

Is It “Problem Behavior”?

When is “Problem Behavior”
Something Other Than
Problem Behavior

Flint Simonsen, Ph.D.

Objectives

- Describe issues and considerations for understanding problem behaviors
- Understand the importance of context for deciding how to respond to behaviors.
- Use a framework for making decisions about addressing behaviors of concern

What is Behavior

- Observable movements, actions
- Observable includes behavior available to our 5 senses
- Must be clear about what behavior “looks like” before trying to understand or interpret behavior

Interpreting Actions (Assigning Motives)

- “Problem Behaviors” typically assumed to be intentional, malicious
- When kids break the rules we likely assume “willful disobedience.”
- CRITICAL Importance to rule out other explanations first

Our Internal World

- Feelings often used to explain behavior
- We behave to give a voice to our internal world
- CAUTION: We make inferences based on a child’s actions... verbal and nonverbal displays and can misinterpret
- Being honest with our assumptions

Physiological Issues

- Illness
- Discomfort, too cold, too hot, pain
- Fatigue
- Some children may have no way to let you know

Communication Issues

- Behavior is communication
- Not necessarily “problem behavior” but may be effort to tell you something about wants and needs
- Context or environment can help us interpret that communication

Environment Issues

- Look for patterns
- Changes in routines or environment can result in behavior
- Different expectations, people, words, smell (perfume) in environment can lead to reaction
- Is the environment set up for student to access

- Consider simple adjustments before considering “punishment”
- Awareness of the particular conditions or syndromes and disabilities may give you a slightly different filter

Relationship Issues

- Having a relationship with someone that is deep
- Conflict in relationships can lead to “acting out” behaviors
- Young/new relationships may lead child to act different

Absolutes: When do we treat problem behavior as problem behaviors?

- When is the behavior a danger....and requires behavioral intervention
- Self
- Others
- Property

Big Idea

- Test assumption first
- Rule out alternative explanations
- Consider “problem behavior” and treat accordingly AFTER assessing other contributing factors and issues

References and Resources

- Goodwyn, S.W., Acredolo, L.P., & Brown, C. (2000). **Impact of symbolic gesturing on early language development.** *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior.* 24,81-103.
- Carr, E. G., Levin, L., McConnachie, G., Carlson, J. I., Kemp, D. C., & Smith, C. E. (1994). **Communication-based intervention for problem behavior: A user's guide for producing positive change.** Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Meme Hieneman, M., Childs, K., & Sergay, J. M. (2006). **Parenting with Positive Behavior Support: A Practical Guide to Resolving Your Child's Difficult Behavior.** Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
