

“How Do I Get Out of This Situation?!”

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Occasionally people with disabilities exhibit challenging behaviors in an effort to get their needs met, since they may not have the functional communication skills to tell you what is needed. In an effort to quickly address such behavior, as staff, we find ourselves trying to “calm” the person down with soothing words or positive attention, giving preferred items, removing non-preferred tasks or removing the person from a non-preferred environment when such challenging behaviors are observed. In most cases, when such measures are taken to calm the person down, we find that it is successful at that particular moment. In some way, we have managed to meet his/her needs. However, what we sometimes fail to understand is that such “calming down” techniques are actually strengthening the challenging behaviors. These behaviors are then more likely to occur in the future when the same need arises for that person.

In the last article, Mueller and Russell discussed how challenging behavior results in attention and how such behavior is strengthened. These authors discussed ways to prevent behavior maintained by attention, ways to teach more appropriate methods of requesting attention instead of exhibiting the challenging behavior, and ways to manage challenging behaviors without providing attention in the event that they occur. In this article, we will discuss behaviors maintained by the function generally referred to as “escape.”

Take the following example: *It’s 9 a.m., Rob, a gentleman with severe intellectual disabilities, is sitting at a table with 4 other people at his day program. He has a big smile on his face as he sits and watches others come into the day program and situate themselves in their groups. At 9:30 a.m. a staff member approaches him and says, “Rob, it’s time to start your games.” Rob looks up at the staff as his smile begins to fade and he pushes himself away from the table. Staff enthusiastically says, “C’mon Rob, let’s just do a couple of your games!” Staff sits down next to Rob, gently guides his chair to the table, and then places the game materials in front of him. Staff then gives the instruction, “Rob, please point to the quarter.” Rob immediately begins to slap his face hard enough to leave a red mark. Staff takes Rob’s other hand and attempts to direct him to point to the quarter, but Rob continues to slap his face harder and harder. After five seconds staff says, “Okay Rob, it looks like you don’t want to do your programs today, why don’t you just relax in your chair,” putting the program materials away and beginning to work with another client.*

<i>Antecedent</i>	<i>Behavior</i>	<i>Consequence</i>
<i>Rob was requested by staff to start his game to pick the correct coin.</i>	<i>Rob starts to slap his face hard enough to leave a red mark.</i>	<i>Staff allowed Rob to stop engaging in the games and Rob goes to his chair and relaxes while staff put the material away.</i>

In the example above, Rob repeatedly slapped his face during program time and as a result of face-slapping, he no longer had to participate in the scheduled program. Therefore, he escaped the situation. Robert was reinforced by the removal of a task that he did not want to do. In the future, when he does not want to do something, he may slap his face to convey that message as a result of this prior learning.

Escape-maintained behavior may not be limited day program or vocational settings or to scheduled program times. Challenging behavior may also occur when daily living tasks are presented; such as laundry, bathing, cooking, and other daily living skills. Problematic escape-maintained behavior can also occur when people are uncomfortable with the environment, such as at times of transition in the home (morning routine) or community outings in loud public environments. In such instances, it is possible that a person engages in certain behavior in an effort to escape the noisy setting, and the behavior is strengthened when he/she is assisted to leave immediately following such behaviors.

What are the options when someone is engaging in challenging behavior in an effort to get out of a situation (escape)? First, it is crucial to be certain that the function of the challenging behavior is escape. The following questions should be posed to staff/care-givers who have witnessed the behaviors:

- ◇ Does the behavior stop occurring shortly (one to five minutes) after you or his/her peers stop working or making demands of this person?
- ◇ Does the behavior appear to occur to try to get someone to leave him/her alone?
- ◇ Does the behavior occur when someone asks him/her to do something (get dressed, brush teeth, work, etc.)?
- ◇ Does the person frequently engage in the problem behavior when asked to perform a task or to participate in group activities?

If the answer to two or more of these questions is 'yes,' then the challenging behavior is at least partially maintained by escape. If possible, direct observations by a Behavior Analyst of the challenging behaviors can further confirm the function of escape.

The next question to ask is, is the person engaging in the challenging behavior to get out of doing something OR is it to get to something that is better and more enjoyable? In other words, is the person engaging in the aberrant behavior to escape from a non-preferred situation or is it to escape to a preferred situation? Once this question is answered, your interventions can be further tailored to the situation at hand.

Once the above questions have been addressed, an effective behavior plan for escape-maintained behavior can be created that should include at least the three following components: techniques to help prevent the challenging behavior from occurring, a program to teach appropriate alternative behaviors that the person can use to convey that he/she would like to get out of the situation, and strategies to use when the challenging behavior is observed. Each of the three components of a strong behavior plan will be addressed below.

Prevention:

Escape-From Situation: If the person is engaging in the aberrant behavior to escape from a non-preferred situation, then the following variables should be considered:

What can we do to make this non-preferred situation more preferred? Some factors to add/change would include:

- The type of reinforcers being used during the task-are there enough reinforcing items that will be given that will make this worth the client's time? An example of this: Having the person shop for bath items (bubble bath and fragrant shampoo) for shower time (non-preferred task)
- The way the instruction/task is presented-am I using a tone of voice that the client will respond to, and am I posing the question in a polite yet clear manner? For example, staff says, "Do you mind taking out the garbage" in a calm, enthusiastic tone instead of "Take out the garbage" in a loud, impolite tone.
- The person's history with the non-preferred situation or task-has the person always done poorly with a program like this in the past, or have situations been paired with non-preferred outcomes? For example, Rob has been working on the same program for 5 years OR John doesn't like loud noises as it reminds him of his parents fighting.
- Reinforcement for small improvements-am I providing reinforcers to the client when he/she is making small improvements in his/her performance? For example, giving John his favorite drink when he comes and sits down at the table, and when he responds each time, providing more of the favorite drink when he responds accurately and by himself versus when he is prompted to respond.
- Providing more frequent breaks-are we providing enough breaks to the person when he/she has been on-task for sometime, perhaps are we asking too much of that person and he/she just needs a break? For example, Ken is given a 3-minute break after each 10-minute group activity.

Escape-To Situation: If the person is engaging in aberrant behaviors to escape to a preferred situation, then the following variable should be considered:

- Incorporating characteristics of the preferred situation into the non-preferred situation: Can we allow the person access to the preferred situation periodically when engaging in the non-preferred task. For example, Carrie has a difficult time engaging in activities that her outside of her room. Therefore, staff will present Carrie with the option of spending time in her room after encouraging her to play an activity with a peer in the living room area.

Once such questions have been addressed an effective behavior plan for escape-maintained behavior can be created, that should include at least the three following components: techniques to help the challenging behavior from occurring, a program to teach appropriate alternative behaviors that the person can use to convey he/she would

like to get out of the situation, and strategies to use when the challenging behavior is observed.

Generally, the techniques that can be used to prevent the challenging behavior from occurring are addressed in the Escape-To and Escape-from situations describe above. Again, some techniques could include providing frequent breaks from tasks/demands or forewarning the person of non-preferred situations (visit to doctor's office, or loud environments). Also techniques on how to make the non-preferred situation more enjoyable should be addressed in this section.

When teaching appropriate alternatives to engaging in the challenging behavior, there are many considerations to take into account. First, does the person have the ability to appropriately request a break, or something to indicate that he/she has had enough of the non-preferred situation? If not, teach the person to exchange a picture symbolizing break/Let's leave, the sign for break/let's leave, or request to leave the area/task by stating, "Can I take a break" or "Can we leave?" If the person can appropriately request break/let's leave, but is unable to wait for the break/opportunity to leave then teach the person to wait. One way to teach this skill is to use a timer and teach the person to wait for short intervals of time, gradually increasing that amount of time. If the person can appropriately request break/let's leave, but they often do so at inappropriate times, teach the person to follow an activity schedule with scheduled breaks. The activity schedule should incorporate preferred activities that the person can do by him/herself followed by scheduled breaks upon completion of the preferred activities. Please note, these are not the only appropriate alternative behaviors to teach, and consultation with a Behavior Analyst can be helpful in creating a plan that addresses the needs of the client.

Strategies to De-escalate Escape Behavior:

Even when a strategy to prevent escape behavior and also teach alternative appropriate ways of requesting escape is in place, challenging behavior may still occur. Therefore, a detailed strategy for responding to and managing the inappropriate behavior should be designed for staff. Specific recommendations for intervention cannot be provided without analyzing the problem at hand, but the following general guidelines can be considered. First, ensure the safety of the person engaging in the problem behavior as well as others in the environment. Second, be sure not to provide escape from the situation when the problem behavior occurs. Staff should encourage task completion even if the person engages in the challenging behavior. If safety is an issue, try to assist the individual to comply with at least one instruction, and then prompt him/her to request a break. If this is not an option, at least be sure to re-present the task/instruction as soon as the person is no longer exhibiting challenging behavior. Keeping in mind that the staff person should not continue to request the person to complete a task while the person is engaging in a problem behavior, a designated amount of time should be decided before re-presenting the instruction.

If the person is engaging in the challenging behavior in order to leave a non-preferred environment; staff should wait until the individual is no longer exhibiting the challenging behavior for a period of time, and then prompt the person to request leaving the area. In some very public environments, waiting may not be an option. The team may have to

discuss avoiding certain environments or limiting the amount of time a person spends in non-preferred environments, gradually lengthening the time as progress is made.

In summary, people may engage in challenging behavior in an effort to escape from a non-preferred situation, and it is important to equip staff with preventative strategies and management strategies for such challenging behaviors. Most importantly, teaching an appropriate way to escape the situation should be the primary focus of any intervention.

Future articles in this series will address the remaining two functions of human behavior, Tangible and Automatic Sensory.