

Identifying and Managing Challenging Behaviors

- Matthew Siegel, M.D.
Medical Director
- Kimberly Roy, B.A.
Behavioral Coordinator

Developmental Disorders Program
Spring Harbor Hospital



Disclosures

- Dr. Siegel and Ms. Roy do not receive funding from pharmaceutical companies or device manufacturers
- No financial conflicts of interest to report



How Do They Get it?

- By Communicating
 - Verbal (appropriate or not)
 - Behavioral (appropriate or not)



Spring Harbor Hospital Developmental Disorders Program

- Children with developmental disorders, such as autism, pdd, intellectual disability, down's syndrome, others.
- Behavioral Problems (aggression, self-injury) and Mental Health Challenges (OCD, Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar D/O, etc.)
- 5 – 21 years old
- Entire state and out of state



Our Agenda:

- Common Myths of Behavior
- Common Behavioral Issues in Autism
- What To Target
- How to encourage pro-social behavior (and reduce unwanted behaviors)
- What to expect when you intervene
- When to reach out for professional help
- Questions and Answers



Common Myths

- It comes out of nowhere
- He/She is manipulative – means to do it



- Children do the best they can to meet their needs in the moment.
- Children increase behaviors that get them what they want
- Children decrease behaviors that do not get them what they want



What do children want?

- Attention
- Pleasure
- Stimulation – Increase or Decrease
- Food, Sleep, Sensation
- Rewards
- Routine
- Avoid Non-Preferred Activities



Reinforcement

- Anything that tends to increase a behavior
 - Positive Reinforcement: Adding something that Increases behavior
 - Negative Reinforcement: Taking away something that increases behavior



Behavior is Learned

Examples of every day reinforcement of problem behaviors:

- Jane bangs her fork on the table, and she is given a cheeseburger
- John hits people when he is given math that is too hard, and he then gets to leave the classroom
- Mary grabs eye glasses as she walks down the hall, and people look her in the face and say “don’t do that!”

Common Problem Behaviors in Children With Autism



Common Problem Behaviors in Children With Autism

- Aggression (Hit, Kick, Bite)
- Self Injury
- Property Destruction
- Screaming
- Disrobing
- Elopement
- Food Selectivity
- Non – Compliance
- Social Inappropriateness
- Tantrums
- Strict Preferences For Routines



When Is a Behavior a Problem?

- Safety
- Interference with functioning – school, family life, health



How To Intervene

- General Behavioral Approaches
- Targeting Specific Behaviors



General Approaches

- Catch them being good
 - Praise what you want more of
 - Cannot do this enough
 - Make praise specific and clear and immediate
- Pay less attention to problem behaviors
- Take care of the basics:
 - Food, Sleep, Toileting



Specific Interventions

- Prioritize problem behaviors and choose one to address
 - Unsafe behaviors, behaviors that impair functioning
- Try to assess the function (meaning) of the behavior



Functions of Behavior

- Attention
- Task Avoidance
- Obtaining Preferred Item / Activity
- Sensory Stimulation
- Decrease pain / discomfort



Reducing a Behavior

Your Idea of the Function Leads to Your response

If the function is Attention, Ignore

If the function is Avoidance, Persist

If the function is Sensory Seeking, Provide

If the function is Obtaining a desired item, Encourage alternate
communication

If the function is to Decrease Discomfort, Treat the problem



What Happens Next?

- It gets worse.
 - If you get something by screaming, and it isn't delivered, you scream louder.
- It takes time.
 - It is a risk for children to give up behaviors that have worked for them in the past, and to try new ones.
- This is not easy

On average it takes weeks, not days, for a behavior to change.



When to reach out for help

- Serious unsafe behaviors:
 - Dangerous aggression, persistent self-injury
- Behaviors that don't respond to your interventions
- Behaviors that appear to be related to mental health problems: Anxiety, Depression, OCD, etc.



Take Away Points

- Children engage in behaviors to meet their needs
- To change a behavior you need to understand its function
- Behavior change is hard and takes time



Questions

