

What Causes Behavior

This summary reviews *why* children behave the way they do. Behavior is defined as a specific action that a person does, which can be observed.

There are four main causes for behavior:

- 1) **Attention seeking behaviors** – Behaviors that occur to get focused attention from family members, siblings, teachers or others around the person.
- 2) **Escape or avoidance behaviors** – Behaviors that occur to avoid doing something that the person does not want to do.
- 3) **Access to an item or activity** – Behaviors that occur so that the person can get a preferred item or activity that they enjoy.
- 4) **Sensory function behaviors** – Behaviors that occur because they make the person feel good or because they reduce or eliminate something unpleasant.

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

- 1) **Attention Seeking** – Children do all kinds of different things to get attention from others. These can be positive behaviors such as drawing a beautiful picture to get positive attention and praise. These can also be negative behaviors, such as picking on a sibling to get attention from a care giver who is busy. Sometimes, a child prefers to get negative attention instead of no attention at all.
- 2) **Escape or avoidance behaviors** – Escape or avoidance behaviors are behaviors that occur so that a person does NOT have to do something that they don't want to do. People engage in these behaviors to avoid perceived or real punishment. They behave in ways that will "turn off" or get them away from a particular event.

- 3) **Access to an item or activity** – These are behaviors that occur so that the person can get a preferred item or activity that they enjoy. Sometimes, these types of behaviors can be positive and sometimes they can lead to power struggles.
- 4) **Sensory function behaviors** and behaviors that occur to make the person feel good – Children may use these behaviors to cope with their – environment or regulate feelings such as stress, anger, excitement etc. These are behaviors that can occur any time and differ from child to child. Examples of these include flapping hands, banging their head repeatedly on a surface or touching their face repeatedly.

Determining WHY a behavior may be occurring can help you formulate an intervention plan to reduce and extinguish behaviors that are undesirable. If your child displays undesirable behaviors, take some time to think about what functions the behaviors could be serving. It may be that your child needs something and is behaving a certain way to get what they need.

Once you understand what function a behavior is serving, you can work with your child's therapist to create an intervention plan as needed. Additionally, you can review the module on Reinforcement and Prompting for information on how 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 behavior, please review the modules under the "Behaviors" subject area on the [Learning Modules](#) page on the [Porchlight website](#).