

## Predicting Problem Behavior

" ... recognize that the child's behavior is neither random nor malicious but is motivated by some need, wish or impulse on the part of the child that might be worth considering ... behavior is seldom just plain bad but is more often ill-timed or set in the wrong place or directed inappropriately."

Dr. Carl Haywood, Vanderbilt University

This is perhaps the most important thing I've ever read about children's behavior. It's guided me for several decades and has never failed to help me and many other people understand our children.

### So what is a problem behavior?

A problem behavior is one that:

- interferes with learning
- is unsafe and/or
- is socially or culturally unacceptable

This means a problem behavior is NOT just one that annoys you.

Behavior is **ALWAYS** communication – the child is trying to tell us something.

### Behavior in children with autism is often a reaction to stress and anxiety

A lot of the behaviors we see in children with autism is a reaction to stress and anxiety. When we view behavior through the child's [Learning Preferences](#), it becomes quite predictable.

**Things that cause stress in people with autism are ones that 'violate' their learning preferences, like:**

- sudden change
- anything unknown or unfamiliar
- being asked to do something for no apparently good reason
- being asked to 'wing it'
- dealing with people who deny facts
- pressure to meet deadlines
- pressure to work below his/her own standards
- too much information
- noise, disruption, interruptions

**Typical reactions to stress and anxiety are:**

- focusing on sensing (e.g. chewing clothes, flicking fingers, flapping hands)
- withdrawing, shutting down, refusal



- becoming negative and irritable, unwilling to tolerate anything unknown and/or unfamiliar; resisting even minor changes
- focusing on details and facts
- blaming other people or objects for things that happen
- becoming impulsive and act without thinking (e.g. hit out)
- experiencing confusion, anxiety and panic even though appearing outwardly calm
- obsessing about things causing stress, unable to switch off and relax
- catastrophizing and imagining disasters

### **What are some things that can help children?**

First and foremost, respect their Learning Preferences. Know that, if you fail to respect and honor his/her preferences, you're likely to produce a reaction.

If a child does have a meltdown, here are some things you can do to help her/him regain equilibrium:

- give him/her time alone, preferably in a sensing environment
- keep talk and noise to a minimum
- provide her/him with concrete validation of his/her competence and worth; talk about previous successes s/he's had
- help him/her prioritize and organize activities so he/she can accomplish even small projects
- let her/him vent feelings without judgement or offering solutions; take her/his problem seriously, don't minimize it, it's important to the child
- give him/her a chance to do a physical activity, especially swinging or rocking