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PROJECT ACCESS

Missouri's educational
 leader in autism support

How to Avoid Playing Whack a Mole

Function Based Thinking

Peter Vermeulen tells us that if we really want to understand the behavior and reactions of people with autism, we need to understand their way of perceiving and understanding the world: the “autistic thinking. The interfering behaviors are visible. But the reasons for the Why of the behaviors are less visible. This is often referred to as the contextual meanings. Understanding the context in which the behavior occurs is essential if we want to accomplish behavior change.

If we really want to accomplish lasting behavior change, we must change the way many educators have typically thought about how to change behavior. We must consider the context in which the behavior occurs which leads us to seek out the function of the behavior...thus, Functional Based Thinking.

“If a person with autism can’t negotiate with words, sign, pictures, or other acceptable communication means, her/she will either withdraw or negotiate with behaviors that may hurt other people.” I don’t remember where I first saw this statement, but I wrote it down and have hung onto it ever since. Take a minute to think about how you negotiate with others to get what you want. How do you interact with the person with whom you are negotiating? Do you use words? Most of us negotiate verbally. We say, “I’d rather not have that kind of ice cream.” or “I want this sweatshirt, not that one.” Maybe we point at what we want if we are offered something we don’t want. Or maybe we show a picture on our phone to show the clerk something we want. People who are deaf may use sign language or finger spelling. But what about people who don’t have the verbal or gestural skills to negotiate? It can get pretty darn frustrating. Read at the statement above again. It isn’t just true for students with autism. It’s true for other students as well. Think about it.

“Behavior, however deviant, often is a means of communication that enables a person who is otherwise unable to communicate to tell us about ho an individual perceives and tolerated a particular environment.” I don’t know where I first read this either, but it has stuck with me for at least 30 years. Maybe that awful behavior is telling you something. That elopement may be telling you

that there are too many people in the room. That screaming may be telling you that he isn’t getting enough with this set of mat problems that he somehow could do easily yesterday. That pinching of the kid in the wheelchair may be telling you that she wants him to play with you.

Many children engage in challenging behaviors because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people doing the wrong things for the wrong reasons. Maybe this child would be exhibiting this challenging behavior if he was in a different place (one that is less noisy, or crowded, or hot), or at a different time (when he is not so tired, or not so hungry, or if his parents didn't fight all night), or with a different person (one who is more enthusiastic, or smiles more, or who isn't wears such strong perfume), or for a different reason (not just busy work, or so I am learning a real work skill, or not just because third graders are supposed to do this).

I can't tell you how many times people have told me "It just happens out of the blue." NOPE! Something causes the behavior. Problem behaviors do not occur randomly. Problem behaviors are causally related to the events, situations, and circumstances that happen before and after they occur.

I am going to use the words "function" and "purpose" interchangeably. I'm not talking about purpose in the sense of "He did that 'on purpose,'" but rather in the sense that there is a REASON the behavior occurs. The behavior serves a purpose FOR THE KID! **Think about it.** It has a function for the KID. That's what function means. The behavior is getting something for the student. If we pay attention we will learn that the student is telling us something with his behavior. The behavior has a FUNCTION...Thus "Function Based Thinking."

Forms of Communication. Behavior is communication. There is no communication without behavior. People communicate with a variety of behaviors. Maybe the behavior we use is speech or sign language. The speech could be single words or complex sentences. The signing could be American Sign Language or finger spelling or gestures. Or it can be even more subtle. I might come stand beside you to indicate that I'd like to talk with you. I might tap you on the shoulder or tug on your sleeve to get your attention. If I don't like what you are saying I might just walk away. I could cross my arms or stomp my foot. All

those things communicate something. All these behaviors are **forms** of communication. Behavior is communication.

Functions of Communication. Basically, humans communicate for two basic reasons: to get or obtain something or to avoid or escape something. I might want to get your attention. I may want to get an object. I may want to gain access to an activity. I may want to get some kind of stimulation. I may want to get acceptance. On the other hand, I might want to escape interaction. I may want to escape a particular activity. I might want to avoid pain or discomfort or boredom. I might want to escape failure or frustration. All these motivations are **functions** of behavior.

There is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between forms and functions. Think about that.

One form of behavior can serve multiple functions. Think of very young babies: The only behaviors they really have are to cry, sleep, look around, pee, and poop. So, they use crying to

say "I'm hungry", "I'm uncomfortable", "I feel funny", "I'm cold," "I'm hot," "Where's mommy?" She is using crying to express all those things. That one **form** of behavior (crying) is serving several different **functions**. On the other hand, an older child has more means of communication and may use hitting and grabbing to get your attention. Or to make you go away. Or to get that cookie that he wants. Or that hitting & grabbing may be getting something else entirely but...trust me... he's getting **something** out of it.

The same purpose (function) can be expressed by several different forms of behavior. How many ways can you get somebody to stop standing on your toe? "Get off my darn foot!" "Ouch!" "Pulling your foot back." Saying, politely, "Pardon me, sir, but you are standing on my toe."

A student may tell you that he wants to escape an academic task by sliding down under his desk, or by running out of the room, or sweeping everything off of his desk. Or by saying "Please, ma'am, may I do this later?"

The real trick, ultimately, is deciding what form you are going to honor. (We'll come back to that later.) Did you send him to the office for clearing his desk? Guess what! Maybe the principal was busy and what the kid got was that he avoided the task. Hmmmm. Or maybe he got a lot of attention from the secretary

while he was waiting and that was reinforcing. Hmmmm again. Maybe he got what he wanted.

Everything Communicates Something. If a person with autism cannot negotiate with words, signs, pictures, or other acceptable communication means, he/she will either withdraw or negotiate with behaviors that may hurt other people... or disrupt the class... or say something extremely rude...or put himself in danger or ??????. I'm sure that you think of some ways that a student you know communicates that he doesn't like what's going on.

For lasting change to occur, the function of the problem behavior must be understood, acknowledged, and dealt with. It is one of the most important things you will learn. If you are going to be successful in working with students with challenging behaviors, you are going to have to understand and accept this fact.

We need to understand the difference between Enabling and Empowering. Enabling is giving a short-term solution. Sending the child who throws everything off his desk to the office to escape academic work is giving yourself a short-term solution. **That is enabling.**

Empowering is something entirely different. Empowering is teaching the student another, socially acceptable, behavior that YOU allow to get what the challenging behavior was getting him. We don't assume that he already has an appropriate behavior in his repertoire of behaviors. We may have to systematically teach him a new behavior. **That is empowering.**

Did you ever play the Whack a Mole game at the arcade? If we don't teach the student a better way to get what he wants, we will be playing a perpetual game of Whack a Mole. A particular

challenging behavior may stop, but I promise you that he will come up with another one that will get the same thing for him...that gets him what the other challenging behavior got for him. And it may be worse. In the words of the GODFATHER...He'll make you an offer you can't refuse. That is enabling inappropriate behavior.

Don't play whack a mole.

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