



POP CULTURE + DESIGN

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS



Challenging behaviors represent one of the most difficult and frustrating attributes of autism. While not every individual with autism displays challenging behaviors, those who do often struggle to gain access to opportunities and independence in their communities of choice. In the face of challenging behaviors, many parents, caregivers, and practitioners sometimes feel powerless in how to best respond. This article is intended to serve as a resource by providing practical tips.

Tip #1

- » Behavior is communication. An individual's behavior communicates to the environment his or her wants and needs. Listening to those needs will allow us as practitioners, parents, and caregivers to better understand and respond appropriately. Furthermore, understanding what an individual communicates will allow for teaching new, appropriate ways to communicate the same thing. For example, a child throws items when he or she needs help. Rather than providing help after a child throws, teaching the child to appropriately request help will build a new skill and reduce throwing.

Tip #2

- » Isolate challenging behaviors as actions. What movement does the child make when he engages in the challenging behaviors? What actions do I see? Using action words becomes a starting point for planning. Using action words keeps the focus on what the behavior communicates to the environment and how stakeholders can help change that behavior. Changing the lexicon of challenging behaviors from meltdown to movement may allow for more reflection, collaboration, and positive programming.

Tip #3

Consider yourself a co-conspirator. Changing behavior involves reflecting on how the environment sets the stage for challenging behaviors and how we as stakeholders, caregivers, and parents, respond to those behaviors. Behavior doesn't occur in isolation; behavior happens as a response to the people and activities in an environment. Consider recording what occurs after an individual engages in a challenging behavior. Whatever occurs immediately following a challenging behavior serves to reinforce it and allow it to continue to occur. Learning how to adapt the environment can prevent challenging behaviors from occurring and promote more appropriate, positive behaviors. Changing challenging behaviors and ensuring that challenging behaviors do not stymie equal opportunities involves taking equal responsibility for the behaviors occurring.

Final Thoughts

My work in the field of special education continues to push my perception of challenging behaviors, assumed competence. One of the greatest lessons I have learned is that challenging behaviors do not change overnight. Behavior change occurs gradually over time, typically in fits and bursts. It takes persistence to work with and change challenging behaviors. However even more than that, it takes compassion and empathy. Incorporating both will build an environment of kindness, mutual respect, and trust for all involved.

Bio: Rachel Schwartz, PhD, BCBA-D has worked internationally creating and supervising programs for individuals with developmental disabilities. Rachel currently works as an education consultant and trainer with the Watson Institute in Pittsburgh, PA.

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