to something your child wants, they might engage in any of the following behaviours:

- crying
- screaming
- whining
- verbal protests
- non-compliance
- property destruction
- Aggression
- self-injury

or

## Escape/Avoid Something

When attempting to escape/avoid something your child doesn't want, they might engage in any of the following behaviours:

- non-compliance
- negotiating
- running away
- ignoring
- hiding
- covering their ears
- crying
- stalling

Every child who exhibits problem behaviour has their own unique way of behaving. How one child chooses to behave to get access to something they want or avoid something that they don't want, might look completely different from how another child behaves in a similar situation. There is no right way or wrong way for your child to reach their goal, there is only the way that works most effectively for them.

## Where do I start?

- 1) To prevent your child (or yourself) from feeling overwhelmed, choose only one behaviour to work on at a time.
- 2) Once you have chosen a behaviour, it is important to define it. Write an objective sentence about the behaviour that makes it very clear to all caregivers involved what the behaviour looks like. A good definition of behaviour would include only the behaviour that you see. Refrain from making guesses as to what your child is feeling or thinking. For example, if your child engages in tantrum behaviour, a definition could be: "Johnny drops to the floor, cries, kicks his feet and screams."
- 3) The next step is to collect information about the behaviour.
  - Identify what triggers the behaviour (antecedents). What environments, people, or times of day is the behaviour most likely to happen?
  - Identify what the responses (consequences) are to the behaviour. What do you and others do immediately after the behaviour? How does the behaviour help your child to get what they want?
  - Record how long each behaviour episode lasts.
- 4) Look at all of the information that you have collected. What are the patterns that you see. Are there circumstances that usually happen to trigger the behaviour? Is the behaviour working to get your child what they want or escape from what they do not want?
- 5) Try something new. Decide what you can do to help prevent the problem behaviour from happening as well as stop responding in a way that allows your child's behaviour to work for them.
- 6) Decide what skills your child is lacking. Help to teach them the skills they require to be successful.

**It is important to remember that your behaviour can significantly impact your child's behaviour.**



# How can I organize the information?

## ABC Data Sheet (example)

Date	Time Start	Time End	Antecedent	Behaviour	Consequence
May 1	7:23 p.m.	7:25 p.m.	Describe what you saw immediately (three to five seconds) before the problem behaviour.	Describe only the physical behaviour that you saw.	Describe what you (or anyone) did immediately (three to five seconds) after the problem behaviour.
May 1	7:23 p.m.	7:25 p.m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>told to pick up three toys</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignored parent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>repeated the instruction three times</li> <li>raised voice</li> <li>parent picked up toys</li> </ul>
May 1	7:30 p.m.	7:45 p.m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>told to get pajamas on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>said "No!"</li> <li>ran away/hid</li> <li>ignoring parent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>arguing about pajamas</li> <li>bedtime delayed</li> <li>parent got child dressed</li> </ul>
May 3	8:36 a.m.	8:42 a.m.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wanted a chocolate bar for breakfast.</li> <li>told "No".</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>crying</li> <li>screaming</li> <li>stomping feet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ignored behaviour for four minutes</li> <li>stated "Stop Crying!"</li> <li>explaining why it is not a healthy breakfast</li> <li>parent gave chocolate to stop the behaviour</li> </ul>

## How can I behave differently so my child will too?

### Get/Achieve Something

- Build a positive relationship with your child.
- Give your child positive attention when they are behaving appropriately.
- Ignore attention seeking behaviour. It is okay to ignore the challenging behaviour, but always monitor your child's safety.

Explain when they can access what they want.  
Use a timer or calendar to help them understand the passage of time.

- When something is not available, offer other choices that are of equal value.
- Model other appropriate behaviours that work to get them what they want.



### Escape/Avoid Something

- Offer an incentive to help motivate your child to complete a task. **First** your child must do something you want (clean room), and **then** they get access to something they want (e.g. the Wi-Fi password).
- Offer choices on how to complete the task (e.g. "Would you like to clean up the Lego or your clothes?").
- Make sure that the task you have given your child, actually gets done. Don't ask unless you are prepared to follow through.

Reduce the big task by offering help (e.g. "You pick up the red Lego and I will help pick up the green Lego.").

- Try to imagine the situation from your child's perspective and be patient. They are still learning to navigate and regulate their behaviour, and emotions and they need your support to do it effectively.

# Important Skills You Can Teach Your Child

When teaching your child a new skill, break the larger skill into smaller more manageable parts. This helps to make the learning process easier, more fun and motivating for you and your child. Be sure to praise each learned step as your child gains new skills.

## Get/Achieve Something

- Teach your child to communicate their wants, needs, thoughts and feelings using appropriate words/phrases rather than physical behaviour.
  - If your child struggles with language, use pictures to help them better communicate.
- Teach your child to make appropriate requests to get what they want from peers (e.g., “Can I have a turn when you are done?”).
- Teach your child how to tolerate being told “No!”
- Teach your child how to wait for access to preferred items/activities.

## Escape/Avoid Something

- Teach your child how to ask for help.
- Teach your child to request a break.
- Teach your child relaxation/coping skills.
- Slowly expose your child to environments, situations and/or things that make them feel anxious.
  - Stressor presented for very short periods of time, under controlled situations, to minimize discomfort.



**Your child's behaviour is what they do,  
it is not who they are!**



**Remember that behaviour is a form of communication.**

As children mature, they continue to develop their ability to use language to communicate their thoughts, feelings, wants and needs. Until your child acquires those effective language skills (no matter their age), they will use other ways to get their ideas and feelings across. Often, those other ways include challenging behaviours.

Can you think of a time when you were trying to explain something that made perfect sense to you but your audience had no idea what you were talking about? Were you frustrated? Remember that your child might be still learning to communicate. Help them to use better words, so they don't have to engage in challenging behaviour to get what they want.

**Resources and information have been taken from the following sources:**

[www.connectABILITY.ca](http://www.connectABILITY.ca)

[www.erinoakkids.ca](http://www.erinoakkids.ca)

[www.autismspeaks.ca](http://www.autismspeaks.ca)



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