

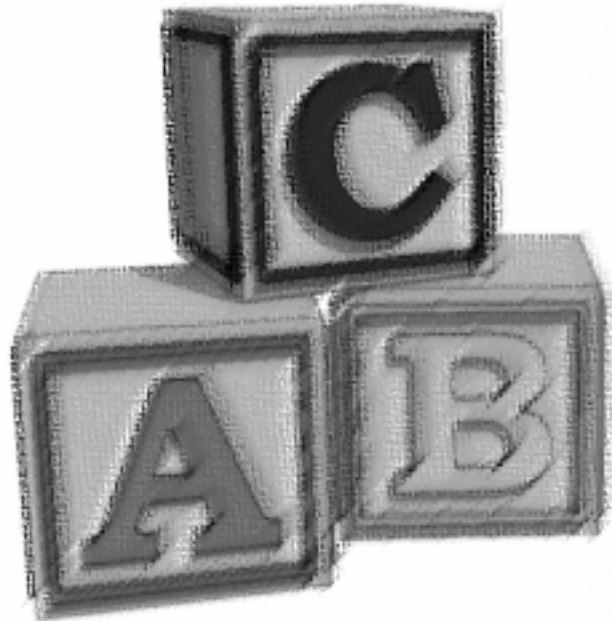
# 1

MODULE

# The ABCs of Behavior

## Main Ideas

- Definition of behavior
- Discrimination between words that describe feelings and words that describe behaviors
- Identification of examples of learned behaviors
- Defining and identifying examples of antecedents, behaviors and consequences



# Defining Behavior

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Before we can talk about a child's behavior, we need to identify what we mean by the word "behavior." Here is a definition of behavior (*write on board*). Behavior refers to a specific **action** that a person does that can be **observed**. Just about everything we do can be described as a behavior. Turning the alarm clock off in the morning, brushing your teeth, making breakfast, and starting your car are examples of behaviors. For children, playing with toys, getting dressed, eating breakfast, and talking are all examples of behavior.

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## Feelings Versus Behaviors

(*Write the following list of words on the board.*)



*Good*

*Disruptive*

*Cooperative*

*Hyperactive*

*Aggressive*

Often, when describing a child's behavior, we use words such as the ones listed above. For example, a teacher may speak of a student and say, "she's very good," or a teacher may report to a parent that his son "can be very disruptive." The problem with these statements is that they do not tell specifically what the child is doing.

For example, when a parent says that a child is "usually good," what does that mean? It may mean the child puts her toys away when asked or she eats everything on her plate. The same is true when a teacher tells a parent that his child can be "very disruptive." Again, what does this mean? It may mean the child throws toys, makes loud noises, and runs around the room. On the other hand, it could mean that the child does not listen to the teacher and distracts his friends by making faces.

Words such as those listed above often mean different things to different people. For example, a child may behave the same way with two people, but each person may describe the child's behavior differently. One person may describe the child's behavior as "active, but this is not a problem," while the other person may report that the child is "hyperactive and unmanageable." (*Write the word*



“feelings” on the board.) Both of these descriptions communicate each person’s **feelings** about the child’s behavior, but they do not tell us what the child is actually doing.

Let’s see if you can identify the difference between words that describe feelings and words that describe behaviors. (*Write the following words on the board one at a time.*) Which words describe behaviors that can be observed? (*Allow time for answers.*)

<i>Helpful</i>	<i>Lazy</i>	<i>Stubborn</i>	<i>Yawns</i>
<i>Cries</i>	<i>Taps pencil</i>	<i>Pleasant</i>	
<i>Sits down</i>	<i>Bad</i>	<i>Combs hair</i>	

One way to avoid using words such as “good” and “disruptive,” which describe feelings, is to be specific when you talk about the child’s behavior. When we describe behaviors specifically, we can more clearly communicate what a child is actually doing. Listen to this exchange between a mother and her child’s teacher. (*Refer parents to the Example Sheet found on page @@ of the Parent’s Workbook. If there is someone available, you may want to role-play in this exchange.*)

**Mother:** “J.J.’s been very bad at home. Is he bad in the classroom?”

**Teacher:** “Oh, no. J.J. is usually good.”

**Mother:** “Really? He’s being good?”

**Teacher:** “Sure. Well, he’s disruptive every once in a while, but not often.”

How much do you feel you know about what J.J. is doing in the classroom? (*Allow time for answers.*) This mother and teacher were using words that describe their feelings about J.J.’s behavior. It’s difficult to get a clear picture of what is happening in the classroom. Now listen to an exchange between the same mother and teacher when they use words that describe behavior more specifically:

**Mother:** “J.J.’s been hitting his brother a lot at home. Does he hit the other children in the classroom?”

**Teacher:** “Well J.J. hit another child three times last week. But this week he hasn’t hit anyone.”

**Mother:** “Are there other behaviors you are worried about at school?”

**Teacher:** “Yes, there is one more thing. He often screams, ‘No,’ and runs away from me when I ask him to clean up.”

One other way to illustrate the difference between feelings and behaviors is to think about a person you feel is “nervous.” We may not all agree that a person is “nervous.” “Nervous” is a word that describes our feelings about a person’s behavior. We usually associate the word “nervous” with certain actions that we can observe — for instance, nail biting, pacing the floor, or wringing hands. These activities represent behaviors we can observe and agree upon.

Let’s see if we can change some words that describe feelings into words that describe specific behaviors. Listen to this sentence: “Jeffrey is the class clown.” You could restate this by describing specific behaviors, “Jeffrey tells jokes during class and makes faces to distract other children.”

Here is another sentence, which reflects someone’s feelings about a child’s behavior: “Tanya is a little angel.” Can you restate this sentence into a specific statement that describes a behavior? (*Give parents time to answer. Possible answers may include, “Tanya plays quietly and cleans up her toys when she is finished,” or “Tanya shares her toys with her little brother.”*)

It will be helpful when you talk to students’ parents, or other teachers and professionals, to clearly describe the behaviors you would like to discuss. If someone is reporting to you something a child has done and is unclear or unspecific, ask him to clarify what he is describing.

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## Learned Behaviors

*Listen to the following list of words:*

Blinking	Dressing
Using a spoon	Breathing
Talking	Driving a car
Sneezing	Coughing
Shivering	Making a telephone call

These words are all examples of behaviors — actions that can be observed. However, some of these are reflexes — behaviors that our bodies do naturally. And some are behaviors that we learn at some time in our lives.

Most of the behaviors that we do each day are “learned behaviors.” Examples of learned behaviors that you may have done today include shutting off your alarm clock, getting out of bed, brushing your teeth, and having a cup of coffee. Your child probably has demonstrated many learned behaviors today. These might include playing with toys, eating breakfast, taking coats off, and watching TV.

As I read through this list of words again, tell me whether the behavior is a reflex or a learned behavior. (*Read through the list of words again.*)

Blinking (R)	Dressing (L)
Using a spoon (L)	Breathing (R)
Talking (L)	Driving (L)
Sneezing (R)	Coughing (R)
Shivering (R)	Making a telephone call (L)

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## Learning Social Behaviors

Just as children learn how to color, put together puzzles, and count, ***they learn a variety of social behaviors.*** They learn behaviors such as how to walk quietly in a supermarket, how to share toys, and how to say “please” and “thank you.” Children also learn many undesirable behaviors, such as whining, hitting, and not doing what is asked of them. When we say that a child has learned these behaviors, this does not mean that someone intentionally taught the child an undesirable behavior. What it does mean is situations occur before and after a behavior which may, without our realizing it, have an effect on whether or not the child continues the behavior in the future.

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## How Behaviors Are Learned: Antecedents

If we say that children learn the majority of their behaviors, you may be wondering how all this learning occurs. When children are very

young, much learning occurs through observations and interactions with parents. For example, many toddlers learn to say, “bye-bye,” when hearing their parents say, “good-bye,” as someone is leaving. The parents also will encourage the child by saying, “Say bye-bye.”

In this example, saying “bye-bye” does not occur by itself. It happens in response to a specific situation — typically, when someone is leaving and the parent tells the child to say, “bye-bye.” Rarely do you hear a toddler just randomly saying, “bye-bye.” This is true for all behaviors. They occur in response to a situation.

*(Write the word “antecedent” on the board).* This word, “antecedent,” is used to refer to **the situation that comes before a behavior**. An antecedent can be any object, person, or event in the environment that cues a person to do something. For example, the antecedent to a child dressing himself may be having his clothes put out where he can reach them. Or, the antecedent to a child signing for “cookie” may be the parent asking the child if she wants a cookie. Two antecedents for going grocery shopping may be an absence of certain food items and having some form of payment for purchases.

Because they often will cue a particular behavior, antecedents play an important role in determining behaviors. Antecedents set the stage for a behavior to occur. For example, if a child has been told he cannot have a cookie, he is less likely to sneak a cookie if the parent is standing in the kitchen. This behavior would be more likely to happen if the parent were out of the room. In this example, the parent’s absence would be the antecedent to cue the behavior of taking a cookie. Similarly, a person is not likely to drive through a red light when in front of a police car. If however, the antecedent is that it is late at night and there are no other cars in sight, this may be a cue to drive through the red light. *(Read statements three through five on the Example Sheet, one at a time. Ask parents to identify the antecedent of the behavior in each statement. Review the definitions for both antecedent and behavior if needed.)*

3. Becky begins to cry when Greg takes her toy.

**Antecedent:** Greg takes Becky’s toy.

**Behavior:** Becky cries.

4. Robert throws his toys around the room when his mother talks on the telephone.

**Antecedent:** Mother talks on the telephone.

**Behavior:** Robert throws his toys.

5. Dennis gives his father a hug when he gets home from work.

**Antecedent:** Father gets home from work.

**Behavior:** Dennis gives father a hug.

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## How Behaviors Are Learned: Consequences

(Write the word “consequence” on the board.) In addition to antecedents, what occurs after a behavior is very important. The word “consequence” **refers to what happens immediately after the behavior**. Some consequences happen naturally like getting burned if you touch a hot stove or slipping when you walk on ice.

Sometimes a person responds to a behavior in a certain way. These consequences are learned responses. At some time in our lives, we learned how to respond in these ways, whether through imitation or direct instruction. A child in school raises his hand and the teacher calls on him. A child forgets to clean up her toys and the teacher scolds her. Your mother comes for a visit and you give her a hug. Someone says “Hello” to you and you shake his hand.

A behavior may be followed by a consequence that has been planned by another person. For example, a father gives his son an M&M each time he uses the potty or a policeman gives a ticket to someone who is speeding. In other words, someone plans a certain consequence in an attempt to have an effect on whether the behavior continues.

Let’s try to determine what both the antecedents and the consequences are in each of the situations on the Activity Sheet. Read each statement from Section 1 of the Activity Sheet. Which is the antecedent and consequence for each behavior? (*Review definitions if needed.*)

1. Jennifer cries when her mother puts her in bed. She insists on sleeping with her mother. Her mother is exhausted and does not feel like listening to her scream for an hour. She lets Jennifer sleep with her.

***Antecedent:*** *Mother puts Jennifer to bed.*

***Behavior:*** *Jennifer cries.*

***Consequence:*** *Mother lets Jennifer sleep with her.*

2. Mrs. Jones is trying to toilet train her two-year-old daughter, Tamara. She sits Tamara down on the potty chair and says, “Go potty.” After a few minutes, Tamara urinates in the potty. Mrs. Jones kisses Tamara and says, “Nice job—you went potty.”

***Antecedent:*** *Mrs. Jones sits Tamara on the potty.*

***Behavior:*** *Tamara urinates in the potty.*

***Consequence:*** *Mrs. Jones kisses and praises Tamara.*

3. In the grocery store, Bryan asks his father to buy him a toy. His father says, “No.” Bryan begins to cry. His father ignores his crying, pays for his groceries and takes Bryan out of the store.

***Antecedent:*** *Father says “No.”*

***Behavior:*** *Bryan cries.*

***Consequence:*** *Father ignores Bryan’s crying.*

This important sequence of events — antecedent, behavior, consequence — can be shortened to the “***ABCs of behavior.***” It is through this chain of events that children learn. Looking at this chain of events will help us determine what will happen with a specific behavior in the future.

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## Using Consequences to Predict Behavior

The type of consequence that follows a behavior will determine if the behavior will occur more frequently or less frequently in the future. Consequences can therefore be used to ***predict*** the future occurrence of a behavior. In general, consequences that are ***pleasant or rewarding*** result in the behavior occurring more often, while consequences that are ***unpleasant or punishing*** result in the behavior occurring less frequently.

Review the antecedents, behaviors, and consequences for the previous examples on the Activity Sheet. Determine whether or not the consequence of the behavior is pleasant or unpleasant and make a prediction about the future occurrence of the behavior.

- 1) **Antecedent:** Mother puts Jennifer to bed.  
**Behavior:** Jennifer cries.  
**Consequence:** Mother lets Jennifer sleep with her.  
*Type of consequence:* Pleasant and rewarding.  
*Prediction:* Behavior will occur more often.
- 2) **Antecedent:** Mrs. Jones sits Tamara on the potty.  
**Behavior:** Tamara urinates on the potty.  
**Consequence:** Mrs. Jones kisses and praises Tamara.  
*Type of consequence:* Pleasant and rewarding.  
*Prediction:* Behavior will occur more often.
- 3) **Antecedent:** Father says “No.”  
**Behavior:** Bryan cries.  
**Consequence:** Father ignores Bryan’s crying.  
*Type of consequence:* Unpleasant or punishing.  
*Prediction:* Behavior will occur less frequently

Although this seems simple with these examples, it is sometimes difficult to break down a behavior in this way. It is especially difficult if it is unclear what the antecedent to a behavior is or if you are not sure if the consequence is pleasant or unpleasant to the child. If you want to try to change a child’s behavior, you will be more successful if you carefully observe the child and try to determine the current antecedents and consequences. With careful observation you may find that there is a way to change the antecedent or to plan consequences to influence the child’s behaviors that you would like to change. In future sessions, we’ll talk about planning ways to reinforce behaviors that you would like the child to do more often and how to respond to behaviors you would like the child to do less often.

## Bringing It Home

*Refer parents to the “Bringing it Home” handout on page @@ of the Parent’s Workbook. Go over the directions and discuss responses of those parents who wish to share the information.*

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### Summary

*Summarize the session by reviewing the following:*

1. A behavior is a specific action that can be observed. When teachers are specific in describing a child’s behavior, more than one person can observe and agree upon the behavior.
2. Words such as “good” or “disruptive” reflect our feelings about a behavior; they do not tell us specifically what the child does.
3. Being specific about a child’s behavior helps parents and teachers communicate more effectively.
4. Most behaviors that we engage in each day are learned behaviors.
5. Learned behaviors can be analyzed by looking at antecedents and consequences. Antecedents and consequences play important roles in determining whether or not a behavior will occur.
6. Rewarding or pleasant consequences result in an increase in the frequency of the behavior. Punishing or unpleasant consequences result in a decrease in the frequency of the behavior.

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### In A Nutshell

*Refer parents to the “In a Nutshell” handout on page @@ of the Parent’s Workbook. Suggest to the parents that they read the handout as an additional review and that they share the information with family members, other caregivers, and interested friends.*

# Example Sheet

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1. **Mother:** “J.J.’s been very bad at home. Is he bad in the classroom?”

**Teacher:** “Oh no, J.J. is usually good.”

**Mother:** “Really? He’s being good?”

**Teacher:** “Sure. Well, he’s disruptive every once in a while, but not very often.”

2. **Mother:** “J.J.’s been hitting his brother a lot at home. Does he hit the other children in the classroom?”

**Teacher:** “Well, J.J. hit another child three times last week. But this week he hasn’t hit anyone.”

**Mother:** “Are there other behaviors you are worried about at school?”

**Teacher:** “Yes, there is one more thing. J.J. often screams, “No,” and runs away from me when I ask him to clean up.”

3. Becky begins to cry when Greg takes her toy.

**Antecedent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Behavior:** Becky cries.

4. Robert throws his toys around the room when his mother talks on the telephone.

**Antecedent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Behavior:** Robert throws his toys.

5. Dennis gives his father a hug when he gets home from work.

**Antecedent:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Behavior:** Dennis gives father a hug.

# Activity Sheet

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SECTION I: Read each statement and identify the antecedent and consequence for each behavior.

1. Jennifer cries when her mother puts her in bed. She insists on sleeping with her mother. Her mother is exhausted and does not feel like listening to her scream for an hour. She allows Jennifer to sleep with her

**Antecedent:**

**Behavior:** Jennifer cries.

**Consequence:**

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2. Mrs. Jones is trying to toilet train her two-year-old daughter, Tamara. She sits Tamara down on the potty chair and says, "Go potty." Tamara urinates in the potty. Mrs. Jones kisses Tamara and says, "Nice job—you went potty."

**Antecedent:**

**Behavior:** Tamara urinates in the potty.

**Consequence:**

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3. In the grocery store, Bryan asks his father to buy him a toy. His father says, "No." Bryan begins to cry. His father ignores his crying, pays for his groceries and takes Bryan out of the store.

**Antecedent:**

**Behaviors:** Bryan cries.

**Consequence:**

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SECTION II: Determine whether the consequence is pleasant or unpleasant and make a prediction about the future occurrence of the behavior.

**Type of Consequence:**

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**Prediction:**

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**Type of Consequence:**

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**Prediction:**

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**Type of Consequence:**

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**Prediction:**

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# Bringing it home

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***Fill in the following information:***

1. Think of an example of one of your child's desirable behaviors. Identify the following:

Behavior: \_\_\_\_\_

Consequence: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Consequence: \_\_\_\_\_

Prediction: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Think of an example of one of your child's *undesirable* behaviors. Identify the following:

Antecedent: \_\_\_\_\_

Behavior: \_\_\_\_\_

Consequence: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of Consequence: \_\_\_\_\_

Prediction: \_\_\_\_\_

# In A Nutshell

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1. A behavior is a specific **action** a child does that you can observe.
2. When you are specific about your child's behavior, it helps you to:
  - a. Clearly communicate to others what the child is actually doing.
  - b. Have more than one person agree upon the child's behavior.
  - c. Observe the behavior without your feelings interfering.
3. Words such as "good" or "disruptive" reflect our feelings about a child's behavior; they do not tell us specifically what the child does.
4. Behaviors can be grouped into two categories — those we do naturally such as blinking, sneezing, and shivering and those we have learned to do at some time in our life such as dressing, talking, or driving a car.
5. **Most children's behaviors are learned.** Children learn social behaviors primarily through their interactions with adults and other children.
6. Behavior can be analyzed by looking at the following:
  - Antecedent:** the situation that comes before the behavior.
  - Behavior:** the actual behavior that is observed.
  - Consequence:** what happens immediately following the behavior.

(This process can be shortened to **A-B-C** for easy remembering.)
7. The following examples illustrate the **A-B-C process**:
  - a. At approximately midnight, Robbie gets out of bed and goes into the bathroom. Finding his mother's makeup case, Robbie paints the walls with lipstick. Hearing a noise, Robbie's mother enters the bathroom and is horrified by the mess. She scolds Robbie and sends him back to bed.
    - Antecedent:** Parents are asleep, Robbie is awake, and makeup is available.
    - Behavior:** Painting walls with lipstick.
    - Consequence:** Scolding, with Robbie sent back to bed.

b. Maria is playing with a dollhouse on the floor. Carlos, her brother, comes over and they play with the dollhouse together. Their mom notices that they are sharing the toy and not fighting. She comes over and says to the kids, “You two are playing nicely together.”

**Antecedent:** Maria is playing with the dollhouse.

**Behavior:** Maria and Carlos share the toy.

**Consequence:** Mother praises Maria and Carlos.

8. ***Antecedents are important in determining if a behavior will occur.***

For example, laying out your child’s clothes for him in the morning may be an antecedent for him to get dressed. For adults, the seat belt buzzer in the car often is an antecedent to buckle your seat belt. Antecedents set the stage for a behavior to occur.

9. ***Consequences often play the important role of strengthening or weakening the behaviors they follow. Rewarding or pleasant consequences result in the behavior happening more often.*** A special snack following a time when a child played and shared his toys with another child is likely to increase this type of playing. Smiles, hugs, and praise for following a parent’s directions are likely to result in a child continuing to follow directions. ***Punishing or unpleasant consequences result in a behavior happening less often.*** Ignoring a child when she throws a tantrum may result in fewer tantrums. Making a child go in the house because she ran in to the street may result in the child staying out of the street when playing outside in the future.