

Braden on Behavior



As I was pondering what to write about to introduce my first column, it occurred to me just how adept people with fragile X syndrome are at telling us what they need using their behavior. Behavior, although maladaptive and aberrant, can become an efficient way to make a point. What a great topic for discussion!

Children learn how effective their behavior is by observing our reactions. For example, when a child is frustrated with a task and is unable to verbally communicate exactly what it is about the task that is difficult, he may employ behaviors that clearly indicate a need to escape. Perhaps he might choose to destroy the task materials, act out or become verbally engaging. Each of these behaviors could bring about a reaction from an adult that would allow the child to avoid the task and either escape by provoking a negative consequence or diverting attention from the completion of a task.

Efforts to consequence a behavior can result in reinforcement which allows the child to habituate a pattern of avoidance. This case study illustrates such an evolution. John disliked writing because it was very difficult for him. When the

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writing paper, pencil grip and pencil were presented, he became anxious and embarrassed. He wanted to avoid the frustration created by his inability to write. The paper and pencil become the antecedent for him to engage in a behavior that he had learned would result in a predictable outcome. If he was successful in destroying the task materials he experienced immediate relief. If that relief was not salient enough, he was able to avoid further compliance by sitting out or losing a token. He also

learned that if he was unsuccessful in his plight to avoid, he could "up the behavioral ante" to provoke a more severe punishment that would provide an even longer period of avoidance and escape.

The solution to creating an effective remedy is to first observe the behavior and then ascertain the function or why the individual behaved the way he did. Only after the function is determined, can effective intervention strategies develop.

Functional Behavior Assessment	
Presenting Behavior:	Chris becomes verbally and physically aggressive
How often does the behavior occur?	4 times a day
Where does the behavior occur?	Playground and during unsupervised games
With whom does the behavior occur?	Female peers, age matched
What is the function of the behavior?	Intimidation/Chris gets her way Secondary function/When an adult intervenes, although Chris loses her playground privilege she spends more time with an adult
Intervention Strategy:	Reinforce sharing behavior with peers by allowing Chris to spend time with an adult of her choice

Intervention at the point prior to the behavior occurring prevents a full blown behavioral episode. As important as determining the function of the behavior, is the provision for a more adaptive method to communicate the need. The flow chart illustrates a behavioral assessment with function and intervention described.

In summary, children need adults to be in charge. Their behavior may result from being afraid and confused. If the adult remains calm and avoids a sudden reaction, the child can more openly anticipate a reasonable remedy which can provide an alternative to expressing need using an escape behavior. Remaining neutral and following a pattern to change a habit will allow for appropriate interaction and improved behavior.

Update on FXTAS (Fragile X-associated Tremor Ataxia Syndrome)

- The June 2003 Issue of *Neurology Today* featured a story about the discovery of FXTAS, and featured the comments of Dr. Paul Hagerman from the NFXF's Scientific & Clinical Advisory Committee.

- The FXTAS website can be found at www.FragileX.org by clicking on the FXTAS link. It features both articles for the general public and fragile X families, as well as more technical articles for doctors and scientists. It also includes two short videos showing some of the problems associated with the syndrome.



- A new NFXF "Special Topics" pamphlet, *FXTAS: An overview of Fragile X-associated Tremor Ataxia Syndrome*, is now available.

Please contact the Foundation for a free copy, or request it at www.FragileX.org.—"Resources"—"Books, Videos, etc."