

Preventing and Responding to Challenging Behaviors in the Home

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Learning Objectives

1. Understanding Problem Behaviors
2. A behavior analytic perspective on behavior
3. Defining and observing problem behavior
4. Four functions (or causes) of problem behavior
5. Preventing and responding to problem behaviors based on their function(s)



PART I:
Understanding Problem Behaviors

Examples of Problem Behaviors

- Michael drops to the floor and screams when his parents and teachers ask him to do something
- Lucy opens and closes doors and cabinets upwards of 40 times per minute whenever she has free time
- Jessica elopes from her home and walks about her neighborhood unless someone is watching her every moment of the day
- Hilda spits in her hand during group activities, when she is alone, and when asked to transition from a preferred activity
- Kevin throws hard objects at his sister's head an average of 3 times per day, some occurrences resulting in visits to the ER



Impact on Child

- Affects the health and safety of the child and others
- Violates the rights of others
- Impedes upon the child's ability to function successfully and develop friendships
- Interferes with learning



Behaviors = Communication

All behaviors (adaptive or maladaptive) are a form of communication. The question is, what are our children communicating when they engage in problem behavior?



Developmental Delays: Communication

A child who has limited means of requesting preferred items/ activities, assistance, termination of an activity, or other forms of attention from an adult or peer often develop maladaptive behaviors as a way to compensate for their inability to communicate successfully.

For example, the child who cannot tell you that he is done with his meal (termination of an activity) may engage in behaviors such as throwing food and utensils, crying, dropping to the floor, or running away from the table.

Developmental Delays: Cognitive

A child with a cognitive delay:

- may not understand our verbal directions (e.g., never respond to “come here” or “no”)
- may be unable to understand how his actions effect the materials and people in his environment (e.g., flipping tables over to see it’s trajectory)
- may not understand how objects work and engage with toys inappropriately or not as they are intended (e.g., spinning the wheels of a toy car with his hands)
- may not be able to discriminate between objects and people and engage with his peers as other toys in his environment (e.g., pulling Sally’s hair to feel the sensation in his hands or biting Richie to hear the sound that he produces)

Developmental Delays: Motor

A child who has motor delays that affect his or her ability to access and explore their environment successfully, may compensate by engaging in problem behavior as a means of accessing reinforcement for themselves (e.g., flapping hands in front of face) and from others (e.g., screaming when they want someone to turn on the TV for them).



Part II: Explanation of behavior from a behavior analytic perspective



Behavioral research has shown that behavior is affected by what comes before it (antecedents) and what comes after it (consequences).



Antecedent (Example)

You want to be better about sending your mother a mother's day card so you write yourself a note and post it on the refrigerator door two weeks in advance. Five days before mother's day you buy your mother a card and send it out. It arrives on time.

(The ways in which you structure your environment influences your subsequent behavior)



Consequence

Each time you wash the dishes your significant other gives you massive hugs and kisses. You do the dishes every time they need cleaning.

(The responses you get from the significant people in your life following a particular behavior influence your subsequent engagement in that behavior.)



A-B-C Contingency

- Behaviorists refer to the inter-relationship between a behavior(B) and its antecedents(A) and consequences (C) as the 3-term contingency or A-B-C contingency.



The ABC Contingency is Everywhere

Everyday examples of the ABC contingency in early childhood are vast and abundant.

- Some are adaptive and result in
 - easy access to reinforcement,
 - the development and/or maintenance of friendships,
 - further opportunities for learning and skill development, etc.
- Some are maladaptive and adversely affect
 - the health and safety of the child and others,
 - the rights of others,
 - the child's ability to function successfully and develop friendships,
 - ongoing learning.

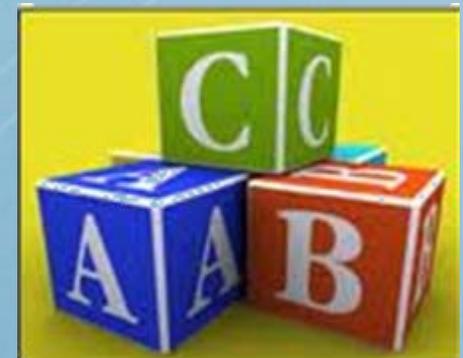
Adaptive Forms

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Difficult puzzle	Ana asks for "help"	Mother helps, Ana finishes puzzle
Full stomach	Max says, "I'm done"	Parents excuse him from the table



Maladaptive Forms

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
a peer's long hair (TA sits with Molly) and TA, Susan, sitting with another child	hair pulling	TA sits with Molly





Molly

Molly, a non-verbal 4 year old girl who attends a preschool program, pulls her peers' hair throughout the day. Based on observation, whenever the TA sits with another child (antecedent event), Molly pulls the hair of her nearest peer (behavior) and the TA comes and sits with Molly giving her attention in the form of verbal reminders that it's not nice to pull hair and sitting with her throughout the remainder of the activity.

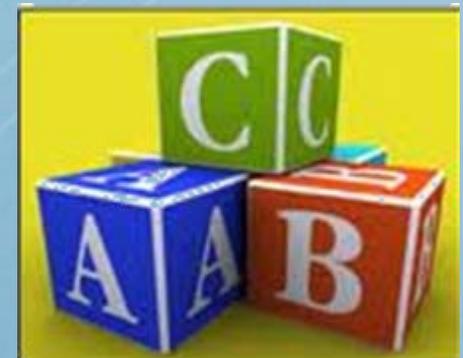


Why Does Molly Continue to Pull Hair?

For Molly, hair-pulling in the presence of a peer often results in opportunities to sit with and receive attention from the TA. Molly's maladaptive behavior of hair-pulling has a history of being reinforced (inadvertently) by the TA. It is a behavior she maintains in her repertoire because of the consistent and reliable consequence that results -- access to attention from the TA.

Maladaptive Forms

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Presentation of toothbrush followed by verbal direction of "time to brush your teeth"	Dropping to floor, crying	Removal of toothbrush



Kevin

Kevin is a 4-year old boy with limited verbal skills who drops to the floor and cries when it is time to brush his teeth. Whenever one of his parents is holding his toothbrush and says, “it’s time to brush your teeth” (antecedent), Kevin drops to the floor and begins to kick and cry (behavior) which results in the parent removing the toothbrush, consoling him until he stops crying, and letting him play in his room (consequence).

Why Does Kevin Continue to Drop to the Floor and Scream?

For Kevin, dropping to the floor following his parents demands to brush his teeth, results in his escape from the task and access to the toys in his room. Kevin's maladaptive behavior of dropping to the floor and screaming has a history of being reinforced (inadvertently) by his parents. It is a behavior he maintains in his repertoire because of the consistent and reliable consequence that results – escape/avoidance from brushing his teeth.



Part III: Description and Observation of Problem Behaviors

How do we describe problem behavior?

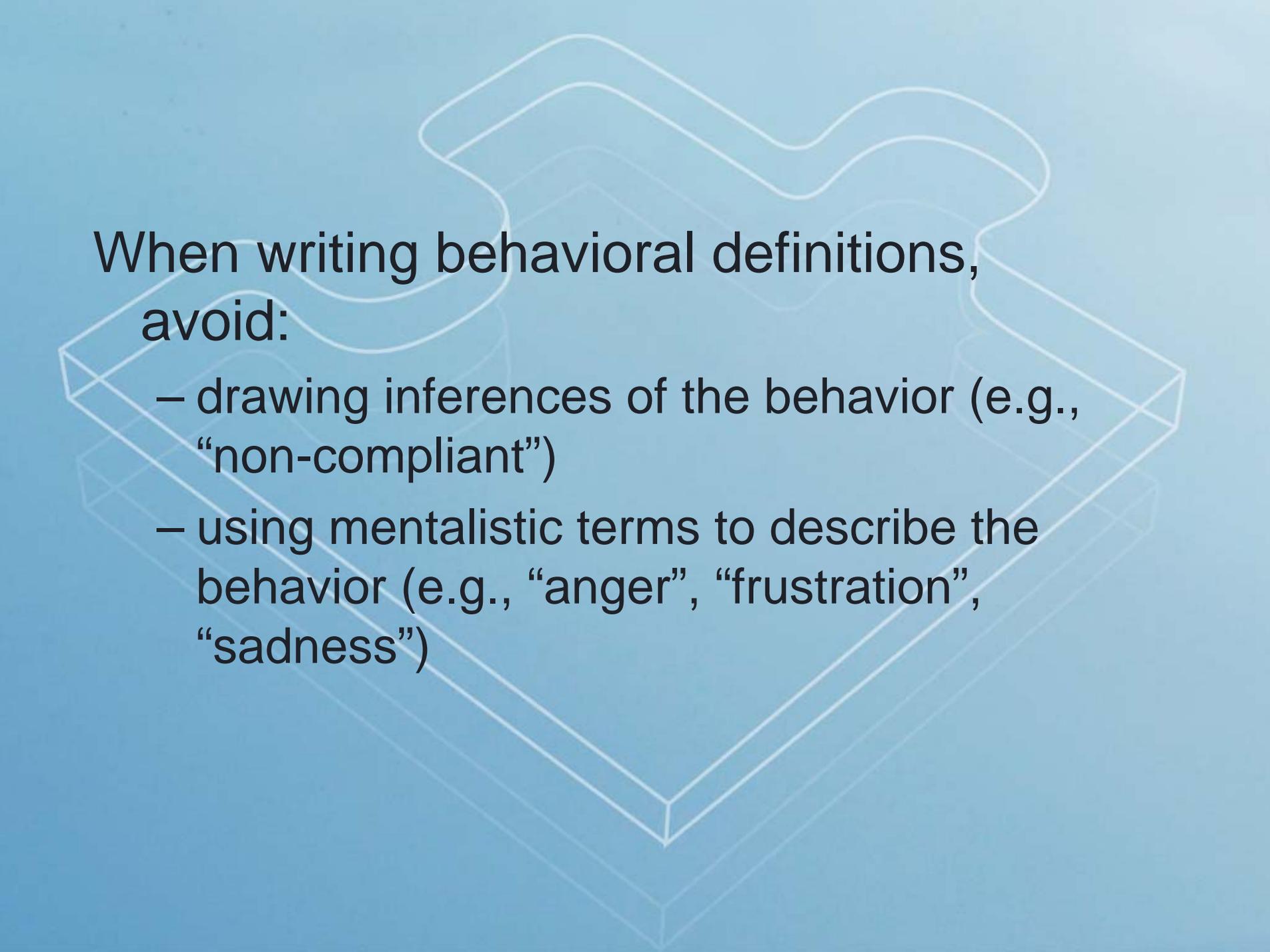
1. Define the problem behavior
2. Observe the behavior
3. Collect data

1. Define the problem behavior

- A behavioral definition should be:
 - objective, assuring that specific instances of the behavior can be reliably observed and recorded
 - clear, assuring that it is readable, unambiguous, and easily paraphrased
 - complete, delineating what is and what is not the behavior and aiding the observer in discriminating the problem behavior from other similar responses

A Behavioral Definition Should Answer the Following Questions:

- What is the behavior?
- When does the behavior occur?
- How often does it occur?
- What is the intensity of the behavior?
- With whom does the behavior occur?



When writing behavioral definitions,
avoid:

- drawing inferences of the behavior (e.g., “non-compliant”)
- using mentalistic terms to describe the behavior (e.g., “anger”, “frustration”, “sadness”)

Examples

Good Definitions:

- Michael drops to the floor and screams loudly for 10 minutes everyday before bath time.
- When there is downtime at home (i.e., her parents are busy and no demands are placed on her), Lucy opens and closes the cabinet doors as many as 100 times in a 10 minute period until one of her parents redirects her.

Examples

Poor Definitions:

- Michael tantrums
- Lucy engages in repetitive play.

2. Observe the behavior as it occurs in the environment and identify its antecedents and consequences

As with the behavioral definition, describe in detail what happened before the problem behavior occurred and what happened after the problem behavior occurred. Again, avoid drawing inferences about the antecedent and consequent events. Only describe the events and behaviors you observed surrounding the problem behavior.

Your antecedent and consequence descriptions should answer the following questions:

- Antecedent
 - What happened before the behavior?
 - What time was it?
 - Who was there?
 - Where were you?
- Consequence
 - What did you do in response to the behavior?
 - How did your child respond to your intervention?

Good Descriptions

- Antecedent -- Michael's mother tells him, "it's time for bath", and asks him to clean up his toys in his room.
- Consequence – Michael's mother tells him he can have 5 more minutes to play with his toys. Michael gets up off the floor, stops screaming and plays with his toys.
- Antecedent – Lucy is in her room by herself and her parents are doing chores in the apartment.
- Consequence – no socially mediated consequences (i.e., no demands placed or removed, no attention/tangibles given or not attention/tangibles removed)

Poor Descriptions

- Antecedent – Michael is angry
 - Consequence – Michael gets his way
- Antecedent – Lucy is bored
 - Consequence – Lucy plays with the cabinets

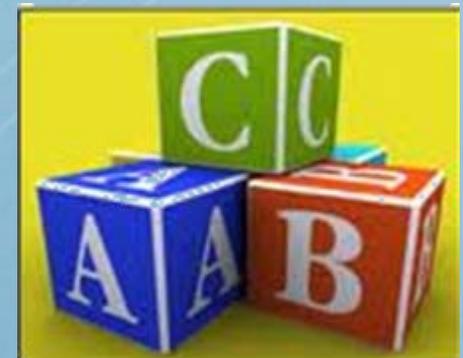
3. Collect ABC Data

Collecting ABC data will allow you to determine the function of (or reason for) the problem behavior and plan strategies to reduce and replace the problem behavior.



Collect ABC Data

- Keep a running log or data sheet of each occurrence of the problem behavior. Right down the time of the behavior, what occurred before the behavior, and what occurred following the behavior. Over time, this data will provide information with regards to the types of environmental events (antecedents) that proceed the problem behavior and the consequences that are reinforcing and maintaining the problem behavior.



ABC Data Sheet: Example

Child: Kevin

Data Collector(s): Mom and Classroom Teacher

Date/Time	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
2.5.04/8:30am	Sitting in car on the way to school	Hand-flapping and/or humming Duration: 5 min.	No socially mediated consequence
2.5.05/8:55	Walking from car to entrance of school	Duration: 30 sec.	Mom holds his hand by their sides and sings a pop song from the radio. Kevin sings along.
2.5.04/10:00	Morning meeting at school	Duration: 30 sec.	Teacher tells him to put his hands down. Kevin complies (i.e. he stops)

Date/Time	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
2.5.04/10-:05	Morning meeting at school	Duration: 1 min.	Peer tells him to stop. Kevin does not look at peer in response and continues to hand flap and hum.
2.5.04/10:10	Morning meeting at school	Duration: 45 sec.	TA blocks his hands and Kevin stops hand-flapping.
2.5.04/11:55	Waiting in line to go the gym	Duration: 15 sec.	Teacher asks Kevin to take attendance and gives him a clipboard and pen. Kevin stops hand flapping and humming and complies with the teacher.



PART IV: Four functions (or causes) of all behavior

Functions of Behavior

According to behavior analysts, humans engage in behaviors for one of 4 reasons.

Of the 4 reasons, two are mediated and reinforced through others in the individual's environment:

- **socially mediated positive reinforcement (attention, tangible)**
- **socially mediated negative reinforcement (escape/avoidance)**

While the other two are reinforcing in and of themselves

- **Automatic positive reinforcement (self-stimulation)**
- **Automatic negative reinforcement (pain removal)**

Socially Mediated Positive Reinforcement

The consequence is the delivery of something by another individual following a behavior that increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur in the future:

- Attention (hugs, conversation, smile, praise)
- Activities (video games, board games, sports)
- Tangible Items (food, seat on the subway, pen)

Socially Mediated Negative Reinforcement

The consequence is the removal of something aversive by another individual following a behavior that increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur in the future:

- Escape or removal of non-preferred demands
- Avoidance or postponement of non-preferred demands

Automatic Positive Reinforcement

The consequence results from one's own body movement or activities that produce a feeling that increases the likelihood that the individual will engage in the behavior in the future.

- Self-stimulatory behaviors (e.g., hand flapping, rocking, mouthing, hair twirling, foot tapping)



**Part V. HOW TO PREVENT AND
RESPOND TO PROBLEM
BEHAVIORS BASED ON THEIR
MAINTAINING FUNCTIONS**

Preventing and Responding to Behaviors maintained by SOCIALLY MEDIATED POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT (Attention or Tangible):

- Create a rich, reinforcing environment and provide lots of attention (praise, smiles, hugs, tickles) for all appropriate behavior
- Teach an appropriate means of requesting attention (e.g., vocalization, ASL sign, PECS) and provide the attention contingent upon this new replacement behavior
- NEVER reinforce the problem behavior. In other words, IGNORE all instances of the behavior by not providing 1) eye contact, 2) verbal redirection/reprimand, or 3) physical contact.

NOTE: DO NOT USE THIS STRATEGY FOR SELF-INJURIOUS BEHAVIOR. ALWAYS REMEMBER - SAFETY FIRST.

Example

- Whenever Molly pulls her peers' hair during circle time, the TA, Susan, diverts her attention from the child she is sitting with, explains the classroom rules and how it's not nice to pull hair, and sits next to Molly for the remainder of the activity.
- One would hypothesize from this profile that pulling hair serves an attention function for Molly. Every time she pulls a peers' hair during circle she receives attention from Susan. Susan has inadvertently reinforced this behavior by providing attention every time it occurs.

INTERVENTION PLAN

- Provide Molly with lots of attention in the form of verbal praise, hugs, social gestures (thumbs up, smiles, high-fives) throughout circle time contingent upon non-occurrences of hair pulling
- Teach Molly an appropriate means for requesting attention from Susan and other preferred people in her environment. Because Molly is non-verbal at this time, teaching her to tap someone on the shoulder and/or vocalize and gesture or sign “come here” would be some functional means for Molly to gain the attention of others.
- Post “Classroom Rules” that includes “no hair-pulling” and discuss the rules only when the children in the class are behaving appropriately (i.e., not in response to incidents of problem behavior)
- When/if hair-pulling does occur, IGNORE the behavior COMPLETELY. Do NOT make eye contact with Molly, do not speak to Molly, and do not sit next to Molly. Be sure that the other child is free of Molly’s grasp and provide that child with lots of attention. Perhaps, teach this child to tell Molly to “stop it”.
- Note: With Attention seeking behaviors such as Molly’s, the teachable moments are throughout the day, NOT following the problem behavior.

Preventing and Responding to Behaviors maintained by **SOCIALLY MEDIATED NEGATIVE REINFORCEMENT (Escape or Avoidance):**

- Create a visual schedule, allowing the child the opportunity to anticipate future activities
- Create reinforcement contingencies wherein the child receives positive reinforcement in the form of a preferred activity, or tangible following completion of a less preferred or non-preferred activity.
- Imbed choices within less preferred activities
- Use a timer to indicate how long a child must engage in the less preferred activity before he can move on to a preferred activity
- NEVER allow the child to escape or avoid a demand!
- When appropriate, teach the child to request a break from a less preferred activity or teach them to appropriately refuse a less preferred activity

Example

- Whenever one of his parents is holding his toothbrush and says, “it’s time to brush your teeth”, Kevin drops to the floor and begins to kick his legs and cry which results in the parent removing the toothbrush consoling him until he stops crying, and letting him play in his room.
- One would hypothesize from this profile that dropping to the floor and crying serves an escape/avoidance function for Kevin. Whenever he drops to the floor, especially following requests to brush his teeth, he is allowed to avoid the activity and play in his room. In this example, the parent has inadvertently reinforced his tantrum behavior by allowing him to escape brushing his teeth and leaving him to play in his room.

INTERVENTION PLAN

- Create a vertically displayed picture schedule that lists the activities that Kevin will engage in before bed. Briefly prime him by pointing to each picture at the beginning of the bed time routine so he sees and begins to understand the sequence of events. Plan the schedule so that highly preferred activities follow the activities he may find aversive (i.e., brushing teeth). This way he sees that good things will come after teeth brushing.
- Only allow him to engage in certain highly preferred activities contingent upon brushing his teeth or contingent upon allowing his parent to brush his teeth.
- Embed choices (e.g., green versus red toothbrush, mint versus bubblegum toothpaste) throughout the teeth brushing routine so that he has some control over the activities proceedings.
- Use a timer to indicate how long teeth brushing will occur. OR count aloud to him to a predetermined # so that he knows when the activity will end.
- NEVER allow him to escape or avoid teeth brushing. Pick him up off the floor and bring him into the bathroom. Hold up a preferred activity in the opposite hand of the toothbrush. When he calms remind him, “first brush your teeth, then (preferred activity)”.

Preventing and Responding to Behaviors maintained by **AUTOMATIC POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT (Self Stimulation)**:

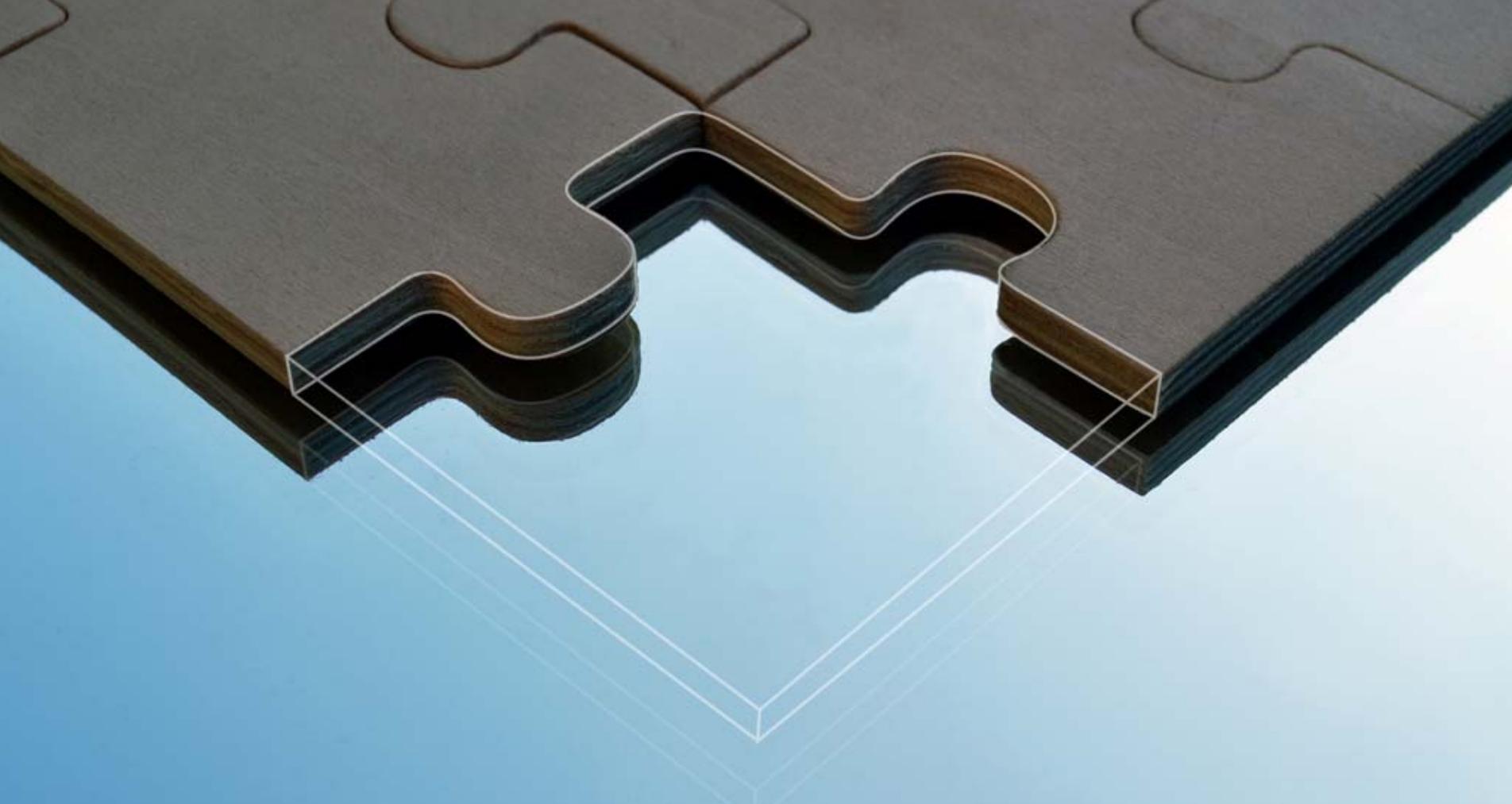
- Provide an activity rich environment to reduce the likelihood that the child will engage in self-stimulation over play
- Provide activities that produce a similar reinforcing stimulation either non-contingently (i.e., free access), contingent upon appropriate behavior (i.e., only when the child is not engaging in the problem behavior), contingent upon work/task completion, or contingent upon non-occurrences of the behavior.
- Without telling the child to stop, reprimanding him, or giving him attention or tangibles, block the problem behavior (either physically or with equipment) to prevent the stimulation the child obtains from engaging in the behavior and redirect them to something else.
- Teach the child to engage in more appropriate means of self-stimulation

Example

- Ryan is a 10-year old boy who flaps his hands and hums loudly periodically throughout the day. Based on his parents ABC data, it occurs most often when he is physically transitioning from one activity to the next, sitting in the car and the train and waiting on the subway platform, during preferred activities that do not require the use of both of his hands (i.e., video, TV, computer games), and a minute or two after he puts down a preferred toy.
- It does NOT occur when he is engaged in activities of daily living (i.e., dressing, eating, and brushing his teeth), when his parents ask him to do something around the house, or when he is engaged in a social activity with his family and friends.
- His parents typically redirect him to an appropriate activity when they catch him engaging hand-flapping and humming but rarely tell him to stop or physically block the behavior (i.e., put his hands down). Based on this profile, one would hypothesize that this behavior functions as a form of self-stimulation as there are no socially mediated consequences to Ryan's hand-flapping.

Intervention Plan

- Teach Ryan to carry a back-pack with preferred items that he can choose from and engage with during periods of downtime (e.g., transitions, waiting for transportation or upcoming activities)
- Engage Ryan in conversation prior to activities that typically precede the hand-flapping and humming, thus preventing the behavior from occurring.
- Teach Ryan an alternative and appropriate means for accessing the same sensory stimulation (e.g., head phones with music and drum sticks with a drum pad)
- Provide Ryan with activity reinforcers contingent upon successively longer intervals of non-occurrences of hand-flapping and humming.
- Block/interrupt the response and redirect him to appropriate activity or conversation following occurrences of the problem behavior



This concludes the presentation piece of today's workshop. For the next 15 minutes I am happy to take questions from the audience.

