

Promoting Healthy Social Behaviors through Uncovering the Purpose of Behavior

What is meant by the ‘purpose of behavior?’

When a baby cries, parents and other caregivers run through a list in their head...could he/she be hungry... wet... cold... tired... over-stimulated? Fortunately, it’s relatively easy to uncover the purpose of a baby’s behavior. Just like a baby’s cry, there is a purpose behind the behavior of young children. The adults in the child’s life can become behavior investigators and uncover the mystery; what is he/she trying to tell us through the behavior, what is the purpose or function of the behavior, what is creating the situation that causes him/her to act this way? This process, formally called functional behavior assessment, is particularly important when the behavior makes it hard for the child to participate in and enjoy classroom activities and routines. As behavior investigators, teachers look for clues in the environment to determine what might be causing the behavior, hoping to discover the events that typically occur before and after the problem behavior. After the purpose of the behavior is uncovered, teachers can design strategies that promote a more successful experience for the child.

Why is it important to uncover the purpose of behavior?

Going through this process gives teachers the information they need to create positive changes in the child’s behavior and, as a result, make the classroom calmer and happier (for children and adults). Studies have shown that use of this investigative model results in more positive interactions with other children, increased participation in classroom activities and, best of all, reductions in problem behaviors.

It’s important to note that children use challenging behavior because the behavior works for them. For example, through your behavior investigation you may determine that a child typically misbehaves in circle because he/she wants attention. He/she has learned that misbehaving at circle time is a sure-fire way to get it ...this strategy works! The key to successful behavior investigation is to figure out how to guide the child to more appropriate behavior while still ‘honoring the purpose’ of the misbehavior. Using the previous example, look for ways to give the child positive attention during circle time before the problem behavior occurs (e.g., let him/her pass out props or select a song) and he/she will likely continue to seek more of that positive attention through appropriate behavior. The purpose of the behavior was ‘honored’ and the problem behavior will diminish.

What can you do in the classroom?

You can try to solve the mystery alone or pull together a team of fellow investigators, including the parents and a behavior specialist. The process involves collecting information about the child and the behavior through observations, interviews, and review of reports or records about the child’s behavior. Seek to determine what happens before the behavior, during the behavior (what the problem behavior looks like) and after the behavior. This will help you understand what the child is communicating through the behavior. Typically the child is trying to ‘get’ something or to ‘get out of’ something. The child may be trying to get attention, a toy or a special activity or may be trying to get out of an uncomfortable situation or difficult task. When you have enough examples and information you can create an educated explanation (hypothesis) about the purpose of the behavior. Using this explanation, appropriate social and emotional teaching strategies can be designed and implemented to teach the child new skills to replace the problem behavior and serve the same purpose.

Research on this topic:

Figuring out the purpose of the behavior alone will not change the behavior. However, research shows that if appropriate strategies are put in place once the purpose of the behavior has been determined, changes in behavior occur rapidly.

Food for thought:

Try to view misbehavior as mistaken behavior. No one likes to make mistakes and children genuinely want your approval and affection. If you seek to determine the purpose behind misbehavior you are charting a course for a more successful preschool experience for the child and a more fulfilling relationship for both of you.

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