

Put an End to Challenging Behavior

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One of the most important things to remember when trying to understand the reasons why some of our loved ones engage in challenging behavior is that these behaviors do not occur randomly. *Most* of the time (but certainly not always) these behaviors occur as a way for individuals to get their message across loud and clear so they get what they want.

It is critical to make careful observations of events that happen right before and after challenging behaviors, helping caretakers detect patterns that can help design environments to reduce triggers and reactions that can make the behavior more likely to occur in the future.

Unfortunately, some of the exact same things that cause a tantrum to stop are the things that make it more likely to occur again. Let's take a specific example: If your child begins to have a tantrum when you tell him he can't have another cookie, we know that giving him the cookie will often make the problem behavior stop. From a "common sense" parenting perspective, you "treated" the problem behavior because you made it stop. The problem lies in the analysis of what the child just learned.

Take an objective look at the sequence of events and you will see: (a) child is being "good," (b) child wants another cookie (who wouldn't?), (c) child is denied another cookie, (d) tantrum behavior begins, (e) tantrums are noxious so you give the child a cookie, and (f) the tantrum stops.

Unfortunately, the child now learns that tantrums are an effective way to communicate with caregivers, and although the tantrum will likely stop, the child will quickly exhibit tantrums the next time their wants and desires are not immediately met.

My take-home message here is that we need to stop associating good parenting with a lack of challenging behavior. Instead, we need to be comfortable with knowing that many things we do with our child may cause them to be upset, but in the long run teaching that challenging behavior will not result in desired outcomes will eventually encourage them to tolerate times when they can't have what they wants.

In closing, all of this advice is easy to say but very difficult to implement. No one should have to start this type of intervention plan by themselves because it is very difficult to objectively analyze the challenging behavior when you are involved in the "heat of the battle." I encourage parents and caregivers of children with severe challenging behavior to work closely with a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (http://www.bacb.com/consum_frame.html) in your area to make sure that the behavior management plan is "right" for you and your family.

Dr. Richman is a former member of the Foundation's Clinical Advisory Board and Professional Development Committee.

