



## The Role of the Family System in Managing Children's Behavior

Recently, I had the opportunity to assist several families in managing behavior problems that affected the entire family. During the problem-solving phase of these interactions, it is often clear that certain aspects of the family system contribute significantly to the targeted behavior of the child with FXS. Even though the family may be aware of the tenets of positive behavior support, that awareness can be lost in the “moment,” or maybe not even acknowledged due to patterns that have been embedded into the family system.


The families indicated that the most difficult times to manage their child(ren) with FXS are during the “hurried” portions of the day. The before-school routine is especially difficult, and often the most likely to trigger behavioral outbursts. The analysis itself is easy: “Everyone is rushed, so the person with FXS shuts down under the pressure.” More difficult is the task of deciding how to structure the morning with less chaos. If the person with FXS feels the pressure, so does the family system. Most families have multiple people impacted by the tight morning schedule. Parents are getting ready for work and children are scurrying to find their homework, book bags and gym clothes—all of it under a time constraint.

Because the child with FXS has the most difficulty dealing with being rushed, the entire family runs the risk of that child's behavioral episode affecting everyone's morning. Without overtly planning it, the family employs methods of adjustment to keep the system running smoothly. These adjustments may include ways to pacify the child affected with FXS that are not always behaviorally sound. The problem is that even though the short-term fix keeps the morning going, the child with FXS becomes accustomed to the adjustment, demanding it again the next morning as a way to gain prediction and preserve sameness. This may not be significant in isolation, but if the system adjusts daily in order to “keep the lid on,” the entire morning routine can cause the child with FXS to become more confused and frustrated

because the expectations around the “routine” don't conform to the otherwise prevailing behavioral norms of the family.

Perhaps even more salient is the emotional byproduct this readjustment brings to the family. Each family member not affected by FXS experiences an imposed reaction that can breed resentment and anger. In a recent consultation, two children not affected by the gene shared their resentment about keeping their brother with FXS happy in the morning. They felt as though their parents “gave in” far too often, but they also felt trapped because if the behavior escalated, the entire family risked being late and upset. In addition, they disliked the emotional loading they experienced when the behavioral episode occurred right before leaving for school.

The solution we brainstormed was to practice a morning routine during a weekend, with the family continuing to incorporate that routine on school days. A backup plan was put into place if the child with FXS had a behavioral episode that would impact the other family members' morning schedule. Interestingly, the routine became habituated in just a few days. There may be many reasons this plan worked so quickly, but the most obvious was the fact that the entire family could relax in the morning because they were able to affect a positive change. They also knew they had a backup plan that would preclude a negative outcome. This plan also provided the child with FXS a predictable, consistent routine, which reduced his anxiety level.

This issue is not unique to this family. Sometimes, we focus so much on the behavior of the child with FXS that we fail to see the interaction between the child and the family system. Before embarking on any behavior plan, look at the system maintaining the behavior, and consider the environmental factors that may be contributing to it. 

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