



Managing Challenging Behaviors: Part 1

Often when children have difficulty communicating, for whatever reason, they develop challenging behaviors to communicate or to deal with the frustration that their inability to communicate causes them. Much to the parents' dismay, these acting out behaviors include, among others, tantrums, aggression, non-compliance, resistance, and running away. Parents may feel unequipped to deal with such behaviors in young children, and often react by ineffectual responses such as yelling, repeating an admonition which the child becomes deafened to, reasoning with the child, or just giving in. Such children often control the workings of the household, with both parents attempting continuous appeasement, while siblings are left unattended and mystified.

Therapists who work with problem behaviors apply behavior modification techniques to change them, basing their approach on the knowledge that since all such behaviors are learned, they can be unlearned. Behavior modification is a system of techniques which helps the child feel good about his appropriate behaviors and regret his inappropriate behaviors. Strictly speaking, behaviorists call this a system of rewards and punishments, but the latter word is often misconstrued as being corporeal. What is important to know is that reward, or positive reinforcement, makes the child feel good enough to repeat a desired behavior. Positive reinforcements happen all the time for children, and are the driving force behind the learning of appropriate or inappropriate behavior.

Here's an example of a two-year old who is rewarded by his parents for the inappropriate behavior of throwing himself down and banging his head hard against the floor or wall when he does not get his way. Unbeknownst to his parents who love him deeply, they are reinforcing this behavior by picking him up, rubbing his head, and saying "poor baby," often following up by giving him the disputed object or activity that precipitated the tantrum. With such attention, the child has learned that head banging is a good way to get his parents to comply. A more appropriate strategy might be for the parents to ignore the behavior and let the tantrum run its course.

A behavior that is not reinforced will become quickly extinguished. Any behavior that is reinforced, as in the above example, will persist. The approach is to apply rewards when the child is behaving appropriately, thereby circumventing inappropriate behaviors while increasing the probability that the desired behavior will reoccur. Rewards for appropriate behaviors may be token, verbal, or physical, and may be as simple as praise, or as complicated as a trip to the toy store after a period of earning "good behavior" stickers. Whatever rewards are used, however, they must be highly desirable, age-appropriate, and consistently applied, after a careful analysis of the behavior targeted to be modified.