



# Techniques to Prevent and Manage Challenging Behavior During COVID-19



# Who we are...

- Mariel Fernandez, MS, BCBA, LBA
  - Area Clinical Director, North Texas- Blue Sprig Pediatrics
  - Working in the field of ABA since 2001
  - BCBA since 2004
  - Communications Chair, TxABA PPG
  - Board Member/ Treasurer, IDD Council of Tarrant County
  - Public Advisory Board, Metro-Care Services
- Holly Salicco, MA, BCBA, LBA
  - Regional Director, Texas- Merakey Autism Center, Fort Worth
  - Working in the field of ABA since 2002
  - BCBA since 2014
  - Diverse background across a variety of settings and ages



# GOALS

- Discuss A-B-C Analysis
- Why does all behavior (functioning and challenging) occur?
- Consider prevention & antecedent strategies
- Discuss reinforcement.
- Learn how to reinforce to “pre-cursor” behaviors
- Set the occasion for, prompt and reinforce replacement & alternative behaviors
- Discuss options for managing challenging behaviors



# Behavior

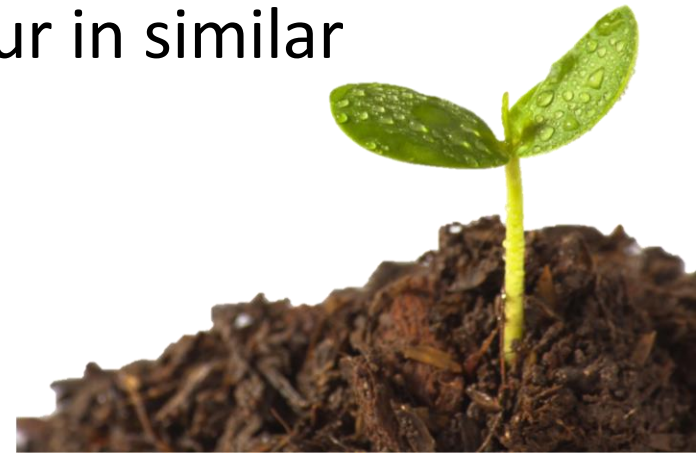
- The action of all living organisms
- Is observable and measurable
- Is both functional/ adaptive or challenging/ maladaptive
- If you aren't "behaving" you are not alive.
- Can be obvious or can be done covertly in a more "secretive" manner





# Antecedents, Behavior & Consequences

- Antecedent- What occurs BEFORE the behavior
- Behavior- the action of a living organism
- Consequence- what occurs AFTER the behavior
- Antecedents can set the occasion for behavior, both desirable and undesirable to occur
- Consequences can make it more or less likely that behavior will continue to occur in similar circumstances



# Why does behavior occur?

- The consequence!
  - Reinforcement
  - Punishment
  - Neutral consequence
- History is important...
- Determined by the effect on behavior, not what we “think” should happen.

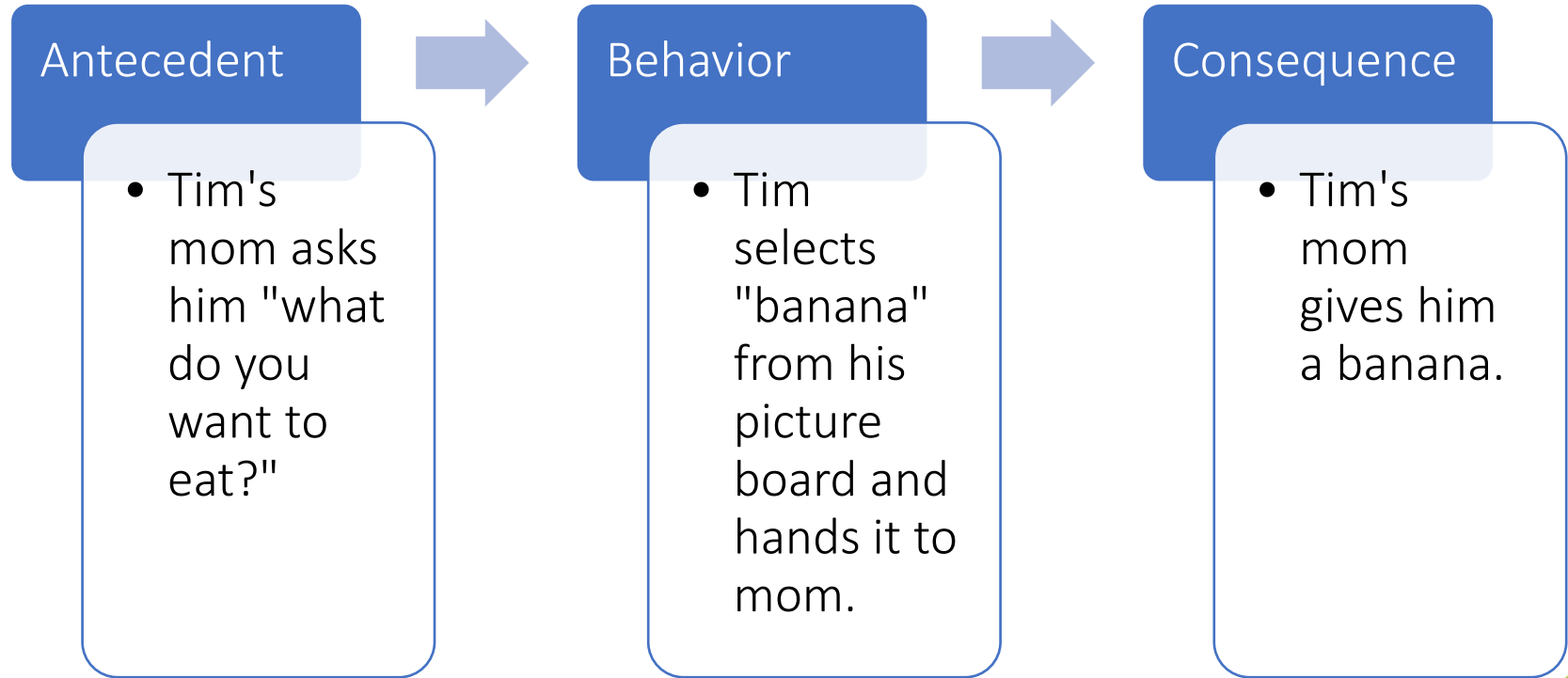


# Reinforcement

- Reinforcement is a consequence that increases the likelihood of a behavior occurring again in the future.
- Reinforcement strengthens and increases the behavior.
- Desired and undesired behavior can be reinforced, whether we realize we are doing it or not.
- Reinforcement can be positive (something added) or negative (something removed)



# Example of Positive Reinforcement

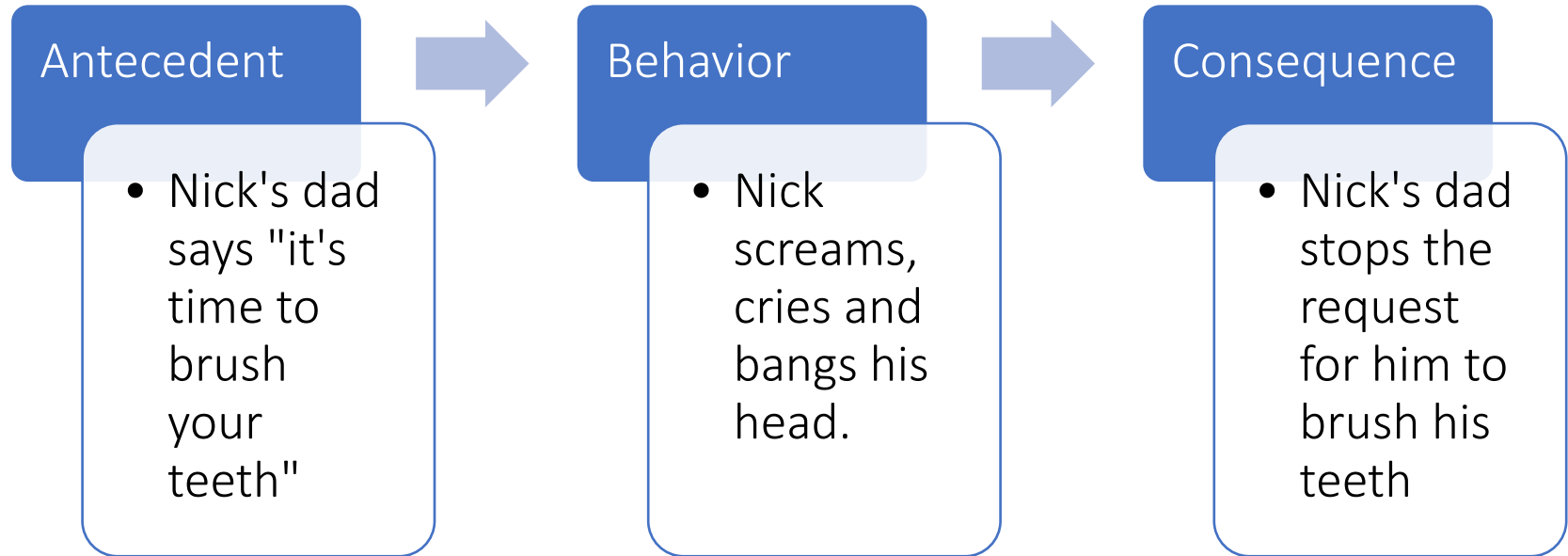


Tim's behavior of using his picture board to get items is more likely to occur in the future.





# Example of Negative Reinforcement



Nick's challenging behavior is more likely to occur in the future when asked to brush his teeth.



# Functions of Behavior

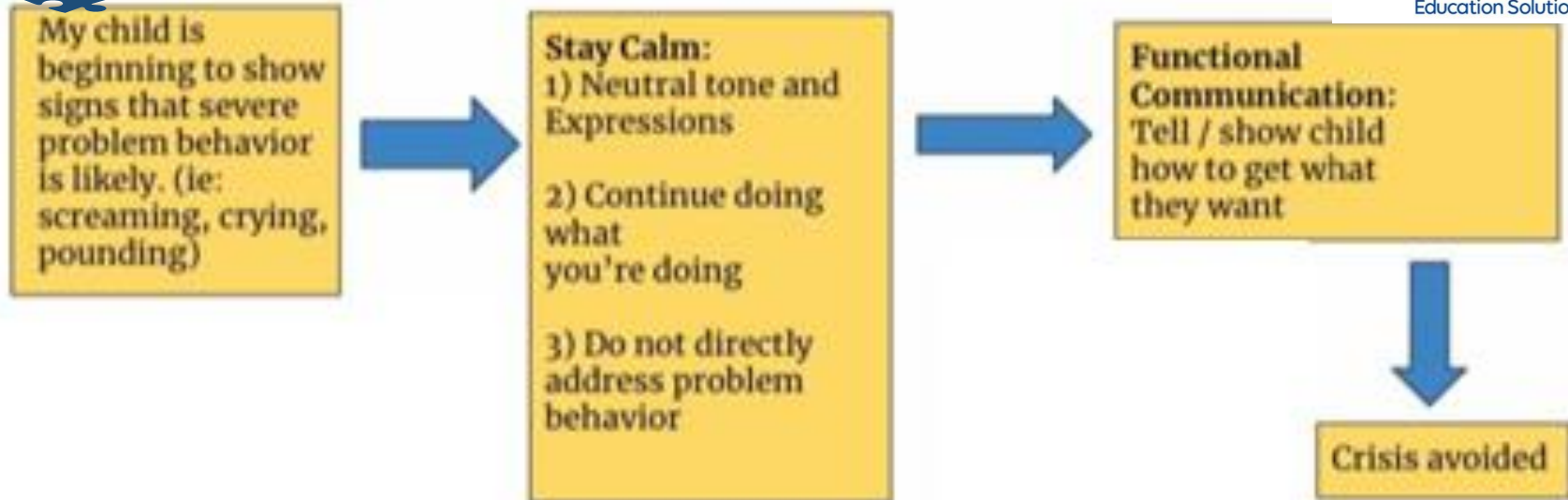
- Behavior serves a purpose or function for the behavior.
- Determined by the Antecedent, Behavior and Consequence.
- 4 Functions:
  - Attention: the behavior gains access to attention
  - Escape/Avoidance: the behavior allows tasks or environments to be put off or avoided completely.
  - Access to tangible: the behavior allows access to an item or activity
  - Sensory or Automatic: the behavior itself is reinforcing



# Prevention & Antecedent Strategies

- Are used to reduce the likelihood that the challenging behavior will occur.
- Set up the environment for success.
- Pay attention to “precursor” behavior, which signal that the challenging behavior is probably about to happen.





# Precursor Behaviors

- Precursor behaviors occur prior to challenging behavior and serve as predictors.
- Precursor behaviors can help guide what antecedent strategies to use and when to use them.



# Antecedent Strategies

- Provide a schedule
  - A schedule prepares your child for upcoming tasks/changes in routine, identifies when reinforcement will be available
  - Can be written or visuals with pictures
  - Can also be used to prepare for upcoming tasks, transitions, or changes
- Provide Choices
  - Keep the choices short and concise
  - Choices can be within tasks, choice of reinforcer or within schedules.
- Token boards
- Increase motivation
  - withholding preferred items/activities (e.g., not giving free access to iPad, not giving ice cream every day after dinner) to ensure items/activities maintain their effectiveness as reinforcers
  - Your child will be more likely to complete a tasks in order to earn time on the iPad, if they don't have the iPad all the time.





# Antecedent Strategies

Using Visual a Schedule



# Antecedent Strategies

using TokenBoard's at  
home



# Antecedent Strategies

- Escape/Avoidance Function:
  - Break down new or difficult tasks into smaller parts. Work on one part of the task at a time and provide frequent reinforcement.
  - Adjust the difficulty before starting a new or difficult task.
  - First require completion of a small part of the task or only require working on it for a short period of time, then gradually increase requirements.
  - For example, if you're learning to do the dishes, only require cleaning 1 plate at first instead of the entire kitchen sink.
- Attention Function:
  - Provide attention throughout the day that goes beyond making requests or delivering instruction.
  - The attention can be brief or for longer periods but should be meaningful social interaction.



# Replacement & Alternative Behaviors:

- Understand “why”
- Understand “why not”
- Based upon the Function or Reason
- Function must match or this will be ineffective



# Replacement & Alternative Behaviors Attention:

- tapping arm
- raising hand
- saying excuse me
- saying hello
- making eye contact
- approaching others





# Replacement & Alternative Behaviors Accessing Items:

- requesting the item using:
  - Speech (approximation is ok)
  - Sign
  - Gestures
  - Eye contact
  - Approach
  - Leading/ handing
  - Pointing
  - PECS
  - AAC device
- learning to wait
- learning to accept “no”
- accepting an alternative
- “working” to access the item
- Earning tokens/ points to access the item



# Replacement & Alternative Behaviors : Escape/ Avoidance

- Asking for a break,
  - pushing items away,
  - walking away calmly,
  - saying “no thank you”, “no”, “I don’t want it”, “break please”
- Asking to do something else
- Asking to do the task later
- Making a choice
  - Which task
  - How many
  - What order



# Replacement & Alternative Behaviors : Automatic

- The behavior feels Good
  - provide safe alternatives that match the sensory input
- Feels bad & want to make the pain stop
  - look for precursor signs of pain or discomfort,
  - respond immediately
  - Teach individual to identify pain in some manner
  - Give pain relieving medications



# But how do you teach it?

- Never in the moment of crisis and always calmly
- Repetition, repetition, repetition
- Identify reinforcers/ function
- Set yourself up for success
- Prompt
- Deliver reinforcers: contingently, immediately, appropriate quantity, appropriate quality



# Prompting:

- Least to Most:
  - Verbal, gesture, model, physical, total physical
- Most to least:
  - Total physical, physical, model, gesture, verbal
- Errorless:
  - Figure out the help they need to be successful, start there and fade
- Error Correction:
  - Make sure they end with a correct response before delivering the best reinforcement





# Teaching Example:

**Replacing Aggression  
With communication**



# Managing Challenging Behavior:

- Easier and safer to prevent than manage
- There is no magic wand
- Pick your battles
- Be consistent
- Understand the function.
- Reinforce something else desirable
- Baby steps



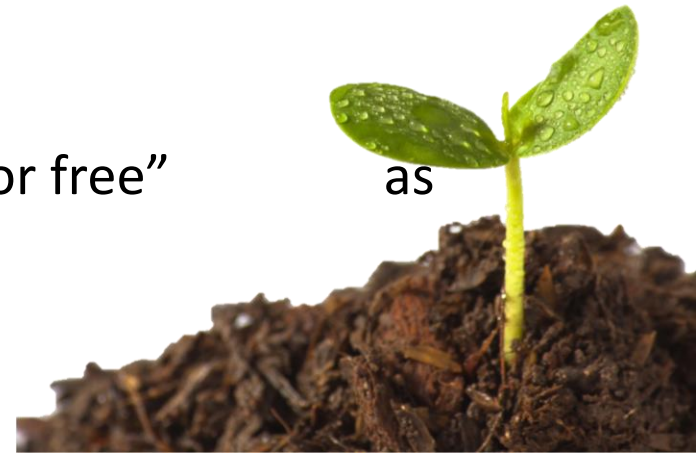
# Possible consequences for challenging behavior:

- Attention maintained:
  - reinforce anything mild that happens first
    - mild precursor challenging behavior,
    - antecedents,
    - first behavior in behavior chain
  - walk away
  - pay attention to others in the home-
    - siblings, spouse, family, pets
    - only if the challenging behavior does not put them at risk
  - Use First\_\_\_ then \_\_\_ language
    - if the challenging behavior is not dangerous
  - Remind of expectations
    - Only once, better to do as a preventative measure



# Possible consequences for challenging behavior:

- Maintained by access to items:
  - reinforce anything mild that happens first
    - give them the item then\*\*\* not ideal, but practical
  - wait them out
    - don't give the item until they are calm
    - 30 seconds to 1 minute break in challenging behavior
    - Make sure everyone knows what "calm" means
  - prompt an appropriate response, then deliver the item.
  - Offer alternatives if the item is not available.
  - Token system to earn items.
  - Establish a daily routine
  - give access to the item(s) frequently "for free" part of the daily routine.



# Possible consequences for challenging behavior:

- Escape/ Avoidance:
  - pick your battles,
    - give only the instructions that you are willing to follow through with.
  - Set up a daily routine/ schedule, be clear with your expectations,
  - use first\_\_\_\_, then\_\_\_\_ statements.
  - Set up a visual schedule
  - use a timer to signal the end to a task
  - set up activities with clear beginnings and ends,
    - accept a shorter duration and gradually build it to a longer duration
    - prompt as needed
    - be sure to set yourself up for success.





# Possible consequences for challenging behavior:

- Sensory:
  - physical activity (trampoline, bouncy ball, swing), squeezes/pressure, headphones, music, massage, unique smells or textures (sensory bins), physical play. This is really individualized by the child and what they are seeking.
- Aversive Sensory:
  - pay attention to pre-cursor behaviors
  - try to identify what is wrong
  - give medication at the first sign of pain or discomfort
- During non-COVID times:
  - reach out to medical professionals to consult and address underlying medical concerns



# Individuals ARE Individuals

- No two people are alike, and no two people respond the same.
- Trial and error
- Consistency
- If something isn't working, give it a few days before you give up, but not too long...
- Extinction:
  - Sometimes things get worse, before they get better...
  - can you endure worse?
  - If not, try a different approach.
- Consult with a BCBA/ LBA, we'd be happy to help!





# Thank You!

Mariel Fernandez, MS, BCBA, LBA  
[mfernandez@bluesprigpediatrics.com](mailto:mfernandez@bluesprigpediatrics.com)



Holly Salicco, MA, BCBA, LBA  
[Holly.Salicco@merakey.org](mailto:Holly.Salicco@merakey.org)





