

Defiance or Disability?

Understanding Behavior when Students have “Hidden Disabilities”

Dr. Beth Brown

Director of Psychological Services, Center for Disability Services
Independent Contractor, Campbell House Psychological

About the Audience

- Parents
- Teachers
- Providers
- Clinicians
- Administrators

About the Presenter

- More than 15 years clinical practice
- School psychologist for 5+ years
- Currently:
 - Director of Psychological Services, Center for Disability Services: oversee implementation of psychological services in the Residential Services Division
 - Campbell House Psychological: Support children through direct counseling, assessment, and consultation services with their schools and families
- And, mother of 7-year-old twins!

Typical Development & Expected Behavior

Behavior, Communication, Impulse Control, Needs, Decision-making:

- Adults
- Adolescents
- School-aged Children
- Preschoolers
- Infants

Children with Disabilities

Typical development continues in many areas, but one or more area of development is impacted, and thus impacts behavior

- Delays in neurological development that impact attention and impulse control
- Communication delays, and thus communicate needs via behavior
 - Behavior = Communication
- Higher degrees of stress \Rightarrow Higher need to Fight or Flee
- They may be suffering from a medical or psychiatric condition that makes them more sensitive and/or less attentive to those around them
- Adults use discipline practices that may not match with the child's social-emotional or cognitive development stage

Behavior

Happens for a reason

.... Continues because it works



"I'm sorry, this isn't working. Can't you just teach me some more old tricks?"

Behavior Theory: Associational Learning

- Child's Behavior \Rightarrow Adult-Dispensed Reward or Consequence
- If something works, we will continue to use it (behavior is reinforced).
- If we have received a *meaningful* punishment, the likelihood of behavior decreases
- If something has worked and the reward is big enough, we will continue trying the same action to obtain the desired response/reward (e.g., gambling, superstitious behavior); intermittent reinforcement is strongest. Why?
 - Option of reward more powerful than risk of punishment.
 - Each time punishment is avoided, it reinforces the action (negative reinforcement) with option for big reward (positive reinforcement)

Application:

1. Yesterday, Sally stays in her seat during math. She completes her work. Today, she completed her work again. Why does Sally stay in her seat?
2. Sam is out of his seat during math class. He refuses to sit back down and is sent to the principal's office. What do you think will happen tomorrow?

Case example, continued

Next week - Sam, once again, refuses to stay in his seat during math class. His teacher and his mother do not know what to do.

- He has been sent to the principal
- He had to miss recess to complete his work
- He is embarrassed in front of his peers.

Despite all of these consequences, why isn't Sam staying in his seat?

(Hint: Behavior happens for a reason, continues because it works)

Social Learning Theory (Bandura)

- **Vicarious Reinforcement:** we see others benefiting from an action, so it increases our likelihood of engaging in the same action at the same or another time.
 - Benefits can be tangible or social, and highly individualized (what is a benefit to one person is not necessarily perceived as a benefit to another)
- **Vicarious Punishment:** we see others suffering from their action, so it decreases the likelihood that we'll try out that action (e.g., “Sam,” or Eddie Haskell)
 - Again, what some view as a punishment may actually be a positive for others.

This is why consequences for negative actions still have a place. But this is more of a benefit to deter others from engaging in the action.

Applying Theory to Real Life



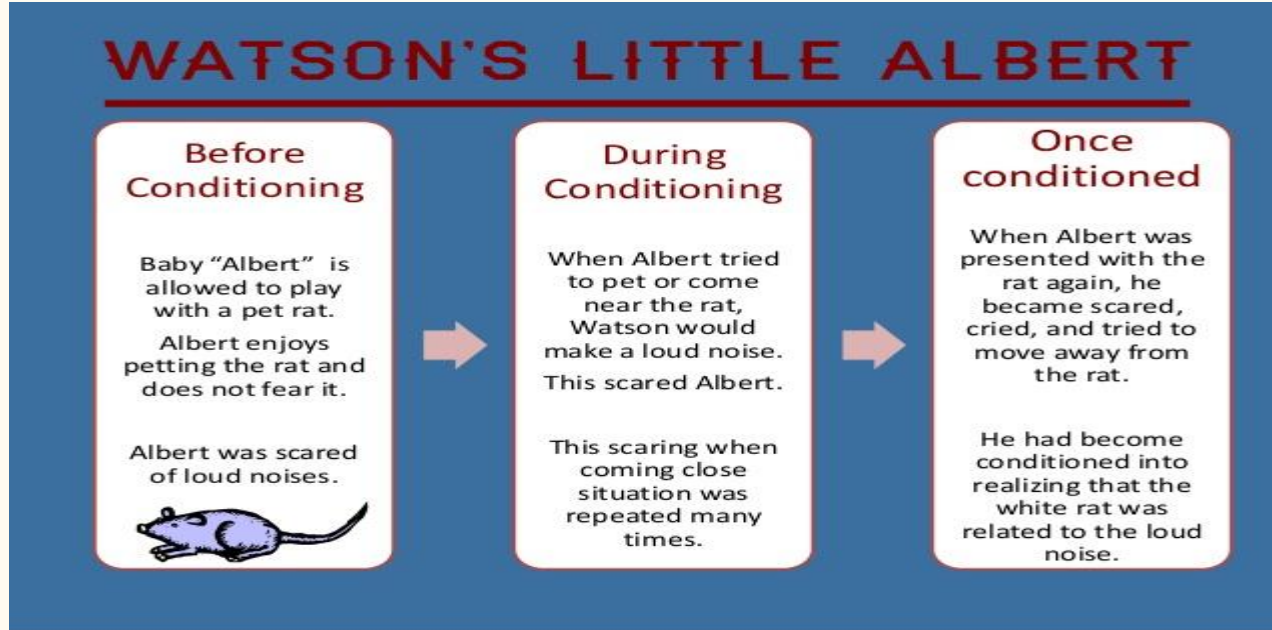
How many followed the speed limit to come here today?

How do we respond if we are pulled over?

How long does behavior change last?

Behavior Theory:

Associational Learning/Development of Phobias



Children can form associations to overstimulating events, which can easily develop into what appear to us as an irrational phobia. Thus, rationalizing will not work.

Application

- Steve won't go to restaurants, amusement parks, and certainly will not go to the cafeteria on pizza day
- Reassurance and Reasoning don't work
- He screams, yells, and runs away
- People are afraid for his safety.
- Pizza is everywhere - he "NEEDS" to cope.

Why is he so afraid of pizza?

What can be done?



A vibrant, sunlit forest scene. In the foreground, a lush field of green grass is dotted with numerous dandelions, some in bloom and others as seed heads. Two large, dark tree trunks stand prominently on the left side. The background is filled with dense green foliage and trees, with bright sunlight filtering through the canopy, creating a hazy, ethereal atmosphere.

**Insanity: doing the same
thing over and over again and
expecting different results.**

Albert Einstein

Recap on Multiple Influences on Behavior

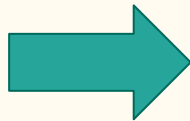
- Path of Least Resistance - quickest, most efficient way to meet a need
- Developmental progression (and impacted by disabilities)
- Learned Response to meet a need
 - Either through direct reinforcement of use, modeling, or vicarious reinforcement
- Dependent upon impulse control: We think of the reasons why we engage in the action (to meet a need).
 - It takes a lot of impulse control and attention to consider the reasons why we shouldn't, unless we have had past experience or an in-the-moment reminder of why we shouldn't
- Active phobia/strong desire to avoid the stress-inducing “stimulus”

Behavior happens for a reason ... continues because it works.

All Behavior (Prosocial or Challenging):

Occurs for a reason

- Uncomfortable: Physical
- Uncomfortable: Emotional
- Desire to Obtain Something (Attention, Social, Tangible, Stimulation)
- Desire to Escape/Avoid Something
- In the moment, couldn't access another way



Continues because it works (the quickest, most efficient way to):

- Communicate Need
- Obtain Comfort
- Obtain Something
- Escape/Avoid

The Reasons for the behavior will not change. But, we can teach a more positive alternative to support the person's needs. Once the use of the new way is more desirable, supervised, and/or more easily accessible, behavior change can happen.

Reaction to Challenging Behavior

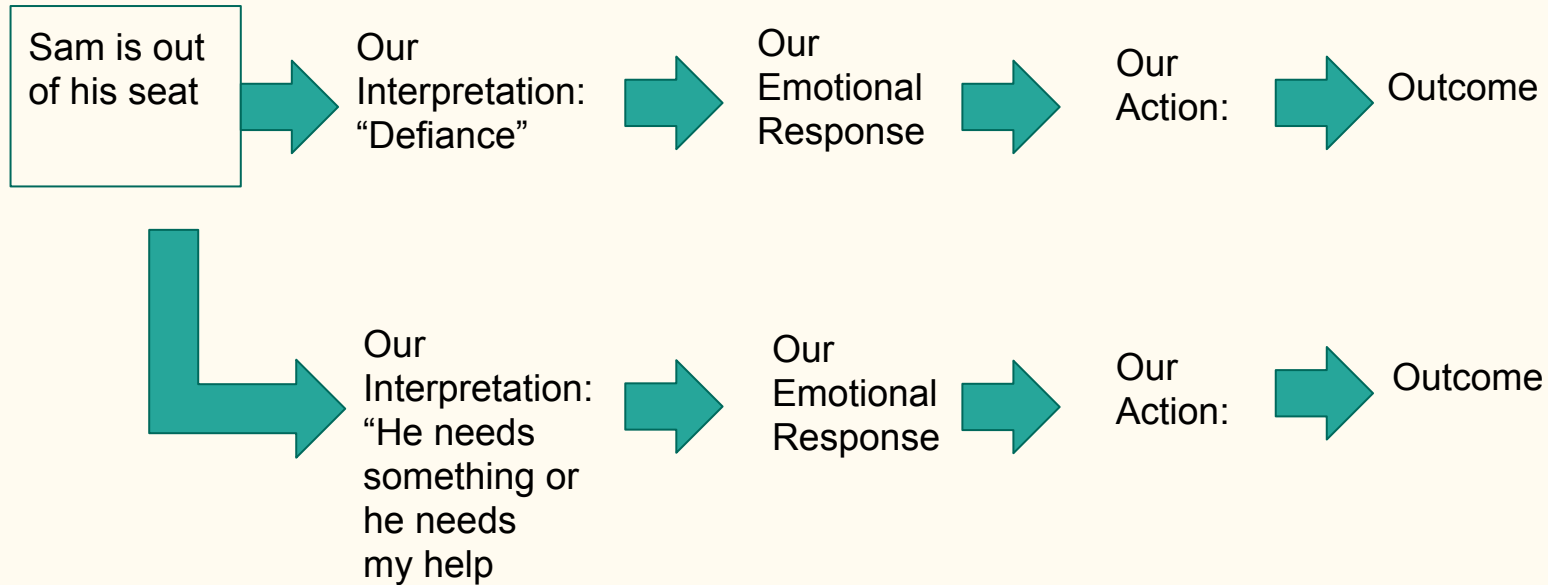
- Personalize → View as defiance → Anger from perceived disrespect

Why does this happen?

- Our own fight-flight mode is activated. We are stressed when we don't have other tools in our tool-belt. Previously effective interventions are not effective with this particular child. So, it can't be us - it must be the child!
 - (see Trauma Stewardship, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky)

We can counteract this learned helpless reaction by changing our perspective and increasing our skills to support the child to find a better way.

Reaction to Challenging Behavior (via A.Ellis, R.Greene)



If Challenging Behavior is a Learned Response ...

... then we can teach another way!!

- If we've been inadvertently reinforcing negative behavior → we teach a more adaptive way to meet the need (Give option of break)
- ADHD/poor impulse control → we provide increased visual aides and/or supervision to help support expectations (Cop in the Median)
- Learning/Skill deficit → we provide increased support/scaffolding during the stressful subject to improve coping and increase skill
- Anxiety/phobia/too much sensory stimulation → we provide new associations to show that they are safe in previously stressful environments (counterconditioning)

How can children access this support?

- If challenging behavior is impacting access to instruction, request that the program/school begin to complete an Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)
- NYS requires FBAs in specific situations and in the context of child's disability
- The special education teacher, counselor, social worker, or psychologist will begin the process.
- An FBA outlines the triggers (antecedents), actions that support the negative behavior, and possible ways to reinforce positive behavior.
- Based on the FBA, a BIP (behavior intervention plan) is developed.
- A BIP is a multi-dimensional plan that includes: Preventative strategies, teaching alternative skills, reinforcement plans, and emergency plans.

Importance of a TEAM Approach

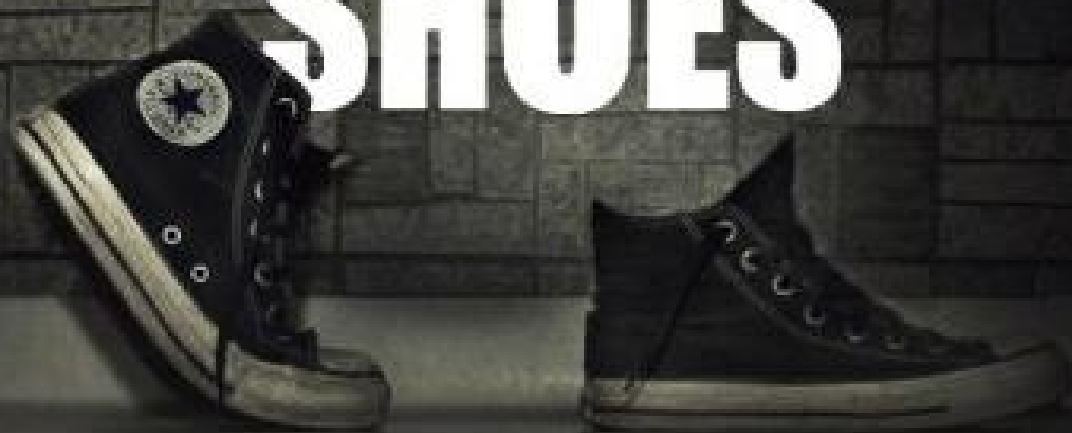
Together

Everyone

Achieves

More

**WALK A MILE
IN MY
SHOES**



Questions?

To respect confidentiality and time, please refrain from specific case examples.