



## "Your Attitude Just Might Be My Biggest Barrier"

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Behaviors always happen for a reason. The reasons may or may not be obvious to us. They do not simply "just happen" but may be a function of a situation, a communication partner, the message that is being sent, or even a physiological need. Every human being uses behavior to communicate. Consider the facial expressions that let you know if a conversational partner is interested or not, the slammed door that expresses a frustration or anger better than any words could have, or the shove out of the way when someone wants to be left alone. Even though most of us can speak and have the ability to understand and solve problems, we often rely heavily on behaviors to express our feelings. Many of the individuals with autism spectrum disorders that we support may have limited or no speech to access when they want to communicate messages such as they don't understand, want to be left alone, or are having a rough time. Instead, they "act out" as a way of telling us.

Individuals who have autism spectrum disorders or other disabilities are faced with many challenges. One of the challenges they may face are attitudes and misconceptions regarding their behaviors. Often behaviors are looked at as something to be fixed or eliminated rather than a method for expressing feelings or desires. In order to bridge that gap, the first concept to grasp is that behavior is communication and that communication is behavior. It is impossible for anyone to "not communicate." Every human uses behavior to communicate at one time or another. This concept is central to our understanding of how "unacceptable" or "unwanted" behaviors develop and how they function in the communicative repertoire of some individuals. However, before looking at specific behaviors, there is yet another very important concept to understand. This is the concept of labels and how they are perceived. As Herb Lovett (1996) stated in *Learning to Listen*, "I do not like the idea of people (with disabilities) being identified in ways that are dismissive and rude. We have also taken people's behavior out of their social and personal contexts by labeling them as well. The ways we label behavior simply extend the ways we have been trained to label people." It is true that we use "labels" to name behaviors but unfortunately labels cause us to miss the message the behavior may be communicating.

Parents, teachers and other support staff may dismiss the message of the behavior by saying, "Oh, they're just doing that for attention." In many instances, the term "attention seeking" has become a way of "devaluing the needs of people and not taking them seriously" (Lovett, 1996). There are many questions to ask regarding "attention seeking" such as: Why might someone be seeking attention? Is seeking attention always a bad idea? Most often it is true that, when behavior is identified as attention seeking, the next step is to ignore the person and their behavior. Perhaps it would be a better option to consider why attention is desired. Is the only time the individual receives any "meaningful" conversation and attention after they have done something which resembles "misbehavior?" Could the individual be hurt, frightened, or frustrated and wanting to tell someone? Could the individual be lonely and simply want to be noticed?

Young children in school love to receive attention and be noticed. Adults also like to receive attention. It may even be the case that adults may have a conversation on the phone with someone simply for the sake of communicating with another person. When you have called someone "just to talk," has anyone ever told you "you need to call another time when you have something meaningful to say?" Perhaps "attention-seeking" behaviors are not always wrong.

If behavior is to avoid or escape a person, situation or activity, our response should be "why do they want to avoid this activity." Instead of calling someone "non compliant" we should begin thinking of the possible reasons for the behavior rather than reacting automatically. We seldom consider whether the individual is bored, frustrated, frightened, does not understand, or finds the situation or activity meaningless. Would any of us want to show up for work if it was meaningless and we were paid poorly? Or would we want to attend classes in school where the subject didn't interest us or was boring? Could avoidance behavior be the result of other issues such as not thoroughly understanding the situation, not introducing a new person, or not creating an environment that supports the individual's learning style? It may be important to consider the following questions: What can be changed about or within the activity? What is really necessary for the individual to learn? How are the activities and situations meaningful to the individual's future life? There is much to consider when an individual avoids or escapes. Along with the avoidance behaviors, Lovett discusses aggression.

"One of the most common 'difficult behaviors' is aggression. Most people do not like to be hit, or to live or work where violence is a common occurrence. But labeling a person, or even a behavior, as aggressive in a clinical context has a radically different dynamic from respecting the reasons a person might be legitimately angry in a social context: being bossed about, being sexually frustrated, being insulted, or rejected or any of the dozens of other real and individual reasons anyone might have for being angry. It seems strange and perverse to persist in seeing these reasons strictly in our own terms rather than also in the ways the person who is angry sees them (Lovett 1996)."

Certain repetitive behaviors, sometimes called "self-stimulation behaviors," may also be sensory in nature. Individuals may engage in these behaviors when they are bored, frustrated, stressed, or need to "chill out." Most of us resort to sensory-type behaviors when we are bored, stressed, or frustrated, however, our behaviors are not as obvious. We wiggle in our seats, tap our feet, chew on erasers, hum tunes, bite our nails, or fiddle with jewelry to maintain attention or to calm ourselves when feeling anxious. We may want to be alone if we are stressed or need to have some "space." Often when the individual with disabilities uses "self-stim," we decide that we should extinguish the behavior because it is inappropriate, or makes the individual stand out as very different. Perhaps we feel uncomfortable with the behavior and how it might reflect on us as teachers, parents or other supports. Lovett (1996) states, "By labeling people's behavior we often feel that we have the right to act on how the behavior affects us rather than on what the person doing it might be trying to communicate." If that is the case, maybe we should look more closely at those situations when individuals engage in sensory (self-stim) behaviors and instead of simply telling them to "stop" ask ourselves, "Why?" or "How can I help?" or "Does the person need help?"

Remember the language we use is powerful and can set a tone in which people's behaviors and motives are dismissed and demeaned. The important concept is to remember that all behavior is communication. So when an individual "misbehaves," rather than merely reacting and putting the behavior into a disability framework as something to be corrected, we should ask "Why?" "What is being said?" "What do they want?" and "How can I help them get what they want?"

We can begin to reframe our thinking by forming support teams around individuals who may be challenging. Rather than focusing on incident reports at meetings, share stories and look for strengths, preferences, interests, motivators, fears and frustrations. Rather than discussing the data and behavior incident reports that everyone already knows, begin to focus on the person's history and personality in order to get a different perspective for why some behaviors may be occurring. Share positive information as freely as "negative" information is shared. Include the individual whenever possible to get their feedback. Build on the strengths instead of creating a curriculum where each individual goes to school and "majors in their deficits." Create supportive communities for everyone by listening to the behaviors, avoiding labels, and asking, "Why?" or "What can I do to help?"

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Davis, K. (1999). "Your attitude just might be my greatest barrier." *The Reporter*, 4(2), 1-3, 13.