

LADC Behavior Handout



Preventing Problem Behaviors

Learn how to prevent problem behaviors before they even occur!

Why wait to implement effective preventative strategies until your child is engaging in problem behaviors? Start now!

Preventing Problem Behaviors

Most often we talk about what to do when our child engages in problem behaviors. This is important; however, what if we can prevent some of those behaviors from even happening? If we make some changes on the front end to implement some strategies, we may be able to save time and effort in the long run by preventing the behaviors from even happening. By looking at some common triggers for problem behaviors, implementing strategies to reduce or eliminate those triggers will decrease the presence of problem behaviors. These strategies work with a wide range of ages and are effective for a large variety of problem behaviors.

Some parents may read this and think, “my child doesn’t have any problem behaviors right now, so this information isn’t for me”. However, I would challenge you to think about this situation differently. These strategies work with all children. Why wait to implement effective preventative strategies until your child is engaging in the problem behaviors? At any point, problem behaviors may arise, but if we engage in these environment enriching strategies, it is much more unlikely that they will surface. Therefore, making a few changes right now may dramatically save you time and effort in the long run.

Offering Choices

The first strategy is offering choices. Offering your child choices can be a very effective strategy to prevent problem behavior because it is giving your child control and offers them motivation to participate. Choice making is especially effective when children are refusing to engage in an activity. This strategy is also helpful when problem behaviors occur when making transitions from preferred activities to non-preferred activities.

When your child is given the control to choose, they are more likely to follow through since it was their choice rather than someone else’s choice. You can incorporate choices throughout your entire day. Maybe you let your child choose which activity to do first or maybe they can choose which materials to use in that activity. Be creative in the choices you provide but also remember that you have to follow through with whatever choice they choose, so make sure to choose ones you approve of. Sometimes providing pictures when presenting choices will help your child to understand the options. Some examples are:

- Do you want to wear blue pants today or red pants?
- Do you want to put on PJs first or brush your teeth?
- Or maybe allow your child to choose a toy to bring with in car.

Supervision

Another way to prevent problem behaviors is to provide active supervision and attention. Children may engage in problem behaviors with other children when adults are not around, or they may engage in problem behaviors to get more attention from the adults. If you are physically present more around your child while they are playing, you can prevent problem behaviors by providing lots of positive attention and reinforcement throughout the activities. Increased rates of positive reinforcement will effectively reduce problem behavior if the function of the problem behavior is to gain attention.

Preventative Strategies for Problem Behaviors

Functional Communication Training

Behavior is always communicating something to us. Maybe your child whines or screams because they want something. Maybe they are screaming because they want attention or help. Maybe they are screaming because they want to get out of doing something or take a break. When we can determine the reason behind why they engage in that specific behavior, we can teach them to communicate their need in another way. The communication forms we teach them can be to vocalize a word or phrase, to use a sign or gesture, to use picture cards, or to use an iPad that speaks for them. There are many different ways our children can communicate to us.

This is an especially helpful strategy to use when your child engages in problem behaviors to get attention. When beginning functional communication training, start by providing lots of verbal prompts for your child to engage in the new form of communication. These prompts are faded as your child becomes more successful! Also, you want to provide high rates of reinforcement initially every time they engage in the alternative form of communication. Initially that reinforcement will need to be something very motivating but eventually you can fade towards more naturally occurring reinforcement such as pure social attention or merely access to the preferred item they requested.

Some common examples of functional communication that are taught include teaching to ask for help, to ask for more, to ask for a break, to ask for a certain item, or to ask to play with mom (to get attention).

Provide Pre-Planned Breaks

Often children engage in problem behavior to escape situations or activities that are too hard, boring, or overstimulating. If you can implement pre-planned breaks during high-probability situations that your child will engage in problem behavior, you can prevent the meltdowns. Those breaks could solely just be the ability to step away from the overstimulating environment and go to a calming spot or it could include planning breaks with preferred activities throughout non-preferred activities. If your child is able to communicate, identify with your child what a break would look like. Determine if they need a calming space/activity during their break or if they just need a preferred activity as a break. Based on your child's reaction to the planned break, you can determine if you picked the right amount of time or if the break could be longer or shorter.

Behavioral Momentum

This is an excellent strategy that is used prior to requesting something from your child that will increase their likelihood to comply with your requests. You begin by identifying a minimum of three behaviors that have a high probability of being completed by your child without problem behaviors (e.g. touch your nose, turn in a circle, give me a high five). You then request these three or more things in a row. Each time they comply with the request, give lots of praise and attention.

After they have successfully completed three or more high-probability requests, you can then give them the low-probability request that they usually do not comply with (e.g. cleaning up toys, coming to the dinner table, putting on clothes). The first three requests build the momentum of compliance so that it is more likely for them to comply with your harder request. Think of a ball rolling down a hill, once you get it started, it just keeps going without as much effort. The initial easy requests are getting that ball to start rolling! This can be used many times throughout the day, just vary your initial easy requests so that your child doesn't get bored of the requests.

Priming

Priming is a strategy that is used to increase the predictability of an activity or situation. Predictability decreases anxiety and stress. Priming includes showing materials for an activity prior to beginning, talking about what to expect in a situation before it occurs, or providing a schedule of activities and when they occur throughout the day.

One very effective way to prime is to provide a visual schedule of the activities for the day or the steps in a routine (e.g. bedtime). Additionally, you can use visuals through a first-then board to prime your child what activity you will transition to after the current activity. If you think your child is developmentally ready, you can provide the priming solely through words; however, often words combined with visuals tend to be more successful.