

Behavior Psychology

Understanding Behavior



Topic Overview: Understanding Behavior

Most educators seek behavior support because a child or children are engaging in behavior that is unsafe, disruptive, or hard to manage. When you're struggling with a child's behavior it can be very difficult to see patterns that tell us why these behaviors are happening. We know from behavior science that all behaviors develop and continue because they serve a purpose- even if that purpose is hard to see at first. All behavior is functional.

Key Term: Function

Function, in behavior, is the "why" of behavior. It's the goal that the behavior serves. For example, when a parent says "no" to candy at the grocery checkout, a child may scream and cry with the *function* of getting what they want (candy).

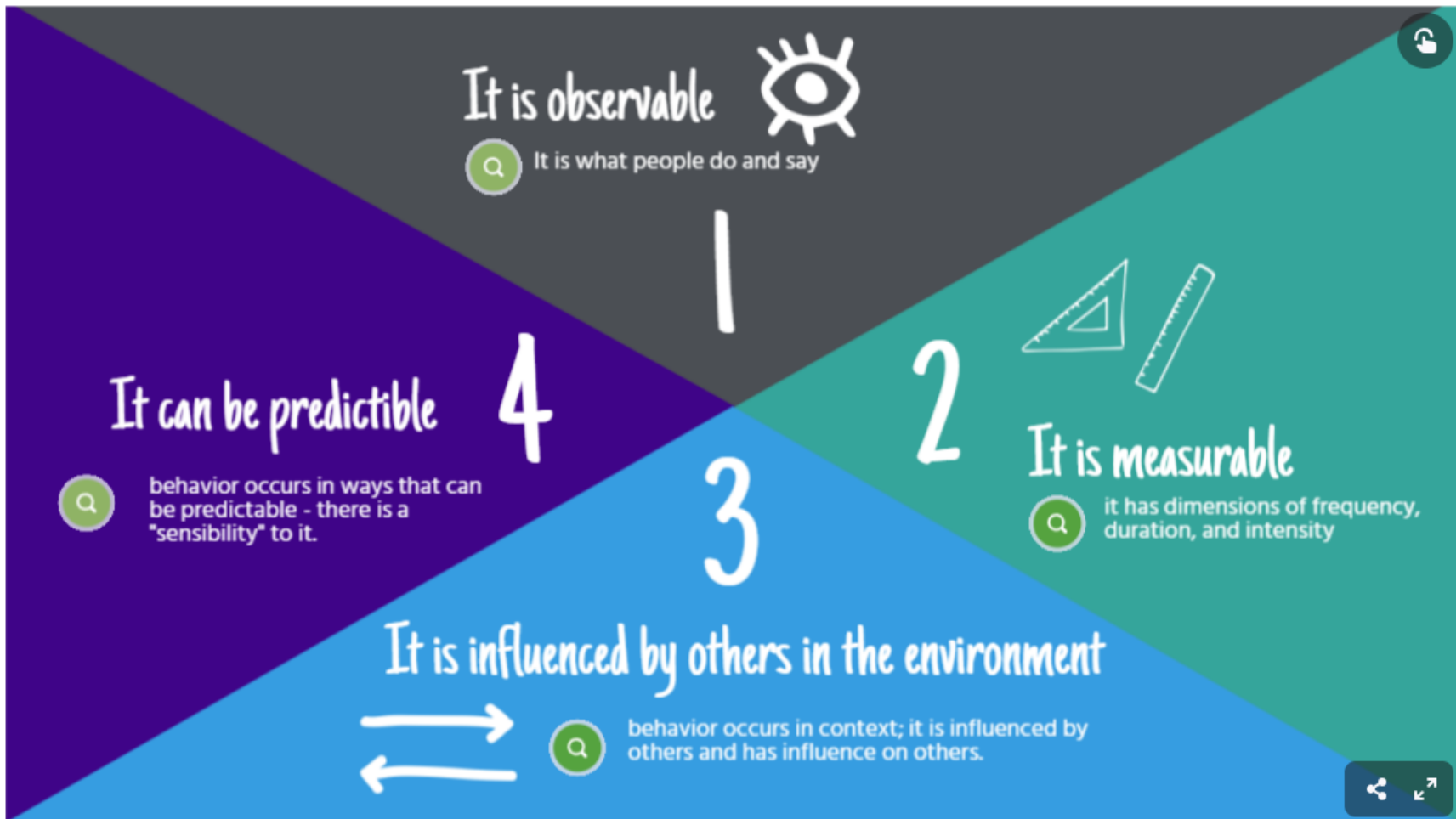
By the end of this topic, you should be able to...

1. Identify each possible function of challenging behavior
2. Determine why an otherwise communicative child may rely on challenging behavior to get their needs met
3. Recognize a way that challenging behavior might be working for an individual



Defining Behavior

What is behavior? While there are a lot of different way to answer this question, it might be most useful to think about behavior in the following four ways.



Children use behavior to produce **favorable outcomes** – the things they want or need.

Think about the most common reasons why babies cry – crying is their best way to communicate. This does not mean that they are bad or manipulative, it just means that **children learn what kinds of behavior works to get their needs met through experience.**



All humans learn from previous experiences and will use behavior that has the best track record of being successful. A teenager who discovers that studying helps them pass a test is more likely to keep studying. An employee who finds that complimenting their boss helps get them extra time off will keep it up.



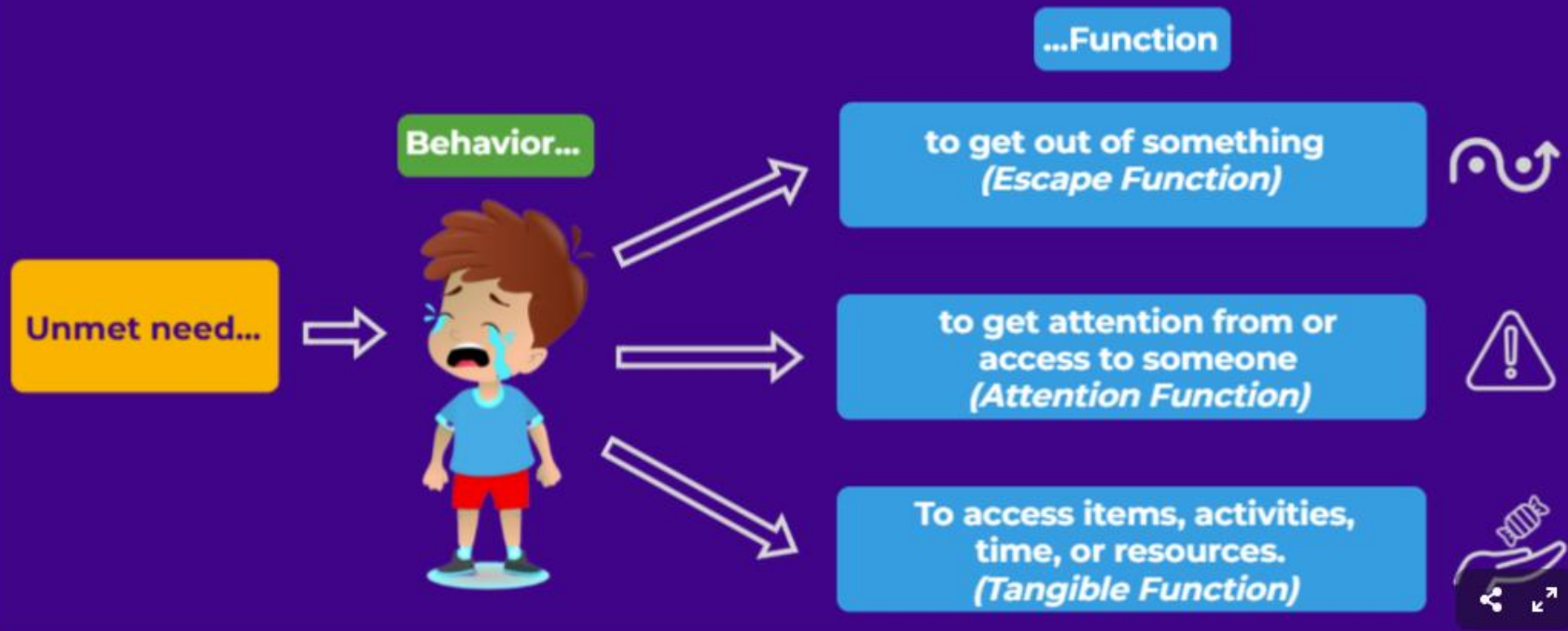
Think of different types of behavior as different tools in a toolbox – we tend to use whatever tools are at the top that seem right for the job. For the children in your care, that means they have learned to use the behaviors they do because they seem like they will work. In order to help them stop their disruptive behaviors and find new, safer, and more positive behaviors, we first need to understand the **why** behind their behavior.

Understanding the “why” is the most important first step in our treatment process. It will help us understand how to teach children to get their wants met by using appropriate behavior instead of disruptive behavior. You are incredibly important in this process, since you spend the a significant amount of time with them.

As a first step in understanding the “why,” you might start to ask yourself – “what might the child be expecting to get out of this behavior? How might the people or situations around them lead to a payoff?” Sometimes as adults we feel like we need to stop the fighting or to make a challenging situation go more smoothly. For instance, “giving in” is a strategy that many families feel they have to do from time to time, but it may be contributing to the cycle of problematic behavior.

Challenging Behavior

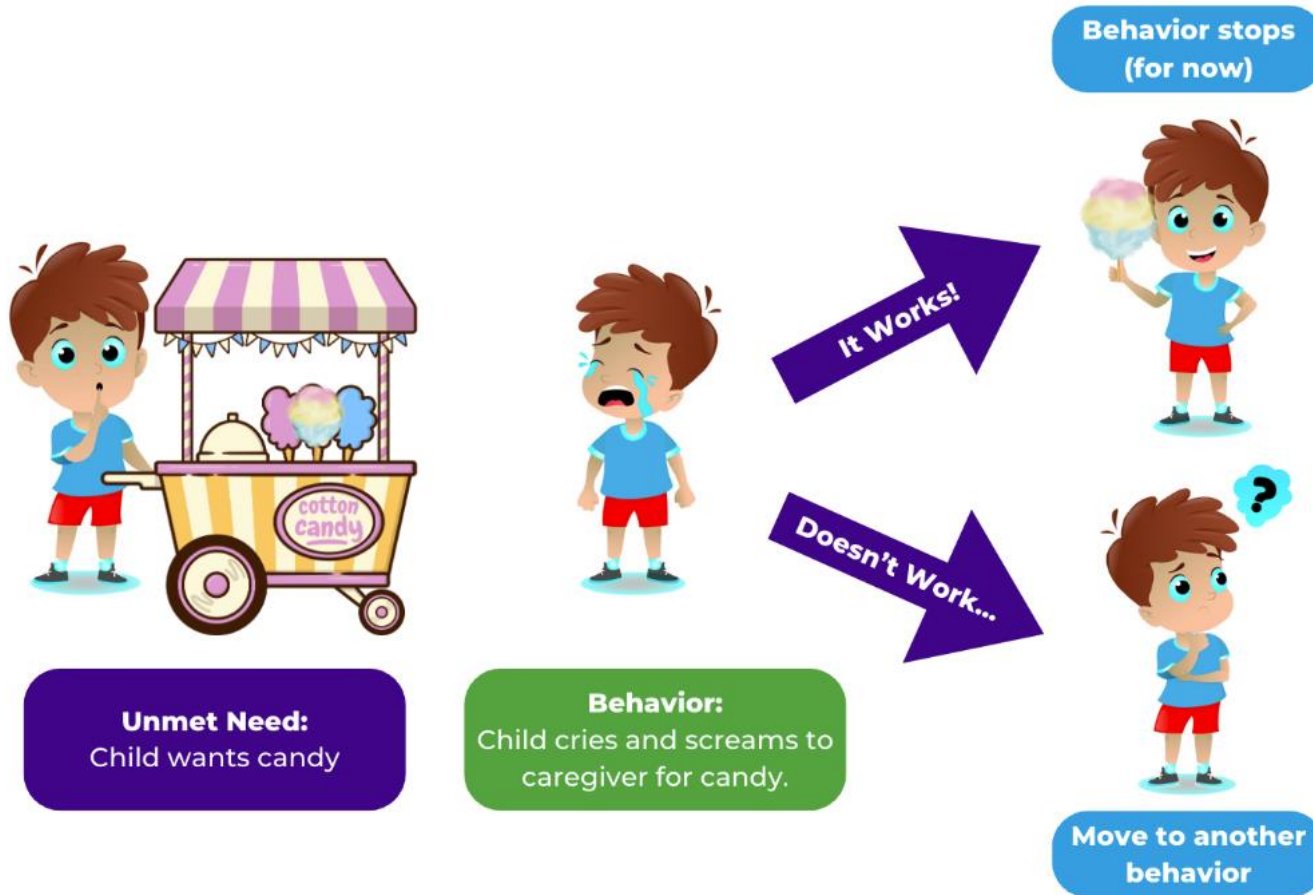
is **based in unmet need** and *serves a function...*



In other words, challenging behavior happens for a reason – it works!

Here is the typical process that unfolds when children have something they want or need:

1. Child has an unmet need
2. Child uses a behavior in their "toolbox;"
3. If it works, the behavior stops (for now);
4. If it doesn't work, they move onto another behavior.





Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence

One way to frame our understanding of behavior as we've defined it is to look at behavior as following a three step process we refer to as the "ABC of behavior."

A Antecedent

This refers to what happens immediately before the behavior occurs. The antecedent can be a trigger or a prompt that leads to the behavior. It sets the stage for the behavior to happen. For example, a teacher asking a child to complete a task could be an antecedent. A child seeing and smelling a cotton candy booth can be an antecedent.

B Behavior

This is the observable action or response that follows the antecedent. The behavior is what the person does, which can be either appropriate or inappropriate, desired or undesired. For example, a child might start working on the task (appropriate behavior) or refuse to do it (inappropriate behavior). A child may ask politely if they may have some candy (desired) or throw a tantrum to get their way (undesired).

C Consequence

This refers to what happens immediately after the behavior. The consequence can either be positive or negative. Positive consequences (like the child getting what they want) **reinforce** the behavior, making it more likely to occur again in the future. Negative consequences (like having the behavior be ignored or experiencing other undesirable results) make the behavior less likely to occur. For instance, if the child receives praise for starting the task (a positive consequence), they may be more likely to engage in similar behavior in the future. If they are reprimanded for refusing the task (a negative consequence), they might be less likely to refuse in the future. If the child gets the candy after screaming, they are more likely to scream to get what they want in the future. If their caregiver ignores the screaming and moves the child away from the candy, the child is less likely to return to that tactic in the future.

Take a look at this familiar situation and notice how it can be re-framed with the ABC of behavior.

Antecedent



Unmet Need:
Child wants candy

Behavior



Behavior:
Child cries and screams to caregiver for candy.

Consequence

Behavior stops
(for now)



It Works!



Doesn't Work...

Move to another
behavior





Summary and Recap

Let's take a moment to summarize and recap the learning in this topic, in light of our key concepts and learning objectives:

Key Term: Function

Function, in behavior, is the "why" of behavior. Its the goal that the behavior serves. The three most common functions of behavior are:

- Escape (from something undesirable)
- Attention (from others)
- Tangible (access to desired time or things)

1. Characterize each possible function of challenging behavior:

Challenging behavior in children typically serves two main functions: **obtaining something desired** (such as attention, toys, or activities) or **avoiding something undesired** (like tasks or situations they find unpleasant). These behaviors are learned through experience, as children discover which actions help them achieve their goals, either by gaining access to what they want or by escaping something they wish to avoid.

2. Understand why an otherwise communicative child may rely on challenging behavior to get their needs met:

Even if a child has the ability to communicate effectively, they might rely on challenging behaviors because these behaviors can be more effective or faster at meeting their needs. For example, when an appropriate behavior (like asking nicely) doesn't work quickly enough, a child might resort to disruptive actions (like tantrums) because they have learned that these behaviors prompt a quicker response from caregivers.

3. Describe a way that challenging behavior might be working for an individual:

Challenging behavior works by either **achieving a desired outcome** or **removing an undesirable situation**. For example, if a child throws a tantrum and as a result, a parent gives them a toy or removes a demand (like stopping homework), the behavior is reinforced. The child learns that this behavior is an effective tool in their "toolbox" to get what they want or to avoid what they dislike.

This content emphasizes the importance of understanding the underlying reasons for challenging behaviors to effectively address and modify them.