



# Guides for Addressing Challenging Behavior

## Behavior Tools

### 1. Can a child's challenging behavior go away or lessen over time?

- Yes, but reducing challenging behavior takes time and consistency. There is no “quick fix” or magic way to immediately eliminate challenging behavior. By practicing the ABCs of behavior, adults can learn to increase appropriate behavior and decrease challenging behavior.
- The most effective way to address behavior challenges is for adults to change their behavior. Adults must teach the child what to do instead, a replacement behavior. The replacement behavior serves the same function as the challenging behavior.

### 2. What is behavior?

- Behavior is anything the child says or does. Behavior includes both desired actions and undesired actions.
- Desired behavior examples include walking on the sidewalk, saying “I want cookie,” raising hand, or taking turns.
- Challenging behavior examples include hitting, kicking, yelling, running, or laying on ground.

### 3. What are some important basic behavior terms and vocabulary I should know?

- **Antecedent:** What happens immediately before the behavior occurs.
- **Behavior:** Anything the child says or does.
- **Consequence:** What happens immediately after or in response to the behavior. Common types of consequences are reinforcement, extinction, and punishment.
- **Function:** The “purpose” or reason for a behavior. There are four common functions of behavior:
  - **Attention:** Behavior results in gaining access to awareness. Example: A child wants their teacher to come over to them, so they cry in order to get their teacher’s attention.
  - **Tangible:** Behavior results in getting access to toys/activities. Example: A child wants their favorite toy car, so they reach with their hands toward the toy bin.
  - **Escape:** Behavior results in getting out of non-preferred tasks or activities. Example: A child does not want to go in the sensory room, so he lays down in the hallway and kicks his feet. His teacher takes him back to the classroom, which allowed him to escape the non-preferred task (sensory room).
  - **Automatic:** Behavior results in pleasure and reinforcement. Behaviors with this function are typically categorized as “sensory” behaviors. Example: A child likes how it feels to rock his head from side to side. The child does this in all environments, including when playing with others and when alone.
- **Replacement Behavior:** A socially appropriate behavior that is taught to a child to replace a current challenging behavior. The replacement behavior serves the same function as the challenging behavior.

### 4. Why do children with autism and developmental delays have challenging behavior?

- Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and developmental delays typically have challenging behavior because they are trying to communicate something, and communication is difficult. Children do not always know how to tell others what they want or need.
- Children do not always understand verbal directions and verbal information can be confusing (“I don’t understand what you are asking me to do.”)
- It is hard for children to pay attention and shift their focus of attention when asked (“I don’t want to leave the park and go to the next activity.”)
- Sensory difficulties can have a large impact on behavior. (“Sensitivity to sounds, lights and other stimuli can affect the way I react.”)



## Guides for Addressing Challenging Behavior

### 5. How do I appropriately define a challenging behavior?

- A behavioral definition should be measurable and observable. It should be specific and not include an opinion of the child or behavior.
- **Measurable:** This means to describe the behavior in a clear and data-driven way.
  - For example, “During circle, the child jumps out of his chair and runs around the room 4-6 times,” instead of, “The child has emotional problems.”
  - For example, “The child screams loudly one time whenever a non-preferred adult approaches him,” instead of, “The child acts crazy to adults.”
- **Observable:** This means a person can see what the behavior looks like. Behaviors can be defined in an observable way by describing what they look like.
  - For example, “The child cries when sitting in the chair at DT time” is better than, “The child is sad in DT”
  - For example, “The child jumps up and runs to their schedule during transition” is better than, “The child is too energetic when transitioning.”

### 6. Why should I focus on a child’s strengths when addressing challenging behavior?

- It is not enough to identify a child’s problems. Recognizing and teaching to a child’s strengths will help decrease challenging behavior.
- Many children with autism and developmental delays can follow and enjoy a structured routine. Providing children with consistent predictable routines will decrease challenging behavior. For children who are too reliant on predictability and may be too rigid, structure and routine can teach them to be more flexible!
- Many children with autism have a good memory which can help with setting up rules that are incompatible with challenging behaviors.

### 7. How can I change a child’s challenging behavior?

- Work as a team with other adults interacting with the child. All adults working with the child should address the behavior in the same way. Response consistency leads to long-term behavior change.
- This packet will provide additional information for using effective strategies to address challenging behavior.



# Tips for Changing Behavior

## Decreasing Challenging Behavior

### Stay structured and predictable

- Environmental structure and staff consistency adds predictability which allows the child to focus on communicating, instead of their environment.
- Maintain a consistent classroom schedule so the child knows what to expect, what's next, and when they get a reinforcing activity.
- Pair visual supports with common language (hands down, sit down, walk with me) as often as possible.

### Respond to challenging behavior effectively and consistently

- Maintain a neutral facial expression, body language, and voice tone when responding to challenging behaviors.
- Create opportunities for small, positive steps toward replacement behaviors, and reinforce them frequently.
- Be consistent. All teachers working with the child should respond to the challenging behavior in the same way!

### Avoid reinforcing the challenging behavior

- Create and stick to a plan for responding to behavior.
- Avoid “in the moment” changes.
- When a challenging behavior occurs, tell the child what to do, instead of what not to do.
- Limit teacher attention to the challenging behavior.

### Identify a replacement behavior

- When a child has a challenging behavior, think, “What do I want this child to do instead?”
- Maintain realistic expectations for the child. The replacement behavior can and should be simple.
- Define the replacement behavior—what exactly does it look like?
  - “Child puts hands in lap,” instead of, “child doesn’t pinch”
  - “Child stands up,” instead of, “child checks schedule”

### Be prepared to deal with escalation

- Have a plan that outlines how everyone will respond when a challenging behavior occurs. When starting a behavior intervention, the frequency, intensity or duration of a behavior may increase at first, because the child is learning a new skill. Remember:
  - Remain calm
  - Prepare staff to consistently respond to the behavior
  - Document what the changes look like
  - Prepare the environment to minimize extra attention, including remove items that may be thrown when the escalation started
  - Response consistency leads to long-term behavior change

## Increasing Desired Behavior

### Use visuals, environmental supports, and prompting effectively

- Pair your verbal direction with a visual. Fade verbal direction over time.
- Whenever possible, use nonverbal prompts to guide the child. Fade prompting over time by using a most-to-least prompting system to guide the child to exhibit the replacement behavior.

### Tell children what to do correctly

- Be clear and concise. Use as few words as possible when telling children what to do.
  - “Stand up,” instead of, “You need to get off the floor”
  - “Hands down,” instead of, “stop hitting and put your hands in your lap”
- Pair verbal direction of what to do with a visual, whenever possible.

### Teach skills using the curriculum

- Keep the lesson assessment updated.
- Identify and teach lessons that teach identified replacement behaviors.
- Embed generalization opportunities for replacement behaviors into all routines. Use the Routine Planning Form to plan for these practice opportunities.

### Teach children skills that directly compete with challenging behavior

- Provide reinforcement for skills children engage in that are incompatible with or cannot occur simultaneously with their inappropriate behavior.
  - For example, if a child engages in hand flapping, teach them skills such as creating play dough objects during free time or holding a book or pencil during academic work time

### Use effective reinforcement

- Pair tangible reinforcement with specific, verbal praise that tells the child exactly what they did right.
  - “Good job putting hands down” or “nice work walking to schedule”
- Always reinforce immediately following a replacement behavior. Provide reinforcement for desired behaviors throughout all activities in the day.
- Learn more about using reinforcement effectively on the “Reinforcement Tips” page.



# Using Extinction Effectively

## General Information

Extinction can be a very challenging but effective intervention to implement. To fully understand and implement extinction procedures, read and review the principles of reinforcement in the reinforcement information sheets before starting any extinction procedures. Key understandings of using extinction include:

- Extinction is withholding reinforcement from the child.
- In order to implement extinction effectively, the adult must know what is reinforcing the child’s challenging behavior.
- Extinction is most effective when it is implemented as a plan instead of on-the-fly, and all adults involved with the intervention should be on the same page and stay consistent.
- Extinction is not appropriate when safety is a concern. For example, if a child runs toward traffic in order to gain attention from an adult, or if they are self-injuring, ignoring these behaviors is not appropriate.

When using extinction, it is likely that the target challenging behavior will likely get worse (sometimes much worse) before it gets better. This is called an extinction burst and happens most often immediately following the introduction of the extinction procedure. Over time, the child might try the previously reinforced behavior(s) occasionally to see if they might work again. However, with careful planning and implementation with fidelity, extinction can be effective over time.

## Using Extinction Effectively

<b>When the Function of Behavior is Attention</b>	<b>When the Function of Behavior is Task Avoidance</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Ignoring the child is effective when the child is seeking attention. When using ignoring as an extinction procedure, remember to always pay attention to when the child exhibits the appropriate replacement behavior. For example, if a child yells out or talks out of turn in order to gain the teacher’s attention, it can be ignored but when the child exhibits the appropriate replacement behaviors, such as raising hand, being quiet, or waiting to talk immediately reinforce!</li> <li>2. When ignoring behaviors, be very aware of your own physical behavior. Remember, the adult’s body language and eye contact or proximity to the child can inadvertently provide attention to the challenging behavior. If possible, limit eye contact, facial expressions, and obvious body language whenever possible.</li> <li>3. If safety is not a concern, it is okay to walk away from a challenging behavior if you think your presence is reinforcing that behavior. For example, if your daughter is screaming and crying on the couch because you turned the TV off, it is okay to walk away and used planned ignoring until she is calm.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. At times it is important to ignore the challenging behavior but continue to maintain task expectation of the child. For example, if a child is laying on the floor to avoid completing a task, don’t provide attention for laying on the floor (focusing on the behavior), but do tell the child “color the picture “ (focusing on what the child should be doing).</li> <li>2. Remember to reinforce the child for small steps moving towards engaging in appropriate behavior.</li> <li>3. Do not verbally respond to challenging behavior. For example, don’t say, “Stop hitting me,” or, “You don’t get your prize until you do your work,” when a child is hitting to escape a task.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Real-world example:</b></p> <p>Alan screams when a Peppa Pig song is played because in the past, when he screamed, the teacher turned the song off. Now, the teacher ignores the screaming behavior and over time he stops screaming during Peppa Pig songs. For the first several days, when the teacher begins ignoring Alan’s screams (and does not turn off the song), he screams louder and longer. The teacher continues ignoring the screaming and gradually he screams less and less. Overtime Alan learns that screaming will not result in the song being turned off.</p>	<p><b>Real-world example:</b></p> <p>During a DT session, a teacher places a cup, bowl and spoon in front of Sara. Sara immediately throws the items on the floor. The teacher quickly places another red bowl in front of Sara and simultaneously says “hands down” (holding the red bowl out of reach of the child) and reinforces Sara for hands down. This provides attention to the desired behavior (hands down) while simultaneously ignoring the challenging behavior (throwing). Over time, Sara immediately complies when the teacher says, “hands down,” and the teacher gradually places all three items in front of Sara and Sara learns that throwing will not get her out of the task.</p>



## Using Reinforcement Effectively



### Make it Powerful

#### Reinforcement must mean something to the person earning it

- Reinforcement can be very powerful. It increases the likelihood of a behavior happening again.
- Select reinforcers by observing and noting what the child likes and dislikes. Complete a reinforcement assessment or see what the child navigates to naturally.
- Offer 2-5 choices between toys, foods, or activities, etc. and allow the child to make a selection.
- Assess the likes and dislikes of the child frequently, as reinforcers may change over time.
- Ensure the reinforcer is an item the child wants. A powerful reinforcer is one the child is motivated to work for.



### Make it Earned

#### Use reinforcement conditionally—only after a desired behavior occurs

- Identify a specific, desired behavior to reinforce. Choose behaviors that the child can be successful at (skills learned in DT or PRT) or the identified replacement behavior.
- Select a desired behavior that cannot occur at the same time as the challenging behavior (competing behavior).
- Do not wait until the behavior starts to occur to take out the reinforcer. Have the reinforcer ready before the challenging behavior occurs.
- Break down more difficult replacement behaviors into smaller steps so the child can be successful gradually. At first, you may expect the child to do only part of the target behavior.
- Reinforce good attempts, even if you had to help the child.



### Make it Immediate

#### Provide reinforcement immediately and with consistency

- Identify how often to provide reinforcement (each step of routine, after entire routine, etc.)
- For new behaviors, provide reinforcement each time the child is successful.
- Reinforcement is most effective when offered upfront, instead of after the challenging behavior occurs. Use “first, then” language to offer reinforcement for expected behavior. For example, “first stand up, then cookie.”
- Provide the reinforcer within 3-5 seconds of the desired behavior. The child may not understand the connection if there is too much time between the desired behavior and reinforcement.
- Be prepared by having reinforcers and tokens easily available.



### Make it Sustainable

#### Maintain the reinforcer value and fade reinforcement over time

- Reinforcers given too frequently can lose their reinforcing value. If possible, restrict access to reinforcer during other times of the day so the child stays motivated to work for the reinforcer.
- Offer choices, even if the child selects the same item.
- Pair reinforcement with specific verbal praise—tell the child what it is they are doing right (e.g. “Good sitting!”).
- Pair reinforcement with a visual cue. Use a visual to show children what they are working for, if using a token board, place a visual of expected behavior on the board.
- As the child learns new behaviors, gradually raise your expectations. Fade reinforcement over time, but continue to provide social praise!
- **NOTE:** Do pair the token with a social reward (good job or great) so that the child connects the token with verbal praise. Gradually fade the token so the child learns that social praise is a positive thing.



## Using Reinforcement Effectively



### Make it Powerful

**Before:** Jane is three years old and attends a preschool classroom. Recently, Jane has been exhibiting some challenging behaviors during small group time. Jane has started to get out of her seat and wander the classroom during group time, rather than stay at the table. Additionally, Jane has started to push the small group items away whenever it is her turn. Jane’s parents noted that she loves to eat seaweed, so her teachers have been doing a nice job of bringing seaweed to the small group area to reinforce her for sitting. However, after she earns the first seaweed, her behaviors continue for the rest of the group.

**Now:** Jane’s teachers start to see that seaweed might be something that Jane likes, but not necessarily something she wants to work for. One of her teachers noticed that Jane gets excited whenever the bubbles are brought out at circle. Her teachers determine that bubbles might be more reinforcing for Jane than the seaweed, so they start to offer that as a choice during group time. Her teachers have also started to complete a performance assessment on Jane to help identify additional reinforcers they can use to address her challenging behavior.



### Make it Earned

**Before:** Paul is six years old and recently he has been having difficulties during circle. At first, he is able to sit and look at the teacher. However, after a few minutes of circle, he starts to hit the other children next to him and stand up out of his seat. This is making it really difficult for the teachers in the classroom, because they have to keep getting up from circle to go get the token board and his skittles. However, once the teachers have the token board and say “hands down” or “sit down,” Paul is able to follow their commands to earn the skittles. Then, the next day, Paul hits again!

**Now:** Paul’s teachers remember the importance of catching Paul being good. They realize their mistake—they have presented the token board and skittles only after Paul starts to hit or get out of his seat. This actually might be reinforcing the hitting behavior, because the teachers are presenting the token board immediately following the hitting. Now, the teachers have started to bring Paul’s token board and skittles to circle. They start providing him with tokens during the transition from table time to circle, and give him tokens for “good sitting” and “good hands down” right when he arrives in the circle area. This has started to teach Paul that the sitting and hands down are what earns him the reinforcement.



### Make it Immediate

**Before:** Luis is five years old and attends a special day class. He is doing well in DT and PRT, but routines are more difficult. The transition routine is especially challenging for him. Each time he has to transition, he lays on the ground, kicks his feet and cries. The teachers have been using backward chaining to prompt him through the transition routine. His teachers are also providing him, the light spinner, as reinforcement whenever he arrives at the next transition. He seems to want the spinner, but he still continues to have the challenges behaviors during most transitions.

**Now:** Luis’s teachers realize that providing reinforcement at the end of the transition routine is not enough. They consider that they may need to provide more frequent reinforcement throughout the transition routine to support more positive behavior. Luis’s teachers decide to review the transition routine steps, and determine they need to provide reinforcement for each step of the routine. Once Luis’s teachers start providing tokens for each individual routine step, Luis understands that performing the steps of the routine independently will earn him reinforcement. After a few weeks, his teachers are able to fade the reinforcement to every third step of the routine. Eventually, Luis performs the entire transition routine independently, and earns reinforcement once he arrives at the next activity.



### Make it Sustainable

**Before:** Yolanda is four years old and the teachers identified that her highly preferred reinforcer is the stackable robot toys. During DT, Yolanda’s teachers ensure the robot toys are readily available in the reinforcer bin. Unfortunately, Yolanda is in errorless learning in many of her DT lessons, and is especially difficult to motivate in PRT. Yolanda’s teachers are unsure why she is making such slow progress in her DT lessons.

**Now:** One of Yolanda’s teachers realizes that Yolanda also loves to play with the robot toys during table time. They notice that Yolanda chooses to play with the robot toys each day during table time, and that she is highly motivated by them during the start of the day. In an effort to use this powerful reinforcer to teach DT/PRT lessons, Yolanda’s teachers restrict access to the robot toys and only provide them during her 1:1 teaching time. They also place a picture of the robot toys on the token board during DT time, so Yolanda can see what she is working for. With restricted access, Yolanda is more motivated by her robot toys and they act as a more powerful learning tool in DT time. With a more effective motivator, Yolanda begins to make more consistent progress during 1:1 teaching times!