Before You Blame the Student

What Behavior Is Actually Telling You

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A student throws a pencil, calls out for the tenth time, or puts their head down and refuses to start. It's easy to see that as a choice to misbehave. Behavior science offers a more useful way to look at it: every behavior is communicating something.

Once you know what a behavior is "saying," you can stop reacting to it and start teaching something that works better for everyone.

Every behavior has a function

In ABA, the **function** of a behavior is the reason it keeps happening: what the student gets or gets away from. Behavior analysts group these reasons into four functions:

1. **Escape or avoidance:** getting away from something hard, boring, or uncomfortable.
2. **Attention:** getting a reaction from an adult or a classmate.
3. **Access to tangibles:** getting an item or activity.
4. **Sensory (automatic reinforcement):** the behavior feels good, or makes something feel less bad, all on its own.

The same behavior can serve different functions for different students. One student tears up a worksheet to get out of the work; another does it because the class laughs. That's why the function, not the behavior itself, tells you what to do.

What escape-maintained behavior looks like

Escape behavior shows up when something feels too hard, too long, or too uncomfortable. A student might suddenly need the bathroom when independent work starts, tear up a worksheet, or act out until they're sent to the office. If it works, it's learned: next time the work comes out, the behavior comes back.

What helps: The fix isn't stricter consequences, because being sent out is exactly what the student wanted. Instead, make the work doable: shorten it, break it into chunks, teach any missing skills, and build in breaks the student can ask for appropriately.

What attention-maintained behavior looks like

Attention behavior is about getting a reaction. It might look like calling out, clowning at the wrong moment, or poking a classmate. Even a reprimand counts as attention, so “Stop that!” in front of the class can keep the behavior going.

What helps: Give attention generously for the behavior you want, and as little as possible for the behavior you don't. Catch the student being on task, use behavior-specific praise (“You raised your hand and waited”), and redirect calmly and briefly when the problem behavior happens.

What tangible-maintained behavior looks like

Some behavior is about getting something: a tablet, a favorite toy, the red marker, or first turn at the computer. It might look like grabbing an item from a classmate, refusing to give up the iPad when time is up, or melting down when recess equipment runs out. The behavior works because, sooner or later, it gets the student the thing they want.

What helps: Teach a better way to ask, and make waiting predictable. Practice phrases like “Can I have a turn?” and honor them quickly at first. Use visual timers and “first, then” cards for transitions away from preferred items. Above all, make sure the problem behavior no longer pays off.

What sensory behavior looks like

Sensory behavior isn't about anyone else. It happens because it feels good or helps the student cope: rocking, humming, tapping, chewing on a sleeve, or covering their ears in a loud room. These behaviors often happen even when the student is alone.

What helps: The goal usually isn't to stop the behavior. Ask whether it's actually getting in the way of learning or safety. If it is, offer a replacement that meets the same need, like a fidget, a chewable necklace, headphones, or a movement break, and look at what in the room might be overwhelming.

The antecedent is where the work happens

The things that happen right before a behavior are called **antecedents**. They're your most powerful tool, because changing them prevents behavior instead of reacting to it. Notice when problem behavior happens most: during writing, after recess, when a certain peer is nearby, or when the room gets loud. Those patterns point straight to the function, and to what you can change.

What to do right now

1. **Pick one student and one behavior.** Keep it small.
2. **Write down what happens before and after** the behavior for a few days. A sticky note is enough.
3. **Ask, "What is this student getting, or getting out of?"** That's your best guess at the function.
4. **Change one thing** that matches the function, and watch for a week.

If a behavior is dangerous, or it doesn't improve, talk with your school team about a functional behavior assessment (FBA). A BCBA can identify the function with more precision and build a plan around it.

Want more classroom tools? Read "5 Classroom Changes That Prevent Problem Behavior," and download the free Sensory & Environmental Audit Checklist and Behavior-Specific Praise cheat sheet at ababreakdown.com.

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