When the Function Is Attention, Don’t Ignore the Child

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One of the most troubling developments in the field of applied behavior analysis over the last several decades has been the way we sometimes think about attention as a function of behavior. Attention is indeed a function of behavior, but attention is rarely the whole story. And if we stop at identifying attention as the function of a behavior, we risk missing the mark entirely.

In my early experience as a behavior analyst, and even before that as a teacher, I frequently heard the term planned ignoring. The idea was that if a child was having a tantrum, and the tantrum was determined to be attention-seeking, the adult should turn or orient their body slightly away from the child, put their head down, and wait until the child stopped.

And experimentally, when you do this with a child, the child will often stop tantruming because the behavior is no longer producing the attention it previously received. But that intervention, while it may stop the tantrum in the moment, does not necessarily get at the heart of the behavior. More importantly, it misses an opportunity to teach the child, which should be the objective of any intervention with a child.

The child was not necessarily having a tantrum simply for the purpose of getting attention. The child may have been having a tantrum because he or she was upset about something. And the thing the child was upset about is typically knowable.

What happened just before the tantrum? Was the child denied something? Was the child given a demand? Was something taken away? Was the child reprimanded? If we don't know the answers to those questions, then we don't really understand why the tantrum happened. And even though ignoring might stop the tantrum momentarily, it does not teach the child. Beyond that, it doesn't necessarily help the child who is genuinely upset.

The idea of ignoring a child who is upset carries a real risk of neglecting that child's needs.

When a Child Has Been Denied Something

Suppose a child has been denied something and responds by having a tantrum. Often, the child has learned through previous experiences that tantruming can cause adults to relent and give the child the very thing that was initially denied.

In that situation, we can understand that one thing we should not do is reinforce that historical association by giving the child what he or she was denied. Doing so would essentially turn the tantrum into a means of communicating a demand, with the adult responding by giving in.

So we don't give the child what was denied simply because the child is having a tantrum. But ignoring the child isn't the only other option.

We can talk to the child. We can say something like:

"Hey, I know you really want this. I'm not going to give it to you right now, but I'm not mad at you. I know you're upset, and it's understandable that you're upset. You didn't get something you really wanted. I can't give it to you right now because I already told you that you couldn't have it, and I don't want to go back on my word. But let's talk about when you might be able to have it. It's not necessarily gone forever."

This is an important point. Many times, when we deny a child something and the child becomes upset, we forget that outside of that particular moment, the thing the child wants may not be inappropriate or wrong or bad in any way. It's simply that, in this particular situation, for whatever reason, the adult has determined that the child cannot have it.

We can have an entire conversation about the thing that was denied, and we do not need to feel that giving the child attention is somehow harmful. We can acknowledge the child's disappointment without changing our decision.

Ultimately, what the child needs to learn is that there is a better way to respond to being denied something he or she really, really wanted than to lie on the floor and scream and yell.

When a Child Is Trying to Communicate a Want or Need

Now consider another situation. A child is screaming or tantruming, and the behavior appears to be maintained by attention. But underneath that desire for attention may be something else entirely. The child wants my attention because I am someone who can provide access to something the child wants, or perhaps even something the child needs.

A child who has communication or language deficits doesn't always have an adaptive way of expressing those wants and needs. In this case, the child might be using screaming to communicate a desire for something he or she doesn't currently have.

So while the screaming may be maintained by attention, it is attention from someone who can help meet a need. That's an important distinction.

We certainly want to avoid teaching the child that screaming is the best way to get what he or she wants. But we don't have to ignore the child to accomplish that.

In fact, we can look directly at the child and say:

"You're screaming. I can see that you're upset, and I want to help you. Help me understand what it is that you want. If you can tell me what you want, then we can talk about whether I can give it to you."

Notice that this situation is different from the previous example. Here, the adult has not necessarily denied the child anything. The child wants something, but the adult may not even know what it is.

Once the adult understands what the child wants, there is a decision to make. Perhaps the request is perfectly reasonable, and the adult could grant it. But if the child has learned that screaming reliably produces adult attention and access to desired things, we also have a responsibility to teach a better way.

And that is where teaching becomes so important.

We can give the child a tool to use, a flag to wave, so to speak, that is not screaming or tantruming. Something simpler, more effective, and more likely to work across many different environments and situations.

That tool is communication.

For a child who can speak, it may be learning to ask using words. For another child, it may be a sign, a picture, a gesture, or another form of communication. The important thing is that the child learns a more appropriate and effective way to express a want or need.

And when the child communicates, we can respond warmly:

"Thank you for asking me. Now I know what you want. Now we can talk about how you can get it."

Maybe the child can have it right now. Maybe the child will need to wait a little while. Maybe the answer will still be no. But the child has learned something valuable: there is a better way to communicate, and the adults in his or her life are willing to listen.

Of course, we should adjust our expectations to the child's abilities. A child who has not yet learned an effective way to communicate may need us to model or prompt that communication rather than simply waiting for it to happen.

The first step toward helping the child through that episode is to recognize and honor what may be behind the tantrum: some sort of perceived need.

We don't have to grant every request. We don't have to agree that everything a child wants is something the child should have. But we can acknowledge the validity of the child's desire, even when we cannot

satisfy it.

And in doing so, we honor the child.

Attention Is Not the Same as Giving In

I think this is where we sometimes get confused in behavior analysis. We treat attention as though it is something we must withhold whenever a child engages in behavior that has historically produced it. But attention is not necessarily the same thing as reinforcement, and giving a child attention does not automatically mean that we are strengthening the behavior we want to reduce.

How we respond matters. What the child learns from our response matters. We can remain present, calm, and compassionate while still maintaining appropriate boundaries and carefully teaching and reinforcing more effective behavior.

We can listen without giving in. We can acknowledge frustration without removing every expectation. We can comfort a child without abandoning the opportunity to teach.

For me, the bottom line is that planned ignoring can too easily become neglectful when it is applied without considering the child's emotional state, communication abilities, and underlying needs. There are so many opportunities to relate to a child who is in the middle of a difficult moment in ways that do not undermine our authority as parents or teachers.

We can maintain our expectations, honor the child, and use the moment to teach something better.

And ultimately, that is what our interventions should be about. Not simply stopping a behavior, but helping a child learn a better way.

References

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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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