



The Four Functions of Behavior

In early childhood, children are constantly learning how to navigate their environment, express themselves, and interact with others. Sometimes, the behaviors they show may seem confusing, especially when they act out in ways that don't seem to make sense. However, most behaviors can be understood through four main **functions**—the reasons behind why children behave the way they do. By recognizing these functions, we can support our children more effectively and guide them toward more positive behaviors.

What Are the Four Functions of Behavior?

1. Attention

Children often engage in certain behaviors to **gain attention** from adults, peers, or others around them. This could be positive attention (like praise or high fives) or negative attention (like scolding or a reprimand). Either way, they've learned that their behavior gets people to notice them.

Examples:

- A child may call out in class or interrupt conversations to get a teacher's attention.
- A child may act out to get a parent to stop what they're doing and pay attention to them.

What to do:

- Respond to positive behaviors with praise and acknowledgment.
- If the behavior is a bid for attention, try to redirect to more appropriate behaviors or give attention for positive actions instead.

2. Escape

Some children display behaviors to **escape** or avoid a situation, task, or demand that they find overwhelming, uncomfortable, or uninteresting. The behavior is a way of saying, "I don't want to do that!"

Examples:

- A child may throw a tantrum when asked to clean up or do a challenging task to avoid the work.
- A child might act out when they are asked to join a group activity or transition from one task to another.

What to do:

- Try to break tasks into smaller, manageable steps.
- Provide clear warnings before transitions (e.g., "In five minutes, we'll clean up and go outside").
- Offer positive reinforcement when your child stays calm or completes a task.

3. **Tangibles**

Children also engage in behaviors to **obtain a tangible item**—something they want, like a toy, snack, or privilege. This is often seen in situations where a child is trying to get something in their environment.

Examples:

- A child might cry or act aggressively to grab a toy from another child.
- A child may ask for a treat or special item, using behaviors to try to get it.

What to do:

- Set clear boundaries around items, and teach your child how to ask for what they want appropriately (e.g., "Can I please have that toy?").
- Avoid giving in to demands made through challenging behaviors. Instead, guide them toward using words or other acceptable ways to ask for things.

4. **Sensory**

Some behaviors are driven by the child's **need for sensory input**. This can include behaviors that help the child self-regulate or feel more comfortable, like rocking, tapping, spinning, or making noises. These behaviors are often calming or stimulating for the child and can help them manage their feelings.

Examples:

- A child may spin in circles, clap their hands, or make repetitive noises to regulate their sensory needs.
- A child may bite their clothes, chew on objects, or engage in physical actions to create a sensory experience.

What to do:

- Provide alternative, positive ways for children to meet sensory needs (e.g., fidget toys, quiet spaces, or movement breaks).
- Work with teachers and caregivers to help create environments that offer sensory-friendly options, like calming lights, soft textures, or visual breaks.

Why It's Important to Understand the Functions of Behavior

By identifying the function behind a behavior, you can respond more effectively. This doesn't mean simply stopping the behavior, but understanding **why** the child is acting that way and finding a way to meet their needs without reinforcing unhelpful behavior. For example:

- If a child is seeking **attention**, offering praise or a small reward for positive behavior can help encourage better ways to gain attention.
- If a child is trying to **escape** a task, breaking the task into smaller chunks, offering choices, or providing a more engaging way to do the task can make it easier for the child to participate.
- If a child is trying to **get a tangible item**, teaching them how to request it politely or introducing turn-taking and sharing skills can help reduce conflicts.
- If a child is seeking **sensory input**, offering them sensory tools or calming activities can help regulate their needs.

What Can You Do as a Parent?

Here are a few simple strategies that can help:

- **Observe:** Pay attention to when certain behaviors occur. What happens right before the behavior (the trigger)? What does the child seem to want or need after the behavior (the outcome)?
- **Provide Alternatives:** Once you identify the function, think about ways to help your child get their needs met in more positive, appropriate ways.
- **Stay Consistent:** Whether it's in the classroom or at home, consistent responses to behavior help children understand expectations and learn better ways to express themselves.

Example: Let's Break It Down

Here's an example of how the four functions might play out:

Scenario: Your child is having a tantrum at home when asked to clean up their toys.

- **Attention:** If your child often gets attention (even negative) when they have a tantrum, they might be doing it to get you to focus on them.
- **Escape:** The tantrum could also be a way to avoid cleaning up because the task is difficult or overwhelming.
- **Tangibles:** Your child may want to keep playing with their toys and is resisting cleaning up because they want more playtime.
- **Sensory:** Perhaps the child is overstimulated and is having trouble transitioning from playtime to cleaning up, which triggers the behavior.

Conclusion

By recognizing the function of a behavior—whether it's to gain attention, escape a situation, obtain something tangible, or meet a sensory need—you can better understand your child's needs and respond in a way that helps them develop more positive behaviors.