

Why are my kids acting out and why are the consequences not working?

Why children act out

To understand why your child might be “misbehaving”, we must first understand the basic principles of behavior. Every human behaves a certain way for a purpose. No one just “acts out for no reason.” Pay attention to what the child is trying to tell you by what they are doing.

There are 4 main functions or reasons for why a person would engage in a particular behavior (good or bad). Every behavior we engage in is maintained or reinforced by at least one of these 4 functions.

It is important to identify the function or purpose for their behavior so that you can respond and intervene with an appropriate consequence that will be an effective behavior modification tool, rather than inadvertently reinforcing a problem behavior.



1. To escape or avoid

When a person engages in problem behavior to escape or avoid something, it is likely that the task is either not interesting or motivating enough for them, or it is too difficult. Take a look at what is being asked of the child, and either modify the reward to motivate them, or break the task down into smaller more achievable steps and help them accomplish the goal so it is less overwhelming. It may also be beneficial to offer frequent mini breaks in between each step of completing the one big main task. Teach them that they can ask for help in lieu of feeling the need to exhibit other challenging behaviors. Also, providing the child with facilitated choices (e.g. “would you like to eat your lunch or clean up your mess first?”) will help the child feel a sense of control, and be less inclined to “misbehave” for the purpose to escape or avoid.



2. For attention

It may not always be possible to provide equal attention to all of your kids/students. Try to focus on catching the children when they are behaving positively rather than focusing and giving attention to the problem behaviors. (e.g. if a student is shouting out in class, ignore the behavior of shouting and reinforce the behavior of the student raising their hand) Create a schedule for when you can give the attention-seeking child some attention one on one. (e.g. create a specific time each day when the student can come talk to you and share whatever they would like to share). This will help decrease their desire to disrupt the class during inappropriate times with attention seeking behavior.



3.They want access to a tangible item or activity

Many people are motivated by tangibles. Most adults are motivated to go to work so they can make money. Children are often motivated for games, toys, candy, recess, etc. Teach the child socially appropriate ways to gain the item. (e.g. asking “may I please play on the i-pad?” rather than grabbing the i-pad or screaming and crying for it.”) It is not always an option to give the child what they want whenever they want. If the child is engaging in maladaptive behavior, never give in by giving the item in the middle of the tantrum. It will only reinforce their tantrum, and the behavior will likely re-occur. Find ways to redirect the child to an alternative item or activity, and only provide the desired item activity when the child has requested it using appropriate means of communicating.



4.It is naturally or automatically reinforcing

Behavior that is maintained automatically is behavior that we do because it feels good, looks good, smells good etc. The purpose of these types of behavior is to seek or avoid sensory input. Examples of automatically reinforcing behavior would be when we tap our foot along with a song playing in our car, twirling your hair or rubbing your knee to relieve the pain after banging it against the corner of the table. In this case children are not engaging in behavior to obtain attention, tangible items or to escape or avoid a task. The consequences to these behaviors do not need to be learned. They are naturally reinforcing. These behaviors are often the most

challenging to decrease because the automatic reward is difficult to compete with. If you are trying to decrease behavior that is for the purpose of sensory stimulation you may want to consider not teaching the child to completely avoid engaging in the behavior, but teaching the child appropriate times and places where it is ok to engage in the automatically reinforcing behavior. For example if there is a child with autism that likes to hum or spin around in circles, it may not be an appropriate time to engage in these behaviors while sitting with the class listening to a book being read out loud to them, but it is ok for the child to engage in these behaviors while they are out on the playground for recess. Remember, that certain behaviors are only considered a “problem” if it is interfering with the safety of the child or another person or inhibiting the child’s ability to learn and live a normal life. Some sensory seeking behaviors may look odd, but if they are not interfering with anyone’s safety or ability to learn, it is not considered a problem. It may also be helpful to teach socially appropriate behaviors as a replacement to the maladaptive behaviors. For example: If a child likes to hit, throw items, or squeeze people for the purpose of sensory seeking, it might be beneficial to give the child a stress ball to play with at their desk at all times. Squeezing a stress ball serves the same function as hitting or squeezing a person when they are seeking sensory input and is far more socially appropriate.

