

# BEHAVIOR AS COMMUNICATION

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All children behave. Much of this behavior is a matter of concern to parents, teachers, and others. Bookstores are full of information on how to cope with the misbehavior of children. No one should be surprised that children with CHARGE also have behavior that is a matter of concern. While the misbehavior of any child can be challenging, the misbehavior of children with CHARGE can be overwhelming for several reasons. First, there are frequently communication problems that make it difficult to discuss behavior problems and expectations with the child. Second, medical complications may limit the kinds of responses to misbehavior that parents and others are willing to utilize. Third, some of the behavior demonstrated is quite unusual when compared with the behaviors of the typical child.

When considering behavior management, one needs to be very clear about its goals. Eliminating misbehavior is not achievable, and by itself is most likely not desirable. To understand this, two important principles need to be described. First: all behavior has a purpose. Behavior is not random. Sometimes the purpose may be very simplistic, like scratching an itch on my head, but it is goal oriented. This means that the behavior demonstrated by our children with CHARGE is not random. They engage in it for a reason. The second principle is equally important: behavior serves a communicative function. This means that we use behavior to communicate something to other people. If we understand the communication, and if we understand the purpose of the behavior, then any behavior can make sense.

Now, to return to the issue of eliminating misbehavior. If we focus our efforts on stopping a behavior, we have taken away a means to a goal, and a means to communicate. That may suggest to the child that we are not interested in their goals or in communication with them. This may lead to withdrawal on the part of the child as they give up trying to engage us in communication, and it may lead to different, perhaps even more difficult, behaviors to try to achieve what the child experiences as important goals.

Thus the primary objective of behavior management is to understand the purpose and communication underlying misbehavior, and to use that to help the child find more appropriate communication methods to achieve their goals, or to help them find more appropriate goals. A temper tantrum may be a means to communicate the desire to receive attention, but children also have to learn that they need not be the center of attention all of the time.

When considering the goals of behavior management, six major principles need to be considered. **First**, as already stated, problem behavior serves a purpose for the person displaying it, part of which is communicative. Communication in general is fraught with difficulties. That is because all communication is subject to encoding of messages, and then decoding and interpretation. If I choose to communicate my frustration about a situation, I must first take my message of frustration and put it into some kind of communicative format, usually language. This is encoding. The listener must then hear my message and interpret it. This is decoding. Of course the listener interprets based on their frame of reference at the moment.

People with outstanding communication skills are articulate in encoding their messages, and accurate in decoding. However, when dealing with a person who lacks communication skills, and who may in fact be nonverbal, communication becomes extremely difficult. That is why communication with children can be a problem, and certainly why communication with children who have CHARGE is difficult.

**Second**, functional assessment is used to identify the purpose of problem behavior. If you know the purpose, the behavior is understandable. Our first task in working with a child with behavior problems is to understand the message behind their communication. We must decode their encoded message. To do this we try to determine the function or purpose of the behavior. Much has and is being written about methods for functional assessment. A great deal of training is needed to utilize some of them. IDEA requires functional assessment in the schools, and school psychologists should be able to conduct such an assessment.

**Third**, the goal of intervention is education, not simply behavior reduction. Once you believe you understand the purpose of the behavior, how do you intervene? The difficulty here is to modify the misbehavior without shutting down the child's attempts to communicate. Here are several general considerations. First, do not become annoyed, threatened, hurt, or give up. Second, help the child find a more appropriate method of communicating the message to you. A third consideration is to avoid crisis management. This involves ignoring the behavior, protecting the individual and others, restraining the individual if necessary, removing anyone who is in danger, and engaging in behaviors that generally reduce the misbehavior. The problem with crisis management, which of course must be used at times, is that it does not teach the child new ways of communicating and reaching their goals. A fourth consideration is to be patient. It takes time to modify behavior in a way that teaches the child the benefits of clearer communication.

**Fourth**, problem behavior may serve many purposes and therefore requires many interventions. The same behavior, for example having a temper tantrum, may be used when the child wants something, and when they want to avoid something, and when they simply want attention. Intervening for situations where they child wants attention, may not eliminate its use when the child wants to avoid going to see the doctor.

**Fifth**, intervention involves changing social systems, not simply individuals. In considering intervention strategies, there are approaches that are directly applied to the child, those that are indirectly applied by changing the behavior of other people in the child's environment (such as changing the behavior of a teacher or a parent), and those that modify the environment itself. A question that might be asked is whether the problem is that the child is communicating inappropriately, or whether the social system is not listening to the child. Very often the approach is to make the child change to meet the demands of the system, as opposed to looking at how systems might better meet the needs of children.

Finally, lifestyle change is the ultimate goal of intervention. Dealing and coping with our children's problem behaviors is enormously stressful, due to worry and a sense of helplessness. Our goal should be children and families who are able to meet their needs and find satisfaction with their lives. Here are some ideas to help you cope:

First, be glad your child is trying to communicate. You may not like the method, but at least there can be some connection.

Second, choose your battles wisely. Not every misbehavior has to be dealt with. Not every troubling behavior needs to be labeled as misbehavior. Go after those that cause your child the most difficulty.

Third, don't feel like you have to go it alone. In fact, everyone in your child's environment needs to be on the same page in terms of responding to the problem. So mobilize as much help as you can from those other people.

Finally, take care of yourself. You are not simply the parent of a child with CHARGE. You are a person in your own right, with your own needs and goals. If you never have a chance to work on your own goals, you will become less and less useful to your child.