

# Behavior is Communication

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## Goals For This Seminar

- Understand that all behavior is communication
- What Makes Sense?
- Illness and Challenging Behaviors
- The Power of Relationships
- Examining the Behavior
- Final thoughts



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## Behavior is Communication

- The phrase “behavior is communication” refers to an individual’s effort to communicate dislikes, needs, desires, etc., but who cannot do so in a traditional verbal manner because of a communication deficit (e.g.,no speech, limited speech), and so communicate through actions.



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## Growing Up With a Brother with Autism: It is all about the Relationships!



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## What Do We All Want in Life!

### What WE ALL Want!

- Be accepted
- Make choices
- Engaged in meaningful activities
- Be surrounded by people who care about us!
- Be listened to and heard by others!
- Be loved

### What NONE of us Want!

- Be Ignored
- Thought to be incompetent
- Abused
- Controlled
- Bored
- Ridiculed
- Restrained
- Manipulated
- Disliked

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## How Should we look at Behavior?

- Problem behavior is a way for individuals to communicate or express themselves about variables such as:
- Lack of choice, control and opportunities
- A poor quality of life
- Instructional or behavioral strategies that may not respect individual preferences or needs (e.g., sensory processing problems, unresolved medical issues)
- Frustration with boredom

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**Behavior is LIFE!**

These people are all having "Behaviors"



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**Uh-Oh Your Child is Having "Behaviors"**

- Behavior is **whatever** the person is doing.
- Behaviors are good, bad and indifferent.
- What do you say when a teacher or others say your child had behaviors?
- You say "Thank Goodness, He is alive and active".



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**What Happens When We Cannot Communicate What We Need?**

- Scream
- Cry
- Run away
- Bite
- Say cruel things
- Lick floor or wall
- Pick nose
- Take others toys
- Pull own hair or others
- Scratch
- Make bad choices
- Put hands in pants

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Only You  
KNOW What a  
Behavior  
Means!



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**Does this make sense?**

Does this make sense?	Unintended outcomes
Grab a persons chin to make them look at you	Person will grab other people by the chin when they want something.
Give tokens to a person when behavior is deemed appropriate by staff	Will not perform the behavior unless they are given tokens
Behavioral support or advice from a professional who does not know the child or gain information from family/ support staff	People/staff or parents are insulted and "check out" of the process.
Persons are ignored unless the behavior is performed "correctly".	Person is frustrated, lonely and often ostracized.

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**Can A Lack of Choice and Control Cause Challenging Behavior?**

- Research has demonstrated that having choices and control regarding daily life events may decrease problem behavior.
- If an individual has choice and control over their life, their friends, where they live and who spends time with them, we are improving quality of life.
- When we improve quality of life, we are likely to see a decrease in problem behaviors.

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There is always a reason for the behavior... You just do not know it!



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### Can Physical Illness or other Situations Cause Challenging Behavior?

#### Ailment/observable behavior

1. Hallucinations
2. Excessive movement
3. Loss of appetite
4. Excessive thirst or hunger
5. Self Injurious behaviors(head banging)
6. Inordinate number of bathroom visits
7. Stomach ache/ cramps
8. Unable to sustain sleep

#### What it might mean?

1. Urinary tract infection, diabetes
2. Food allergies, change in schedule
3. Side effects of medication, constipation
4. Stomach ache, menstrual cramps, diabetes
5. Dental problems
6. Boredom, constipation, Gastro intestinal issues
7. Dislike of a taste, food type, drug
8. Unsure of schedule/how and next

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### Only You KNOW What Behaviors May Mean?

#### Behavior

- Spitting
- Running away/escape
- Pounding( may begin with tapping and escalate)

#### What it might mean

- Thirsty
- They may not like a certain person, sensory bombardment, unsure about expectations.
- Change in schedule

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**Behavior**

Acting Out → Discipline → Compliance

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**Remember this:**  
**The Root of Escalating Behavior Is usually us!!!**

Even when an emergency exists it is because of *“mistakes made by agents of control, ignorance or emergency situations”*

Sidman (1989)

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**How Do We Support Positive Behavior!**




Belonging → Respect → Presume Competence → Choice → Control → Belonging

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## Belonging

"I want to learn the same things as my classmates and NOT SIT IN THE BACK WITH A PARAPRO!"



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## RELATIONSHIPS ARE EVERYTHING!!



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## How Can You Begin to Actively Presume Competence in Your Child?

Talk Directly TO Your Child and Not Around Them!



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**Respect and Presuming Competence:  
How Do YOU Introduce Yourself or Your Child?**

**THIS WAY?**

- My name is Sally and my BMI is 26.
- I have a cholesterol of 163, and my triglycerides are 49.
- My LDL calculated is 91.
- My weight is 161.
- Do you guys introduce yourselves this way?
- **NO, of course not!**

**Or That WAY?**

- My name is Sally and I have 3 grown sons and 3 grandchildren.
- I have a wonderful job at EMU teaching future teachers to teach special education and I founded a College Support Program for students with ASD.
- I love to work out by lifting weights and walking my dog!
- **YES!!! This is how I would start off an introduction.**



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**My Brother Tim**

This is a Tim Linton, my brother.

Tim moved to Michigan in 2000 and lived in an apartment by Washtenaw Community College.

Tim had a job at the old Memphis Smokehouse and he loved it.

He also had a microenterprise with selling his favorite product, Coke.

Tim had a room mate and staff and he had a great life!




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**Try this instead next time!**

Introduce your sons and/or daughters by presenting them in a way that shows them in their best light!



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## Reframing Behavior

- Lucas is a nine year old boy who loves football, Especially our Detroit Lions!!
- On the bus he heard classmates taking about playing football at recess and he wanted in on this.
- After he went into the school building his teacher met him at the door and walked him to his classroom in another hallway away from his friends from the bus.
- The special education classroom where Lucas was had recess at a different time than his friends on the bus.
- When Lucas had recess it was with his special education classmates.



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## Lucas

- Lucas was sad and disappointed when his recess time consisted of time with the adaptive PE teacher in a noisy gym.
- Lucas ran away from the gym in search of the playground and boys playing football.
- The teacher reported Lucas to the principal as a student who had “eloped”.
- The parents were called and a behavior plan was developed in order to prevent Lucas’s elopement.

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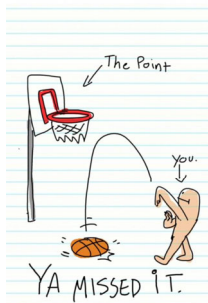
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What Do You Do?  
Where Do You Start?

The first step is WHY?



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**Running Away From Recess was what You See....**  
 The running away was the behavior but the **Why** is what is Important!

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**Understanding the Function of Behavior**

- "In most cases, behavior is a sign they may not have the skills to tell you what they need. Sometimes, students may not even know what they need. What are your students trying to communicate? What do they need, and how can you help?"
- <https://www.understood.org/en/articles/understanding-behavior-as-communication-a-teachers-guide>

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**Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)**

- "OSEP Director Valerie C. Williams encouraged people to see the behavior of students with disabilities as a form of communication. Additionally, she wanted those working with students with disabilities to ask "why" a child may use a disruptive behavior.
- "Thinking of behavior as a form of a communication forces us to shift our mindset and consider the purpose of a child's actions by asking the critical question of why the child is using behaviors that are inconsistent with school or early childhood program expectations," Williams said."

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**Resource Experts: Parents**  
**Was Lucas Running Away from the Gym or To the Playground?**

- Was Lucas communicating through his behavior that:
- He wanted to play football.
- Wear his Lions Jersey
- Make friends
- Have fun
- Have a choice in activities



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**If We Respond to the Student First, as We Should then the Use of Positive Behavioral Supports should be considered. Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is a framework that aims to:**

- Increase quality of life
- Decrease problem behavior
- Teach new skills
- Make changes in a person's environment
- Understand the function and purpose of behavior
- Reinforce positive behaviors while reducing or eliminating problem behaviors.



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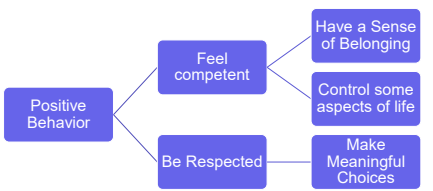
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**What Does Lucas Need?**



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graph LR
    PB[Positive Behavior] --> FC[Feel competent]
    PB --> BR[Be Respected]
    FC --> HSB[Have a Sense of Belonging]
    FC --> CSA[Control some aspects of life]
    BR --> MNC[Make Meaningful Choices]
  
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### What Happens When We Do Not Look at Behavior as Communication?

Confusion, loss of self-esteem, escape, avoidance, increased frustration



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### Emergency or a System Failure

When it *appears* that a person might need to be restrained, secluded, or subjected to aversive interventions, it is because **of the lack of our skills to address the situation, or our unwillingness to address the situation**, rather than the actual need for such strategies.



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### PBS IS NOT!!



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**First: Informally Analyze the Behavior with support staff!**

What Happened?	Why Do You Think It Happened?	What Happened Before the Incident?	How Can It Be Prevented?
Student ran off stage during class activity on stage in front of the school.	The parapro was not with him.	Decision was made to not have the parapro with student on the stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual supports</li> <li>• Parapro presence</li> <li>• Rehearsal in the natural environment</li> </ul>



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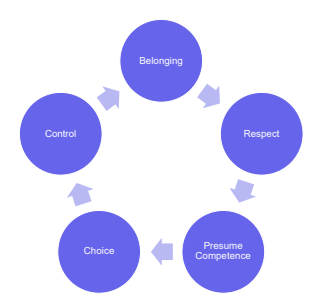
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**How Do We Support Positive Behavior!**

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**The Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)**

- Based on data gathered from:
  - Direct observation across typical routines, and across time
  - Significant others (e.g., interviews with family members and teacher)
- Used to develop a hypothesis regarding the problem behavior(s)
- Used to develop a behavior intervention plan (BIP/PBS) based on the hypothesis



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## Positive Behavioral Support

- 1. An **Understanding** that people do not control others, but seek to support others in their own behavior change.
- 2. A **Belief** that there is a reason behind most difficult behavior and it should be treated with compassion and respect, as that they are entitled to lives of quality as well as effective services.
- 3. A **Conviction** to continuously move away from coercion- the use of unpleasant events to manage behavior.



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## The Positive Behavior Support (PBS) Plan

1. Specific behavior you are addressing (operationally described):
2. What purpose did behavior serve?
3. How will quality of life for person be improved by supporting them with new and more positive behavior?
4. What will you replace the target behavior with? Be specific in supports you will provide that will give the individual a positive behavior which will serve the purpose of the old behavior.
5. What PBS strategies will be implemented in school, family and community for the individual?



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## THE PBS Plan

6. How will typical peers be involved in this PBS approach?
7. How will you teach and reinforce replacement/new behaviors?
8. How will you train staff and family in this PBS plan?
9. How will you monitor this plan?
10. How will you use this information to support a great life for your student.



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**PBS Goals Should Be Based On:**

- Building relationships;
- Participation in preferred, age-appropriate routines
- Creating routines;
- Teaching skills/rules/expectations;
- Identifying replacement behaviors for behaviors that interfere with learning;
- Making problem behavior less effective, efficient, and relevant; and making the desired behavior more functional and adaptive.
- Increased social and environmental inclusion



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**Final Thoughts: Ways to Reframe Behavior as Communication**

- Presume competence
- Identify strengths
- Give choice and control
- Look for environmental/sensory barriers
- Put yourself in the person's place, would you like to do what they are doing?



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**Questions from Attendees**

- Do you treat scripting as communication?
- Supporting robust AAC, not doing Hand over hand prompting for communication
- How to discuss with parents reasonable expectations for non-verbal communication when parents prefer verbal communication.
- In regards to physical therapy sessions for ages 3-26 @ Monroe ISD Education/Transition Center, managing behavior/communication
- When the school is short staffed and not able to provide supports for the student, how does a parent address that?
- How to manage a behavior especially when you're in the community
- What are some strategies for understanding Twice-Exceptional learners?
- Strategies to reduce behavior setbacks during transitions between households with different expectations



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## Questions from Attendees

- How to support children with behaviors who are diagnosed with autism or suspected autism.
- Navigating behavior communication with actionable steps & age appropriate consequences and redirecting.
- What strategies can be used to support behavior
- Why your child may be tapping or hitting their head on the floor? Sometimes not a stressful situation other times adverse situations
- How to address sibling behavior/outbursts of a special needs child.
- Tips on how to determine if they are being a 'teenager' or if there is a bigger problem (depression, anxiety, mental health)
- I am curious about children who mask in an exaggerated way - how to tell when a "goofing off" behavior is actually hidden pain?
- How to better help my 11yr old ASD kiddo identify & communicate emotions, when feels sick/ something hurts. Recommendations to



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## Questions from Attendees

- Children on autism spectrum, how to handle?
- I would like to hear about strategies to help increase functional communication during distressing behaviors.
- How do we view and address behavior with known organic contributors (e.g. FASD/ADHD, pre-mature birth, PWS, Fragile X or Down)?
- Considerations for children with autism and are Deaf - communication barriers as the student has no hearing, all input visual
- How to redirect self harming
- How to help my son reign in his anger when he's feeling overwhelmed. Deep breaths and talking through it don't work.
- How align behavior supports w/ AAC development for communication needs to guide behavior plans?
- How to communicate more positive strategies with the school system so that my son is supported and not punished.



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## Michigan Alliance for Families

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