

UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOR: A QUICK GUIDE FOR FAMILIES AND STAFF



For parents, caregivers, DSPs, teachers, and mental health professionals

Title: Understanding Behavior: A Quick Guide for Families and Staff

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Behavior is Communication

Behavior isn't always random; it is often a message. For individuals with IDD or limited communication, it may be ***the most direct way to express themselves***.

This statement is true for everyone. However, for individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) or limited expressive communication, ***behavior is often the most direct way for them to share their needs and feelings***. Instead of viewing behavior as a “problem,” we can see it as another form of communication.

Examples of Behavior as Communication:



Throwing Items



Frustrated
or Overstimulated



Running Away



Fear of failure
or Feeling overwhelmed



Silence



Tired
or Not feeling well

Tip: Ask, “What could they be trying to say?” instead of “How do I stop this?”

This shift opens the door to supportive strategies like:

- Using visuals, gestures, or AAC devices.
- Adjusting routines or environments to reduce stress.
- Acknowledging feelings and validating needs.

We all have things that set off stress or strong emotions — but for individuals with IDD or limited communication, everyday situations can feel overwhelming. These are called triggers. Triggers can lead to behaviors that are sometimes misunderstood, but really they are signs that a person needs support.

By learning to recognize common triggers, we can reduce frustration, support regulation, and prevent crises before behaviors escalate.

COMMON TRIGGERS

- | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| • Loud sounds | • Transitions | • Being left out |
| • Changes in routine | • Being rushed | • Being told no |
| • Fatigue | • Hunger/Thirst | • Being late |

TIPS FOR SUPPORT

OBSERVE

Watch carefully for patterns in behavior. Track what happens before (triggers) and after (responses or outcomes). Keeping a simple behavior log helps identify causes and plan supports.

VALIDATE

Acknowledge feelings, even if you don't fully understand the behavior. Phrases like, "***I can see you're upset***" or "***That was a lot of noise. It felt too loud, didn't it?***" show empathy. Validation helps reduce stress and builds trust.

PROVIDE TOOLS

Many behaviors occur when a person doesn't have another way to communicate. Tools such as Talking Mats, PECS, visual supports, AAC devices, or even simple gesture boards give individuals ways to express needs and feelings. **Ensure everyone in the person's life knows how to use these tools consistently.**

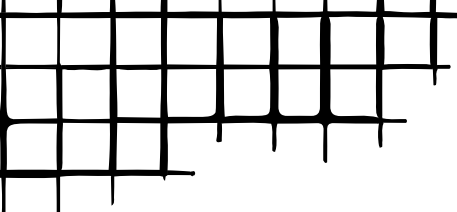
STAY CONSISTENT

Predictability helps reduce anxiety and increase confidence. Routines, visual schedules, and consistent responses let the individual know what to expect. When change is unavoidable, give warnings and prepare supports to ease the transition.

BEHAVIOR TRACKER

DIRECTIONS: This sheet is designed to help caregivers, teachers, and support staff understand why behaviors happen by keeping track of what's going on before, during, and after. The goal is not just to record behaviors but to learn from them and find better ways to support the individual.

Date/ Time	What Happened Right Before the Behavior (Antecedent)	The Behavior	What Happened Right After the Behavior (Consequence)



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