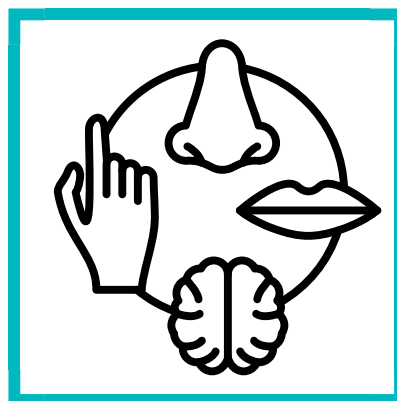
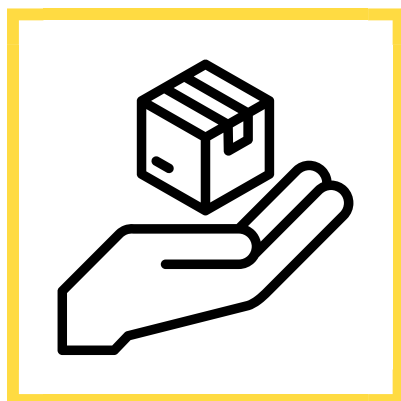
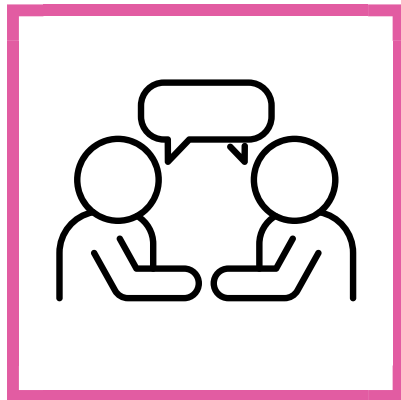


THE FUNCTIONS OF BEHAVIOR

A Simple Guide to Understanding
Why Behavior Happens



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WHAT DOES “FUNCTION” MEAN?



In behavior analysis, the function of a behavior refers to **the reason the behavior happens** — the purpose it serves for the individual. All behavior happens for a reason, and identifying that reason helps us respond more effectively.

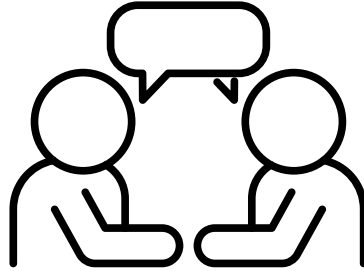
Instead of asking, “How do we stop this behavior?” we ask:
“What is the child getting or avoiding by doing this?”

WHY DO FUNCTIONS MATTER?



Understanding the function of a behavior helps us to respond in a way that is most likely to **reinforce (increase) appropriate behavior and decrease challenging behavior**. In short understanding behavioral functions is the very foundation of changing human behavior.

ATTENTION



Behavior maintained by attention occurs when **actions result in social interaction from others**. This can include eye contact, verbal responses, physical touch, or proximity — even if the attention is corrective or negative.

Examples:

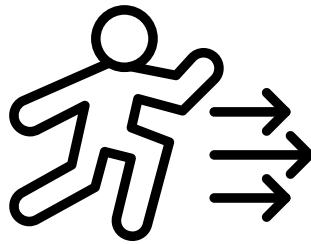
A child repeatedly interrupts while a parent is on the phone to get a response, even if it's "Just a minute!"

At school, a student raises their hand. The teacher calls on them and praises them for answering the question.

An adult is having a conversation with a friend. As the friend tells a story, the person engages by laughing and nodding.

An adult is having a conversation with a friend. As the friend tells a story, the person engages by laughing and nodding.

ESCAPE



Behavior is maintained by escape or avoidance when it **helps the person get out of or delay something they find unpleasant**. This might include difficult tasks, loud environments, or unwanted social situations.

Examples:

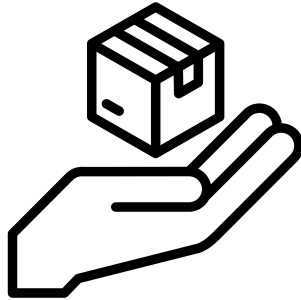
A child throws a tantrum when asked to clean up toys, and the parent says, “Fine, I’ll do it.”

A student asks to go to the bathroom every time math starts and avoids completing the assignment

An adult walks into Walmart, sees a colleague, and pretends to talk on the phone while walking in the opposite direction in order to avoid small talk.

An adult calls their child’s name, getting their attention before giving a direction.

TANGIBLES



Behaviors maintained by tangibles happen **when a person engages in behavior to gain access to a specific item or activity** (e.g., toys, snacks, electronics, or preferred routines).

Examples:

A child cries at the store and gets a toy to stop the crying.

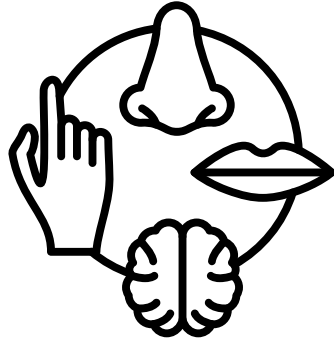
A student raises their hand to ask for the iPad after completing work.

A teenager calls their parent to come pick them up from school because they left their phone at home.

An adult grabs a snack from the kitchen because they're craving something crunchy.

An adult engages in paying the cashier in order to get their groceries.

SENSORY



Behavior maintained by automatic reinforcement provides its own reinforcement — **it “feels good” or meets a sensory need.** This function does not depend on others and can include things like rocking, humming, or self-injury.

Examples:

A child spins in circles or hums while alone in their room — no one is watching or responding.

A student chews on their pencil or taps their foot rhythmically during class – no one is giving attention.

An adult scratches their forearm alone in their office during work when feeling an itch.

A person bites their fingernails regardless of whether they are with others or by themselves.

THE FUNCTIONS OF BEHAVIOR

(TL;DR Snapshot Edition)

ATTENTION



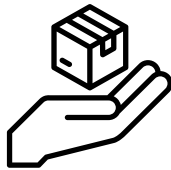
Behavior leads to social interaction (positive or negative)

ESCAPE



Behavior helps avoid or delay something unpleasant

TANGIBLE



Behavior gets access to an item or activity

SENSORY

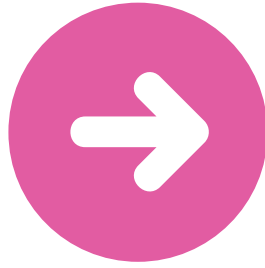


Behavior feels good or meets a sensory need

Want more? Download the full guide at www.GetBehaviorEd.com



WHAT'S NEXT?



Now that you understand the four functions of behavior, you are ready to learn how to use this information to harness the magic of behavior change. The antecedents and consequences that shape behavior are commonly referred to as “The ABCs of Behavior”.

To access resources on The ABCs of Behavior and much more, visit BehaviorEd at:



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