Navigating Treatment for Children
Who Engage in Challenging Behavior

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Overview

• Causes of challenging behavior

• Assessment of challenging behavior

• Treatment of challenging behavior

• Behavior Therapies

• DISCLAIMER….

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Challenging Behavior

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Challenging behavior is challenging...

• For the individual

• For caregiver

• For siblings

Causes of Challenging Behavior

Challenging behavior is.....

• Learned behavior
  • Influenced by internal and external environmental variables

• Adaptive behavior
  • A problem for whom?

Challenging behavior is useful

- Produces a desired consequence
  - Access to desired outcomes
  - Removal of non-preferred or aversive outcomes

- Form of communication
  - Skill deficit
  - Motivation deficit

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Explanations of Behavior

- Mentalistic explanations of behavior are:
  - Common and easy to apply
  - Complex and lack parsimony
    - *I cried* because I was *sad*
    - *I tapped* my foot because *I felt* anxious
    - *I started* a workout program because *I decided* to lose weight
    - *He hit* me because he was *angry*

- Behavioral explanations:
  - Avoid inferences on intentions or emotions
  - Focus on objective, observable variables
  - Allow us to identify patterns of responding
  - Identify how the environment can best support adaptive behavior

Madden et al. (2021)

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Prediction about behavior	Adaptive behavior	Beneficial outcome
I will snooze my alarm 3 times tomorrow morning	Set the alarm to go off 45 min before I need to get out of bed	Arrive at my appointment on time
Within the next 6 months, I will drop my phone and crack the screen	Buy insurance	Save money when I need a new screen
My roommate will eat my favorite leftovers	Hide the leftovers behind something my roommate dislikes	Leftovers are there when I want them
My boss will be grumpy during the dinner rush	Avoid talking to my boss during the dinner rush	Avoid getting yelled at

Table from: Madden, G. J. et al. *An Introduction to Behavior Analysis.* Wiley Global Research (STMS), 2021.

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Explanations of Behavior: Examples

Mentalistic:
- He hit me because he was angry
  - To address hitting → address anger → what caused anger?
  - Circular reasoning….

Behavioral:
- He hit me when I asked him to complete his math worksheet so I let him go play with his toys
  - Can identify environmental variables that influence behavior and thus can be changed
  - Can replicate this situation to observe behavioral patterns
  - Can identify alternative behaviors for the individual to engage in

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Assessment of Challenging Behavior

What is the most common recommendation for dealing with challenging behavior?

Time out

Time out significantly worsens challenging behavior in approximately 1/3 of cases.

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What is the most common caregiver reaction to challenging behavior?

Verbal reprimands/disapproval

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Social attention, in the form of verbal disapproval, significantly worsens challenging behavior in about 1/4 of cases.

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How do we treat challenging behavior?

- Many treatments are based on the "topography" or physical form
  - Treatment of a cavity
  - Risperdal for aggression
  - Zero tolerance policies
  - Time out for disruptive behavior

- Topography-based treatments
  - Don't get to the source of the problem
  - Work for some, but not all (e.g., no universal treatment for aggression)

- Remember.....
  - ***Challenging behavior is adaptive behavior!***

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Before Treatment….

- We must identify the purpose of a behavior

- Why?
  - To find out how and why it is *"useful"* for the child

- Understanding the purpose of challenging behavior helps to…
  - Identify the ***contexts*** in which it occurs
  - Identify how and what ***reactions*** affect behavior
  - Identify ***replacement*** skills or activities
  - ***Effectively*** treat the behavior

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Identifying the Purpose

- Examine environmental variables surrounding the behavior
  - Internal and external

- Behavior is influenced by:
  - What happens prior to the behavior (antecedent events)
  - What happens following the behavior (consequent events)

- Identify patterns of responding → confirm adaptive purpose

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Antecedent Events

• Arrange motivation to engage in challenging behavior

• Examples
  • Hunger, thirst, pain, cold/hot, overstimulation, illness
  • Desire attention/preferred items, escape/avoid non-preferred activity
  • Environmental stimulus, private thought

Consequent Events

• Provide outcomes that influences the future probability of the behavior occurring, or not, in the presence of the same antecedent event

• Examples
  • Access to food/drink, sleep, medicine, quiet place
  • Access to attention/desired items, removal of work, people, etc.

Antecedent – Behavior - Consequence

- A – attention diverted
- B – touch the remote
- C – access to attention

- A – time to go to school/thought about getting into a bus accident
- B – refuse to get onto bus
- C – do not get into a bus accident

- A – math work is presented/thought that I'm not smart
- B – get out of my seat and roam around the room
- C – get sent to principal's office/avoid completion of work or being called upon in front of peers

Confirming the purpose of behavior

- Direct and repeated observation/assessment

- Confirm pattern of responding (antecedent – behavior – consequence)

- Confirm purpose of behavior
  - Identify environmental variables can modify → effectively treat behavior

Treatment of Challenging Behavior

Treatment Overview

Treatment Necessities
- Evidence-based
- Developmentally appropriate
- Track performance (e.g., data based)
- Caregiver involvement

Treatment Ideals
- Individualized
- Intensive (severe challenging behavior)
- Direct strategies

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Treatment Considerations

- Individual factors

- Family factors

- Scope of services

- Setting/modality

- Provider

- Availability of services

Hyman et al., 2019

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Behavior Therapies: General

- Focus on the relationship between our behaviors (private and public) and the environment
  - Aim to increase desirable behaviors and eliminate, or decrease, challenging behaviors

- Include small attainable goals → terminal goal

- Understand that behavior change = learning

- Based on purpose of the challenging behavior (i.e., usefulness)

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(Re) Focus on Appropriate Behavior

- Catch them being good!

- Arrange for antecedent manipulations
  - Set up the environment to support appropriate behaviors/success

- Arrange contingencies for appropriate behavior
  - Assess what current motivation may be
  - First _____, then _____

When Problem Behavior Does Occur…

- Limit attention and stay calm/positive
  - Limit/avoid comments about the behavior, warnings, soothing statements/touches

- Remind of contingencies for appropriate behavior
  - Provide assistance as needed
  - Small requests
  - Example: instead of "Stop biting." say, "If you need help, say "Help, please"

- Keep the child, yourself, and those around you safe

Common Behavior-Change Mechanisms

- ***Reinforcement***
  - The process of delivering a consequence following a behavior that *increases* the future probability of that behavior occurring

- Punishment
  - The process of delivering a consequence following a behavior that *decreases* the future probability of that behavior occurring (e.g., time-out from reinforcement)

- Extinction
  - Challenging behavior no longer results in the delivery of the desired consequence (i.e., reinforcer)

Caregiver Involvement

- Caregivers are integral behavior change units

- Involvement throughout treatment
  - Direct caregiver training

- Access to resources, education, and supports
  - Natural supports
  - Informal supports
  - Formal supports

Behavior Therapies

Therapies

- Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- Parent/Caregiver Training

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

Description: A natural science that aims to understand (and change) the behavior of individuals

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

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Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

Description: A combined psychotherapeutic and behavior analytic approach

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

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Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Description: Psychotherapeutic approach focused on thought processes that influence behavior

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

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Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

Description: A modified CBT approach focused on acceptance and change

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

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Trauma-Focused (CBT)

Description: A CBT approach targeting trauma-related behaviors

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

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Facing Your Fears (FYF)

Description: A CBT-based treatment program for anxiety-related symptoms

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

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Parent Management Training (PMT)

Description: A parent-training program based on operant conditioning

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

The Incredible Years (IY)

Description: A parent-training program focused on positive caregiver/child relationships, reduction in challenging behaviors, and increases in social/emotional competency

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT)

Description: A parent-training program focused on the quality of caregiver/child relationships and the patterns of caregiver/child interactions

Who is it for?

Who is involved?

Service delivery modality

Service setting(s)

Relevant Variables for Treatment Selection

• Target behavior(s)

• Diagnosis

• Age

• Individual strengths and preferences

• Caregiver variables

• Family preferences/cultural variables

• Family resources and supports

• Available services/providers

Wrap Up

Remember…

Challenging behavior is challenging…
• For the individual
  • See beyond the behavior

• For caregiver
  • Recognize need for mental health care, marital discord

• For siblings
  • Recognize need for mental health care, education, other

Summary

• Behavior is influenced by environmental variables (i.e., learned)

• Behavior can be modified by altering environmental variables

• Identify how/why a behavior is useful → effective treatment

• Several variables affect the most appropriate treatment

• Challenging behavior → Adaptive behavior

Thank you!

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