Attention isn’t the Function

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Attention Is Not the End of the Function of Behavior. It Is a Window Into It.

Today, I was working with a child who was having a tantrum. I had just arrived at a school, and this child was at the nurse’s office receiving his medication, which he gets at 10:00 in the morning. He was saying, “I don’t want to go back to class. I want to go home.”

He was with one of the adults from his classroom, and as she walked him back to class, he became more and more agitated. He started flailing his arms, and at one point, he tore another student’s paper off the wall in the hallway.

I was in the building to train the classroom team on managing student behavior, so I took the opportunity to give a recommendation to the teacher. I encouraged her to proceed intentionally and to consider talking with him outside the classroom, helping him de-escalate before bringing him back inside.

The next thing I knew, he had run into the classroom and begun grabbing items and throwing them. I immediately got down on his level and began talking to him while blocking him from hitting me. I used open hands to ensure that he was not being grabbed or held at all. I told him that I wasn’t mad at him and that he wasn’t in trouble.

He continued trying to hit me and grab me, but I continued talking to him calmly. Eventually, he began to de-escalate, and he was able to return to his desk.

Now, this was a behavior classroom, and the adults in the room were experienced in working with students who have behavioral challenges. I was there to help train the team, and one of my colleagues had observed the interaction.

Afterward, she said something that surprised me.

“I wouldn’t have gotten down on his level like that, because I wouldn’t have wanted to give him that attention.”

She expressed concern that his behavior was reinforced by attention and implied that by getting down on his level, I was providing him with the very thing that was maintaining his behavior. She explained that she would have stayed upright, turned her body away from him, and tried to ignore the behavior.

I understood her concern. After all, we know that attention can reinforce problem behavior. If a child engages in problem behavior to get attention from adults, providing attention following that behavior may increase the likelihood that the behavior will occur again.

But I think there is something very important that we sometimes miss when we stop our analysis at attention.

What Was I Actually Reinforcing?

First, I should explain that this was a very small child. If I had remained standing, turned my body away, and attempted to ignore his behavior, he likely would have continued grabbing and throwing things, tearing papers off the walls, knocking over desks, and potentially damaging things in the classroom.

But by getting down on his level, I was doing several things intentionally.

First, I was showing him that I wasn’t there to hurt him or even to reprimand him. Second, I was showing him that I was not afraid of his behavior or threatened by it. Third, getting down on his level allowed me to look into his eyes and show him, through my expression and the sound of my voice, that I was not upset with him and that I was there to help.

Those things mattered.

Now, what I did not pay attention to was the fact that he was yelling, “I want to go home.” That question had already been addressed by the adult who brought him back from the nurse. They had that conversation walking down the hallway. The question had been asked and answered, so I did not continue that conversation.

While he was there on the floor, he was also trying to hit me. I wasn’t paying attention to the hitting. I was blocking it, but I was blocking it as calmly as I could so that I could continue speaking in a calm voice. I wasn’t reprimanding him for hitting me, reacting emotionally, or allowing the hitting to change the way I was interacting with him.

Lastly, I was not paying attention to the screaming and yelling.

What I was paying attention to was when his body was calm. I was paying attention to when he looked me in the eye. I was paying attention to when he used a quiet voice. I was paying attention to when he

stopped trying to run away.

By paying attention to those things, he was getting the attention he needed for the behaviors that were appropriate to attend to. And the behaviors that weren't appropriate to attend to were not receiving the same response.

His hitting wasn't successful in changing the interaction. His screaming did not create drama or alarm. And eventually, when he realized that the adult in front of him was not there to harm him, take something away from him, or prevent him from getting something he needed, he became calm and was able to go on with his day.

I was providing attention, yes. But I was being intentional about what I attended to, how I attended to it, and why.

And I think that distinction is enormously important.

Attention Is Not the End of the Function of Behavior

I think it's important that we remember that attention is not the end of the function of behavior. It is a window into it.

Yes, behavior can serve the function of obtaining attention. But behind that attention is something the child wants or needs, or perceives that they want or need.

Even when behavior looks like it's attention-maintained, when a child is screaming and yelling, jumping on furniture, running away, or creating a situation in which adults have to expend considerably more energy than anticipated to address the behavior, there may be something behind that behavior that the child wants or needs more than simply having an adult look at them.

And if we stop at attention, we may miss it.

A child might engage in attention-maintained behavior because they want to avoid something they don't prefer doing. Maybe they don't feel like they're good at it. Maybe they have a history of failing at it. Maybe they simply don't enjoy it. Or maybe they already have something else in mind that they would rather be doing.

They could also be tired.

All of those are possible reasons for a child to engage in behavior that gets attention from adults and, in the process, distracts those adults from whatever nonpreferred activity they were asking the child to do.

In that situation, the attention may be part of the reinforcement history, but the child's motivation may be considerably more complicated than simply wanting someone to look at them or talk to them.

And there are other possibilities.

When Attention-Maintained Behavior Reflects a Need for Stimulation

Consider a child who has been sitting still, or trying to sit still, for a long time. Maybe the child feels like they're jumping out of their skin, but they're being asked to stay quiet in a classroom or at home.

So the child begins engaging in behaviors that get the adults up and moving.

Maybe the child climbs onto the kitchen table. Maybe they jump from room to room while an adult chases them around the house. They run under the bed, knock things over, climb on furniture, and create a situation in which the adult has to respond.

From a behavioral standpoint, this may look like attention-maintained behavior. The child engages in the behavior, the adult responds, and the interaction continues. Perhaps the child even seems to enjoy the chase.

But consider what else is happening.

The child is moving. The adult is moving. There is physical activity, excitement, interaction, and stimulation. The child may be getting some of the sensory or physical input that they need, or that they feel like they need.

And if we stop our analysis at attention, we may never recognize that.

We might conclude that the behavior is attention-maintained and that the appropriate intervention is extinction. In other words, if attention has previously reinforced the behavior, we would withhold that reinforcement when the behavior occurs.

So we would simply stop paying attention to the child when they're jumping on the kitchen table, running across the room, knocking things over, and becoming increasingly dysregulated.

But that creates an obvious problem. We have a child who is potentially going to damage things or hurt themselves, and we're attempting to ignore the behavior because we've identified attention as the function.

More importantly, we may be missing an opportunity to address the child's actual need.

What if the child would benefit from more opportunities for physical movement? What if they need more sensory stimulation throughout the day? What if we could provide that stimulation before the problem behavior occurs, so that we reduce whatever sense of deprivation the child is experiencing?

Perhaps the child isn't moving their body enough. Perhaps they aren't getting enough physical input. Perhaps they have been asked to sit still and remain quiet for longer than they can comfortably tolerate.

If that's the case, then simply withholding attention does nothing to address those circumstances.

We might be able to reduce the problem behavior much more effectively by arranging opportunities for movement, physical activity, or other appropriate stimulation in advance, rather than waiting until the child becomes dysregulated and then trying to ignore the behavior.

That is a very different way of approaching intervention.

We Have to Look Beyond the Immediate Reinforcer

This is what I think we sometimes lose when we identify the function of a behavior and treat that identification as the end of our analysis.

We identify attention as the reinforcer, and then we conclude that the intervention should be to withhold attention.

But why does the child want the attention?

What is the attention doing for the child? What is happening in the child's environment that makes that attention valuable? What experiences, interactions, activities, or changes in the environment are associated with obtaining it?

Those questions matter because attention is not always valuable for the same reason.

Sometimes a child wants reassurance. Sometimes they want help. Sometimes they want an adult to recognize that they're struggling. Sometimes they want to escape an unpleasant situation. Sometimes they want stimulation, movement, or interaction. Sometimes they want to feel safe.

And sometimes they may not have the communication skills, emotional regulation skills, or behavioral repertoire necessary to obtain those things in a more appropriate way.

So they engage in the behaviors that have worked for them before.

If we simply identify those behaviors as attention-maintained and then withhold attention, we may be overlooking the very circumstances that are making the behavior likely to occur.

This doesn't mean that we should reinforce problem behavior. It doesn't mean that we should respond dramatically to screaming, hitting, or aggression. And it certainly doesn't mean that we should abandon the principles of reinforcement and extinction.

It means that we need to be more thoughtful about how we apply them.

We need to distinguish between providing attention to problem behavior and providing attention to the child. Those are not necessarily the same thing.

We can be present with a child without reinforcing every behavior they engage in. We can offer reassurance without creating a dramatic reaction to aggression. We can remain calm, attentive, and supportive while deliberately reinforcing the behaviors we want to see more often.

And we can look beyond the immediate consequences of behavior to understand the conditions that make those consequences valuable in the first place.

The Child in the Classroom

When I think back to the child I worked with today, I don't believe that getting down on his level and talking to him calmly was a mistake simply because I was providing attention.

I believe that my attention served a purpose.

I was showing him that he was safe. I was showing him that I wasn't angry. I was showing him that I wasn't afraid of him, and that his behavior wasn't going to cause me to become threatening or upset.

At the same time, I wasn't allowing the hitting, screaming, or yelling to control the interaction. I was blocking the aggression calmly, maintaining a quiet voice, and paying attention to the moments when he began to demonstrate more appropriate behavior.

I was not ignoring the child. I was being selective about the behaviors I reinforced.

And the result was that he calmed down and returned to his desk.

Of course, a single interaction doesn't establish the function of a behavior or prove which component of an intervention was responsible for the outcome. But it does illustrate something that I believe is important for teachers, parents, behavior technicians, and behavior analysts to consider.

We should not confuse withholding reinforcement for problem behavior with withholding the attention, reassurance, or support that a child may need.

Those are two very different things.

The goal is not simply to make problem behavior stop. The goal is to understand why it is happening, what the child is trying to accomplish, and how we can help the child meet that need in a more appropriate way.

And that requires us to look beyond the function label.

Because attention is not the end. It can't be.

Behind every behavior, there is a want or a need, or a perceived want or need. And from the child's perspective, those may be essentially the same thing.

Our job is to understand what that want or need is, and to help the child find a better way to meet it.

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About the author

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