

Basics of Behavior

This is a short summary about what behavior is and isn't, how people learn to behave in certain ways and how you can identify what causes certain types of behaviors.

Defining Behavior

Behavior is a specific action that a person does, that can be observed. Turning the television on, smiling at someone on the street and making your bed are all behaviors, because you can observe someone doing these things.

On the other hand, words used to describe someone such as friendly, aggressive, funny, attentive, rude or pleasant are not behaviors, rather, they are **feelings** that an observer has about the person's behavior. These are not considered behaviors, because you can't tell what the person is actually doing.

Behaviors vs. Feelings

You may question why we need to distinguish between feelings and behaviors. However, if you want to change behavior, it is important to first correctly identify the behavior. Once you can identify a behavior, you can also identify what causes that behavior and what you can do to change the behavior.

Here's an example: Audrey's teacher tells her parents that she is "aggressive" in school. Being aggressive is a feeling that her teacher gets about her behavior when Audrey hits others children, pushes them off the slide and throws a crayon at someone. Here, hitting, pushing and throwing things are the actual observable behaviors. Being aggressive is not a behavior. It is a feeling used to describe what the teacher sees.

These are some common words we use to describe children, sorted into behaviors or feelings about behavior.

Behaviors

Screams for 1 minute
Laughs loudly
Touches a child's face
Reads a book
Uses a fork
Talks in a high pitch voice
Sits alone

Feelings

Looks sad
Acts angry
Is a quiet child
Feels lonely
Thinks about something
Listens well

As you can see, behaviors are actions that you can observe. Now that we know what to look for when working with behavior, let's look at how children learn behaviors.

Antecedents and Consequences

There are two key events that strengthen or diminish certain behaviors. These are antecedents and consequences. An **antecedent** is something that comes before a behavior and acts as the trigger for that behavior.

Antecedents are important because they can act as a cue for a child to demonstrate a particular behavior. They can occur immediately before a behavior or accumulate over time and trigger certain behavior. Here's an example of an antecedent: A mother says she is going to work. Her child starts crying immediately, when she hears this. Here, the mother announcing that she is going to work is the antecedent and the child crying is the behavior.

Another example: A teacher asks a child to raise his hand to speak. The child responds by raising his hand. Here, the antecedent is the teaching asking the child to raise his hand, and the behavior is that the child raises his hand.

Antecedents determine whether a behavior will occur.

A **consequence** is something that happens immediately after a behavior. Children can learn new behavior or change behavior based on the consequences. Here's an example of a consequence: A boy cries when he is in his crib. His mother picks him up and brings him to her bed. Here, crying is the behavior that produces the consequence of being brought to his mother's bed.

Another example of a consequence: A girl yells loudly. Her mother gives her a preferred toy to keep her quiet. Here, the girl yelling loudly is the behavior, and getting the toy is the consequence.

Depending on the consequence, a behavior can occur more or less frequently. If a consequence is pleasant and rewarding, the behavior is strengthened and more likely to occur. If the consequence is unpleasant, the behavior is weakened and is less likely to occur. By identifying and changing the antecedents and consequences for a particular behavior, you can help change undesirable behaviors and also teach desirable behaviors.

If you are struggling to change certain behaviors that your child displays, you may want to take a few minutes and break down the undesirable behavior into specific observable actions, and then write down the antecedents and consequences for the behavior. This can make you more aware of why your child is displaying this behavior. Then, together with your child's therapist, you can create a plan to either change or remove the pleasant consequences to change behavior.

Please remember, this module is only for informational purposes, and any action plan should always be discussed with your child's therapist or doctor. We hope you have found this introduction to behavior helpful. To learn more about what causes different types of behavior, or how you can change or teach behaviors, please review our modules on causes of behavior, reinforcement and prompting on the [Porchlight website](http://www.porchlight.org).