

Behavior Therapy and Behavioral Interventions For Children and Adolescents

Many children and adolescents exhibit poor behavior from time to time. For instance, problems not uncommon to some young people include:

- Hyperactivity
- Poor attention
- Refusing to go to bed
- Not listening
- Talking back/arguing
- Defiance of authority
- Refusing to do homework
- Fighting with/or annoying siblings or peers
- Breaking rules
- Refusing to go to school
- Throwing tantrums
- Being bullied or socially rejected

Sometimes behavioral problems are not that serious or are short-lived. Problem behavior deserves attention when it is severe, persistent, and negatively impacts daily activities.¹ Behavioral interventions or a brief application of behavior therapy is highly successful in many young people.

Behavioral Intervention: Something for Parents to Implement

The basic principles of any behavioral intervention are as follows:

- Provide **reinforcement** or incentives for behaviors that you want more of. Examples of incentives include:
 - More attention (e.g., interacting, noticing, commenting)
 - Praise (e.g., "Good job!" "I like that!")
 - Concrete rewards (e.g., toys or candy)
 - Privileges (e.g., going to the zoo or movies)
 - Removal of negatives (e.g., "You don't have to take help me weed this weekend if you keep your room clean and take trash out this week.")
- Provide **punishment** for behaviors you want less of. Examples of punishers include:
 - Time out
 - Criticism or negative feedback (e.g., "No," "I don't like it when you do that")
 - Removal of privileges (e.g., TV, time with friends)
 - Ignoring or withdrawal of attention (e.g., not responding or reacting to child when he or she whining or throwing a tantrum)
 - Adding negatives (e.g., additional chores or homework assignment)

The strategic use of **reinforcement** or **punishment** to change or maintain an individual's behavior is sometimes referred to as *contingency management*. For example:

- Military service promotions are partially based on merit. Service members can be discharged for certain forms of misconduct.
- If you work hard, you may get a raise. If you don't, you may be fired.

Using Reinforcement or punishment is not always as easy as it appears. A behavior therapist can help caregivers develop their skills. To be successful, a punishment must be consistent and it must be something a child actually wants to avoid. Reinforcement must occur very quickly after the behavior (a few seconds).

Sometimes parents accidentally reinforce behaviors that are not desired. For example, imagine a child throwing a tantrum in the grocery store because she wants a toy that her mother will not buy her. The mother might feel embarrassed by her child's behavior, and out of frustration and embarrassment, she caves in and buys the toy for the child. Unfortunately, doing this increases the chance that the child will throw a tantrum again when she does not get her way.

It is very important to follow through on a consequence once you have verbalized the consequence to your child. Although threats may work at first, they soon lose their effectiveness if there is consistently no delivery of a punishment.

Sometimes parents accidentally punish positive behaviors. For example, imagine a father tells his teenage son, "No matter what, I want you to call me before you drink and drive. Don't ever get behind the wheel when you have been drinking!" The teenage son gets drunk at a party and calls his father for a ride. The father reacts with anger and fear that his son is illegally drinking, and lectures him about underage drinking. The next time the teenager is out drinking with friends, he probably will not call his father and ask for a ride.

When parents reinforce favorable behaviors, and punish behaviors they do not like, they are more likely to see the kinds of behaviors expected.

A word of caution: Punishment alone is not successful in changing a child or adolescent's behavior to a desired behavior. If you simply punish children when they do things you do not like, they are likely to reduce the frequency of punished behaviors only when they are around you. However, more desirable behavior will not automatically emerge. **You must reinforce desired behaviors to get more desired behaviors.** Seek opportunities to let young people know when you appreciate their good behavior. When children and adolescents are not receiving attention for good behavior, they may behave badly, in order to get attention.

Behavior Therapy: Treatment Conducted by a Professional

Behavior therapy is a type of treatment that uses a number of behavioral interventions to help people make positive behavioral changes. A behavior therapist may:

- Educate parents/young people about the problem
- Teach parents how to sharpen their contingency management skills (e.g., how to set up a daily reward system or use time-out procedures)
- Teach parents how to work with teachers to use contingency management strategies at school (e.g., how to reward the child in the classroom)
- Depending on the behavioral problem, a therapist may apply contingency management strategies in the session (e.g., if the child throws a tantrum the therapist can demonstrate how to use time-out)

Behavior therapy may also incorporate:

- Relaxation training
- Social skills training (for example, some children need to learn skills to form and maintain friendships or to learn how to be more assertive)
- Gradual exposure to feared stimuli (e.g., insects or school) to help a child learn that he or she does not have to be afraid of these things
- Practicing new behaviors (for example, developing a plan for how to stay on track and not return to old behavior patterns)

Some therapists use cognitive techniques along with behavioral interventions. This type of therapy is called cognitive-behavioral therapy. Cognitive techniques can include:

- Identifying irrational thoughts (e.g., "Everyone at school hates me." "I'm no good.")
- Explaining the relationship between thoughts and feelings
- Teaching different ways to look at and respond to negative thoughts (e.g., "It's not true that everyone hates you. I know that Josie said that everyone hates you but look at the way that others treat you and you will see that many people like you.")

Behavior therapy for children does involve working with parents; with the therapy focused on the child.

Sometimes parents are faced with the challenge of managing a child who is highly sensitive or difficult. The strategies that you may normally use with one child in the family may not be effective for another child. Here's an illustration that may put differences in perspective:

Assume you are a Buick™ owner. Most people drive Buicks™ without difficulty. You know how much pressure to apply on the brakes to get your car to stop, how hard to turn the wheel to maneuver it, and how quickly it will accelerate when you touch the gas pedal. Now assume you become the proud owner of a Ferrari™. The same driving skills you used to drive your Buick™ no longer apply: Firmly pressing the gas pedal can cause the car to quickly accelerate out of control. A hard turn of the wheel may cause you to spin out, etc. Are you a bad driver? No—you've never driven this type of car before. You simply need to refine your driving skills to be able to safely drive a Ferrari™.

Most kids are like Buicks™. When parents end up with a Ferrari™ they need to adjust their driving skills. Parents who need some help may benefit from professional help identifying some new/additional parenting strategies. There are behavior therapists that specialize in working with children and helping parents/caretakers refine their parenting skills.

Behavior therapy does not involve the following:

- Hurting a child
- Blaming parents
- Depriving a child of basic needs
- Reliance on punishment

The practice of behavior therapy is nearly 50 years old. It is by far, the most researched therapy available. There are hundreds of articles promoting behavior therapy as a preferred treatment for helping children with behavior-related problems. In many cases, it works relatively quickly. Typical problems can be resolved in a dozen sessions.

¹National Institute of Mental Health. (2004). [*Treatment of Children with Mental Disorders*](#). Bethesda (MD): National Institute of Mental Health, National Institutes of Health, US Department of Health and Human Services.