

WHY DOES MY CHILD DO THAT?

GOAL

Understand the factors that motivate each of us to engage in behaviors so that you can identify what your child is telling you with his behavior.

BACKGROUND

All behavior happens for a reason and serves some purpose. This is true for your behavior, your child's behavior and the behavior of that person who cut you off in traffic.

Understanding why your child engages in a specific behavior that has become problematic for him allows you to determine how best to help him.

BEHAVIOR AS COMMUNICATION

We all engage in behavior because we get something good or escape something bad.

Challenging behavior continues not because you're a bad parent or your child is a bad child but because the behavior works for your child.

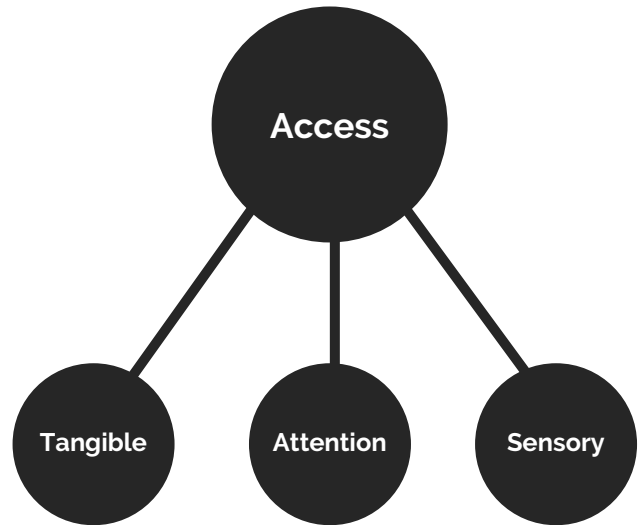
Think of behavior as a form of communication and your job is to figure out what he is telling you. What are those things your child wants? What are the bad things, from your child's perspective, that he's trying to avoid or escape?

Keep in mind that behavior is neither good nor bad. The context and your perspective determines how desirable a behavior might be.

ACCESS

Get something good

Think of some of the things you and your child access using behavior. You might access something tangible such as a glass of water when you walk to the sink or your child might access a favorite toy when he asks for a turn. You might access attention by telling your friend something funny or your child might access your attention by pulling your sleeve when you're on the phone. You might access a sensory experience by lighting a candle or your child might access a sensory experience by spinning in a circle.

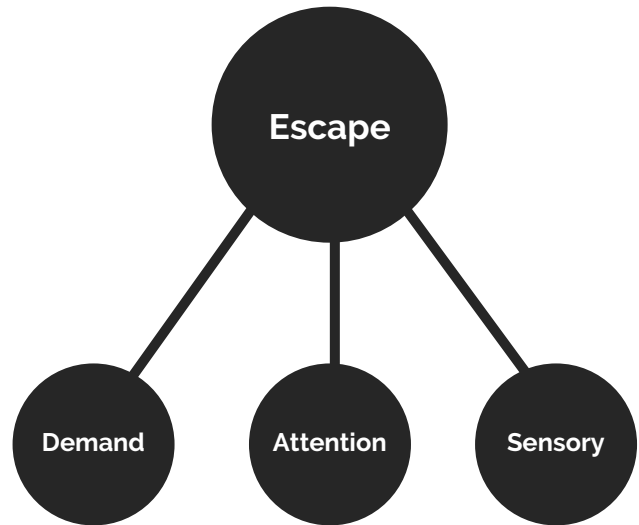


WHAT DO YOU AND YOUR CHILD ACCESS USING BEHAVIOR?

ESCAPE

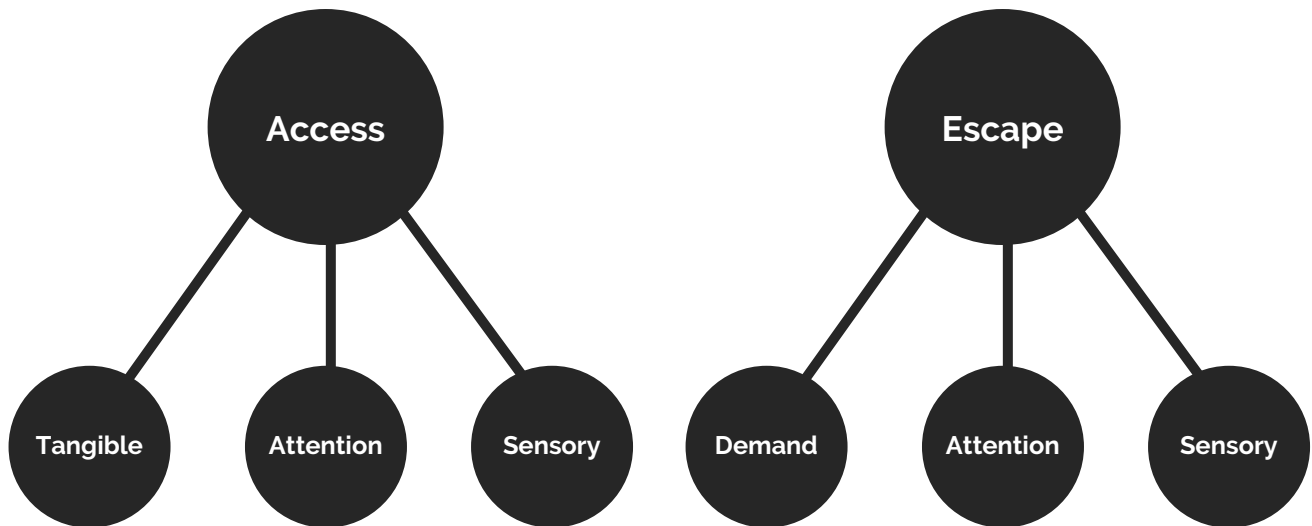
Avoid something bad

Now think about some things you and your child might escape or avoid with your behavior. You might escape a demand such as your boss asking you to complete a report by calling in sick or your child might escape a demand by ignoring you when you ask him to pick up his toys. You might escape attention when you sit quietly at the back of a large meeting or your child might escape attention when he hides under a blanket. You might escape a sensory experience when you change your shirt that has a scratchy tag on it or your child might escape a sensory experience when he covers his ears to block out a loud noise.



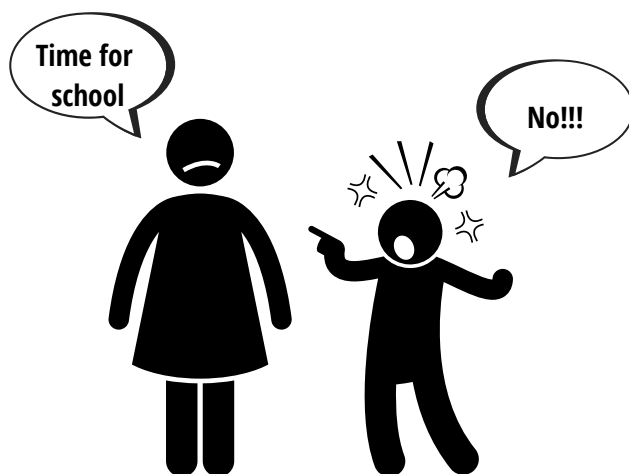
WHAT DO YOU AND YOUR CHILD ESCAPE USING BEHAVIOR?

UNDERLYING CAUSE OF BEHAVIOR



Understanding motivation

It's not always as simple as the previous examples. Sometimes, individuals might engage in a behavior to access something that doesn't fall neatly into one of these categories, like control or a feeling of accomplishment. Similarly, an individual might engage in a behavior to escape a feeling of inadequacy or a situation that evokes fear. These categories are just to get you started thinking about behavior from a more objective viewpoint so we can understand the underlying motivation.



Context of Behavior

Look at the context within which the behavior occurs to identify why the behavior continues. What happens just before the behavior? What happens right after it? Let's look at an example. Jake is playing with his favorite airplane one morning when his mother Debra walks in and tells him it's time for school. Jake throws his airplane and screams, "No!"

What did Jake access or escape with this behavior? How can you know?

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Debra said it was time for school	Jake yelled no and threw his toy toward Debra	Debra gasped and Jake delayed going to school, missing the bus

ABC DATA

Data helps you understand the context of the behavior to identify what your child is trying to tell you.

On an ABC data sheet it looks like this. In the antecedent column, you write what happened just before the behavior, In this example, Debra said it was time for school. In the behavior column, you write Jake yelled no and threw his toy toward Debra. And in the consequence column you write what happened right after the behavior, Debra gasped and Jake delayed going to school.

There might be other antecedents and consequences that also influence the behavior that you could make note of. Maybe Debra forgot to bring Jake's lunchbox into the room or it's already in his backpack and he doesn't know it. Maybe the airplane made a cool noise when it hit the floor. You don't need to write down everything. You know your child best. Which factors might be impacting his behavior?

The act of writing this out will help you be more aware when the behavior comes up again. Look at the information you have and ask yourself, "what is he telling me with his behavior?" What is he accessing or avoiding with the behavior? He gets a small reaction from Debra and he delays going to school. Maybe he's saying, "I don't want to stop playing. I would rather stay with you."

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Debra said it was time for school	Jake yelled no and threw his toy toward Debra	Debra gasped and Jake delayed going to school, missing the bus
Debra gasped and Jake delayed going to school, missing the bus	Jake cries, stomps his feet and then pushes Debra	Debra says, "we have to go now, I'm going to be late for work."
Debra says, "we have to go now, I'm going to be late for work."	Jake hits Debra and runs to his room	Debra follows him and offers to stop to get a donut on the way to school

EXTEND ABC DATA

Behavior is complex and one behavioral event often includes multiple distinct behaviors.

Often behavior is more complex than the last example and a series of challenges build on each other. If we keep going with the last example, the consequence for the first behavior might become the antecedent for the next behavior.

Jake might be upset that his routine was disrupted by missing the bus and that could trigger another behavior. Here we write down what behavior Jake engages in, he cries, stomps his feet and then pushes Debra. The consequence of this behavior is Debra says, "We have to go now. I'm going to be late for work." This consequence becomes the antecedent for the next behavior which is Jake hitting Debra and then running to his room. The consequence to this behavior is that Debra follows him and offers to stop to get a doughnut on the way to school.

We can see through this example that Jake's behavior escalated pretty quickly and Debra was doing whatever she could just to get him out the door. What is Jake saying with his behavior? How about, "I don't know how to handle sudden changes in my routine and I want you to help me." He also gets a doughnut out of the deal.

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Jake yelled no and threw his toy toward Debra	Debra gasped	Jake cries, stomps his feet and then pushes Debra
Jake cries, stomps his feet and then pushes Debra	Debra says, "we have to go now, I'm going to be late for work."	Jake hits Debra and runs to his room
Jake hits Debra and runs to his room	Debra follows him and offers to stop to get a donut on the way to school	Jake gets his backpack and goes to the car

UNDERSTANDING YOUR OWN BEHAVIOR

Your own behavior follows the same rules as your child's behavior. What are you saying with your behavior?

We can look at Debra's behavior in much the same way. The first antecedent in this scenario might be Jake yelling and throwing the toy. Debra gasped. The consequence to that behavior is Jake crying, stomping his feet and pushing Debra. This becomes the antecedent for Debra's next behavior. It proceeds in this way until the final consequence is Jake getting his backpack and going to the car.

Does Debra get something good or escape something bad through her behavior? Sure, she gets cooperation from Jake and avoids being late for work.

Similar scenes play out many mornings in households across the world. Although it takes some practice, taking time to identify what your child is saying with his behavior and what he gets or avoids by engaging in it, you can then intentionally determine how best to help him.

A grayscale photograph of a man and a woman smiling warmly at the camera. The man is on the left, wearing a striped shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a patterned top. They are in a kitchen setting with a tiled wall and a window with blinds in the background. A semi-transparent white box containing text is centered over the image.

TAKE TIME TO JUST OBSERVE

The best part is that you don't have to change anything yet. Just go through your normal routine and simply observe what happens. The next lesson will focus on deciding how best to intervene based on the information you collect about why the behavior continues.