When Screaming Is the Only Language That Works

By Dr. Peter Beddow, BCBA-D



Imagine having something important to say but not having the words to say it. You might be hungry, uncomfortable, frightened, frustrated, or simply disappointed. The people around you are kind and genuinely want to help, but they keep misunderstanding you. Eventually, you discover that one particular behavior gets their attention immediately. You scream.

And it works.

Someone comes running. Someone starts asking questions. Someone offers you things, removes a difficult task, or tries desperately to figure out what you need. You may not have learned how to explain yourself, but you have learned how to get a response.

This is an important way to understand some of the challenging behaviors we see in children with significant language deficits. The behavior may be disruptive, unpleasant, or even dangerous, but it often has a history that makes sense. The child has learned something about how the world responds.

Our job is not simply to make the behavior stop. Our job is to help the child learn something better.

When Adults Accidentally Teach Screaming

Children learn from what happens after they behave. When a behavior repeatedly produces a desirable outcome, that behavior becomes more likely to occur again.

Suppose a child screams whenever an adult presents an activity she does not want to do. If the adult consistently removes the activity, the child may learn that screaming is an effective way to escape. Similarly, if screaming leads adults to offer toys, snacks, attention, or other preferred things, the child may learn that screaming is an effective way to obtain them.

The adults involved may be acting out of genuine compassion. They see a child who is struggling, and they want to make things better. Unfortunately, the consequences of our actions can teach something quite different from what we intended.

Over time, screaming may become the child's most reliable way of influencing the people around her.

This does not mean that every scream is deliberate or that every episode serves the same purpose. A child might scream to escape a demand on one occasion. On another, she might scream because she is overwhelmed or unable to communicate. Pain, sensory discomfort, anxiety, and confusion may also contribute. Understanding the circumstances surrounding the behavior is essential.

The Problem With Simply Stopping the Screaming

It can be tempting to focus entirely on reducing the challenging behavior. We might teach the child that screaming will no longer result in obtaining a preferred item or escaping an ordinary expectation. With consistency, the behavior may decrease.

But consider what happens if we succeed in reducing screaming without teaching the child a more effective way to communicate.

The child may still be hungry. She may still be frightened, confused, frustrated, or unable to explain why she does not want to participate. We have changed how she is allowed to respond without necessarily improving her ability to be understood.

That is not enough.

A complete intervention must address both the behavior we want to reduce and the communication skills we want to develop. We want the child to discover that there are better ways to influence her world, and we must make those alternatives genuinely useful.

First, Understand What the Child Is Trying to Accomplish

When a child screams, I want the adults around her to become curious about what is happening.

• Is she trying to obtain something?

• Is she trying to avoid something?

• Is she confused about what is expected?

• Is she uncomfortable?

• Does she need help, reassurance, movement, or connection with another person?

We may not always know the answer immediately. Sometimes the child does not have the language to tell us. Sometimes several things are happening at once. That is precisely why we need to develop a richer communication system.

The goal is to move from adults guessing what the child wants to the child increasingly being able to tell us.

That distinction is important. A parent may know that a particular gesture means the child wants juice. A therapist may recognize that a particular expression means she is becoming frustrated. But those interpretations depend on someone knowing the child extremely well.

We want communication that works with other people, too.

Teach a Better Way, and Make It Work

Suppose a child wants a drink and has learned to scream until someone brings it to her. We do not have to wait for screaming and then offer drinks until we guess correctly. We can teach her a clear way to request what she needs.

That might involve:

• handing someone a picture of juice

• selecting a symbol on a communication device

• making a sign

• saying a word

• producing an emerging speech sound

The appropriate response depends on the child's abilities and communication plan.

When the child communicates, we respond. We make the new behavior valuable by demonstrating that it works.

If she requests juice, we give her juice when it is available. If she requests help, we help her. If she tells us something hurts, we take that seriously. If she communicates that she is sad, we acknowledge her sadness and offer comfort.

The child should not have to scream to get us to listen.

At the same time, not every request can be granted immediately. A child may request a favorite activity when another activity is scheduled first. We can acknowledge the request, explain what will happen, and help her tolerate waiting or disappointment.

What matters is that the communication is heard, even when the answer is not immediately yes.

Acknowledge, Set a Limit, and Teach

I often organize behavior intervention around three connected responsibilities:

1. **Acknowledge the reason for the behavior.** 2. **Set a fair and firm limit.** 3. **Teach a new way.**

Acknowledging means that we take the child's experience seriously. We recognize that something has happened, that the child wants or needs something, or that she is struggling with an expectation.

Setting a limit means that we maintain reasonable boundaries. Screaming does not automatically cancel an appropriate activity, and it does not require us to grant every request. Limits should be understandable, proportionate, and sensitive to the child's needs and abilities.

Teaching a new way means that we actively help the child develop a more effective response. We do not simply wait for her to figure it out.

These responsibilities overlap. We can remain close to a distressed child, acknowledge her feelings, offer communication supports, and maintain a reasonable expectation at the same time.

There is no contradiction between compassion and consistency.

What Research Adds

The ideas above are my own way of organizing this work. Some published research is consistent with parts of them.

In a 1985 study, Carr and Durand first identified situations in which behavior problems, including tantrums, aggression, and self-injury, were most likely to happen. For the children studied, these included low adult attention and difficult tasks. They then taught four children with developmental disabilities to ask adults for attention or help. Problem behavior decreased. The authors described their results as consistent with the idea that some behavior problems may work as a nonverbal way of communicating. This was a small study, and it does not show that every challenging behavior is communication.

This general approach is known as functional communication training. Tiger, Hanley, and Bruzek (2008) wrote a review and practical guide on it for readers who want more detail.

Hart and Risley (1975) studied language taught during naturally occurring adult and child interactions in a preschool. Children's new language was used first with teachers and later with other children. That study focused on a specific language skill in typical preschool play. It is not direct evidence about screaming. It is relevant to one hope in this article: communication that works with more people than the one adult who knows the child best.

The Goal Is More Than Quiet

A child who screams less may be making important progress. But a quieter child is not necessarily a child who can communicate more effectively.

I want to know whether she can:

- ask for help
- express frustration
- tell someone she is hurt
- request a preferred activity
- reject something she does not want
- share what she is feeling

I want to know whether she can do those things with different people and in different places.

Those are the outcomes that matter.

The goal is not simply to replace a loud child with a quiet one. It is to help a child who has been struggling to be understood discover that she has a voice, that her communication matters, and that the people around her are willing to listen.

A successful intervention does not merely close the old pathway. It opens a better one.

References

Carr, E. G., & Durand, V. M. (1985). Reducing behavior problems through functional communication training. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*. https://doi.org/10.1901/jaba.1985.18-111

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About the author

Teacher at heart, behavior analyst, and writer, Dr. Peter Beddow has spent more than two decades helping children, families, and school teams navigate autism, behavior, trauma, and learning differences with clarity, structure, and hope. He studied English Literature and Creative Writing at Middlebury College and earned a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, where his work focused on fairness, learning, and access in assessment. Peter has worked as a teacher, special educator, clinical director, consultant, and board certified behavior analyst in homes, schools, and clinics. He founded Accessible Hope, a Nashville-area practice supporting diverse families, and writes and teaches practical, humane approaches to behavior and learning.

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