Understanding Your Teen’s Behaviors*

This handout describes six possible factors that contribute to your child's behaviors.

1. The Child's Psychological Characteristics

The first factor that would contribute to behavior problems is personality characteristics. These are the inborn or otherwise biologically based characteristics that the child carries with him or her into interactions with the world. These are not necessarily learned behaviors. As an example, reflect on your experiences with your children as infants. From day one you can see that not all infants are alike. Some infants are easily soothed, settle quickly into a schedule, and are able to entertain themselves for long periods of time. Other infants are fussy, quick to startle, and display difficulty adjusting to a regular schedule. These are temperamental characteristics that the infant was born with - "neurologically hardwired," so to speak - not the result of how they are cared for. Infants, in other words, are not "blank slates" on which the script of experience will be written. They bring characteristics into the world that will make them more or less easy to care for, more or less likely to be viewed as a "problem." Consider purchasing a helpful book, called “Nurture By Nature” by Paul D. Tieger and Barbara Barron-Tieger. This resource will teach you how to discern your child’s particular personality type and gives great suggestions for parenting based on that child’s unique characteristics.

2. The Parents' Characteristics

The second factor that can contribute to behavior problems in a child is parent characteristics. Parents, of course, are human and may have temperamental or physical characteristics that make it more likely that they will have difficulty with the child's behavior. For example, a parent who is in chronic pain because of a back injury is going to have less energy and patience to cope with an active, impulsive child than the parent who does not suffer physical pain. Likewise, the parent who has a psychiatric problem, such as chronic anxiety, will also have less energy and patience than the parent who does not. Parents may also have personality characteristics that are not an optimal "fit" with a child diagnosed with ODD or ADHD. For example, the parent who is compulsively neat and organized may be far quicker to view the child as a behavior problem than the parent who is more laid-back and less organized. Another point to consider is what your own parents taught you about raising kids and how this has shaped your parenting style.

3. Family Stress

The third factor that contributes to the perception of behavioral difficulties is family stress. This is a multifaceted concept that can have an impact in a variety of ways. One or both parents may be under stress for a variety of reasons (illness or death of an important family member, legal or financial problems, marital conflict, job problems, etc.). Under the influence of this stress, the parent may become less patient, less tolerant of minor misbehaviors, and quicker to be punitive, leading to increased conflict with the child. Or, conversely, the parent may be more distracted, withdrawn, and less consistent in implementing common household rules, allowing the child to "get away with murder" and increasing the likelihood that the child will be oppositional when the parent eventually returns to enforcing the rules.

In both of these examples, the child may not even be aware of the exact nature of the stress the parent is under. However, it is critical for parents to understand that children themselves can also experience stress. This might be "bad" stress, such as getting a failure warning from school, being threatened or bullied by others, or feeling inferior. Children can also experience "good" stress, or excitement, over such things as being invited to a party, anticipating school vacation, or going out with friends. Ask any teacher what it is like to manage a class the week before Christmas, and you will hear about the impact of excitement on behavior.

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4. Goals of Misbehavior

A fourth factor to consider in behavioral difficulties is to better understand the goal of your teen’s behavior. Children who misbehave do so for a purpose, which includes 8 possible goals:

- Excitement
- Comfort
- Escape
- Attention
- Helplessness
- Power
- Revenge
- Peer Acceptance

These are mistaken, or negative, goals because they don’t foster a child’s development; in fact they hinder development. If teens are busy putting energy into getting power or revenge, for example, they’re stopping themselves from pursuing positive goals. Attached is a handout that more fully describes the 8 goals of misbehavior.

5. External Negative Influences

Unfortunately, we live in a culture that is aggressively opposed to the values and conduct that healthy families seek to instill in their children. Hollywood, MTV, the internet, video games, and popular music promote violence, irresponsible sex, selfishness, disregard for authority or consequences, and a devotion to hedonism. Meanwhile, as a child matures, peers become an increasingly influential force in his/her life, particularly when the parents are less involved.

6. Parenting Style

The five factors above are all possible targets for change. However, it is this final factor, parenting style, over which we have the greatest control. Parenting style refers to what parents do in response to their child's behavior, that is, how they handle it. Some parenting styles can increase the likelihood of disruptive behavior, while some can decrease their likelihood. While parenting style does not completely eliminate the impact of the first five factors, it can act as a buffer to mitigate their impact, or a sieve through which the other factors must be filtered before we ultimately see the child's behavior.

**THE ABC’S OF BEHAVIORAL MANAGEMENT**

This leads us to the topic of behavior management, you may have heard about behavior modification. Even if you are not familiar with the term, you will be familiar with the concepts. For example, the use of rewards and punishment is part of behavior modification. Behavior modification is very down to earth, rooted in common sense, and is uniquely well-suited to meet the needs of a teen with disruptive behavior. Please examine the following diagram:

Anticipate ➔ Behavior ➔ Consequences

There are two ways to influence or change B (behavior). A formally refers to the "antecedents" of behavior: the cues or triggering events that occur before behavior takes place. For most parents, a more understandable term is "anticipating" behavior before it happens. C refers to the use of "consequences" - after the behavior happens. If we put all our energy into A and C, B will fall into place.

One example common to all parents is the toddler behavior of putting everything into the mouth. Imagine that you have cleaning fluids under your sink. Do you wait for the behavior to happen and then punish it? Certainly not. You anticipate the behavior and shift circumstances around in such a way that the behavior cannot just happen (e.g., adding childproof locks, moving things to a high shelf). That's behavior modification!
Or an example of a positive behavior: We want Johnny to complete his worksheet in class. We know that when he sits next to Billy, nothing gets done, but when he sits next to Bobby and Jimmy, he is able to stay on task. Therefore, we anticipate that behavior and make it more likely that it will happen by sitting him next to Bobby and Jimmy.

Anticipating behavior requires forethought and the use of previous experience to predict the future. Whenever parents can do this, it's like money in the bank. However, often behavior cannot be anticipated, and parents must deal with behaviors after they have taken place.

Research on behavior modification tells us that positive consequences make it more likely that a behavior will happen again, and negative consequences make it less likely that a behavior will happen again. Although this makes sense, parents may not be aware that they are sometimes inadvertently rewarding a negative behavior, making it more likely that it will happen again, or punishing a positive behavior, making it less likely that it will happen again. Let's assume that the parents of the defiant teen have tried rewards and punishments and feel frustrated and discouraged that they haven't worked. Why not? Because for the defiant teen, the connection between their Behavior and the Consequence for their behavior is very easily lost. Once lost, even the most sophisticated behavior-modification system is not going to change behavior. Therefore, we have to work diligently to keep that connection crystal clear. To do so, three concepts must be put into place.

Be Specific. For example, the parent says to the teen, "Clean your room." Fifteen minutes later, the parent looks into the room and notices that the bed isn't made. The parent says to the teen, who is playing a video game, "I thought I told you to clean your room!" The teen looks up at the hamper where he stuffed all his dirty clothes and says, "But I did clean my room." The parent responds, "But you didn't make your bed," and the teen says, "But you didn't ask me to make my bed." And he's right!

A parent may say at this point that every day of his life the teen has had to make his bed, so this isn't a very convincing example. But let's examine what happened. He may have gone to his room with good intentions and put the dirty clothes into the hamper. But then his eye is caught by the screen saver on his computer and he is drawn off-task by the allure of a far more interesting activity. Alternatively, the teen may say to himself, "I put the clothes in the hamper, that's good enough." A more specific request ("Make your bed" rather than "Clean your room") increases the likelihood that the teen will follow through.

Similarly, parents are often extremely vague about consequences, such as "Clean your room or you'll be in big trouble." This type of vague threat is probably so familiar to the teen that he can quite accurately predict that it will amount to almost nothing, and therefore it has no influence on his behavior. "Make your bed and you can use the telephone; if you do not make your bed by 8 A.M., you will lose telephone privileges for the rest of the day." is a very specific consequence. Don't be vague. Don't be general. Be specific.

Be Immediate. The next key component in keeping the connection between behavior and consequences clear is to be immediate. For each minute that passes between the teen's behavior and the consequence imposed by the parent, the connection becomes weaker and the consequence becomes less powerful. This is true even for positive consequences. Of course it is not always realistic to provide a consequence immediately (and it is certainly true that a delayed consequence is better than no consequence at all). Parents need to understand the difficulty with time perception their teen has. For teens, the world they live in is now. They do not think ahead
or reflect on the past unless assisted and guided to do so. Therefore, for consequences, either positive or negative, to have a powerful influence on their behavior, they must also occur now.

**Be Consistent.** The final concept that keeps the connection between behavior and consequences clear is to be consistent. Most teens can figure out that there are different rules for Mom in a good mood, Mom in a bad mood, Mom when Dad is around, Dad when Mom isn't around, and so forth, and they will abide by the rules accordingly. But for defiant teens, who have trouble internalizing and following rules anyway, the more variable the rules, the more likely it is that the teen will fail. When there is one set of rules, for Mom and Dad, for good mood and bad mood, and so on, it increases the likelihood that the teen will be able to comply. Similarly, when the consequence is consistent (e.g., You never get dessert if you don't eat your vegetables), the teen is more likely to be influenced by that consequence.

No parent is 100% specific, immediate, or consistent. It is not humanly possible. Our goal in counseling is simply to move parents in that direction.

Parents also need to be cognizant of the qualities of consequences that will make them more or less effective. First, consequences need to be meaningful, that is, meaningful to the teen. Many parents are frustrated, for example, that their teen is not motivated by "pride in accomplishment," "a sense of responsibility," or "respect for elders." These are weak goals - they do not result in an immediate, positive reward. Parents need to accept the fact that their teen is far more likely to be motivated by tangible, exciting, fun, stimulating consequences than by long-term, intangible ones.

Consequences for defiant teens also work best when they are frequent. Parents must understand that "consequences" encompass words of praise, a smile, a thumbs-up, reprimand, or a hug. Teens thrive on frequent feedback. It keeps them on track, like the automatic pilot in a jet plane. A "patter" of comments and interaction throughout the day will assist the teen to regulate his behavior.

Lastly, consequences need to be well balanced. If the number of negative consequences that the teen receives far outweighs the number of positive consequences, he will become demoralized and we will lose his motivation. This issue is so important that it will form the basis of our first specific exercise.

**The Coercive Behavior Cycle**

The last topic to be covered refers back to an earlier comment about how parents sometimes inadvertently reward a negative behavior, strange as that may sound. It is best to give you a common example of this behavior so you can determine whether it is relevant in your home:

Imagine it is a typical day in the life of a family with a defiant teen. The parent makes a request, such as "Take out the crash." If it is a particularly good day, the teen complies and life goes on.

Request ➔ Compliance

But if it truly is a typical day, the task does not get done (the teen is busy, she'll get to it later, etc.) and the request is repeated several times.

Request ➔ Noncompliance
After a while, the parent will probably begin to get irritated and will escalate the request, that is, make a few threats, raise his/her voice, assume an ugly look on his/her face. In response, the teen may comply or she may escalate her refusal, shout at the parent, slam the door, swear, and so on. This can go around until everyone is good and angry:

Request!!  →  Noncompliance!!!

At this point one of two things is likely to happen. Either the parent will force the teen to comply, through physical intimidation. Or, if the parent is tired, if they just can't deal with it anymore, they will give up.

Have you ever given up and done the task yourself? For the teen, this scenario is like gambling: the teen knows that when the parent makes a request, the odds are in his favor that if he resists, he will not have to comply. "Noncompliance" is the negative behavior – “give up” is the reward.

The first thing that you must do in this program is to break this cycle. You must no longer "give up." If you make a request, the teen must either comply or experience a negative consequence. Therefore, parents must think before they ask a teen to do something: "Do I have the energy to follow through, do I have a consequence planned, should I make a smaller request so I can handle the situation more easily?" For this early part of the program, parents may decide simply not to make any requests at all until they learn how to use consequences appropriately. This is acceptable.

**Common Family Reactions**

A great wealth of material is covered in this handout. You may feel overwhelmed. If you take it slow and steady, your understanding will become a source of empowerment as you confront your coercive teen. Be sure to anticipate an escalation in the teen's negative reactions to your attempts to reassert control over his/her behavior. Parents should interpret this not as a sign of failure, but as a sign of potential success. If you persist in their new parenting style, the teen's resistance will eventually decrease.

**Homework**

Observe and analyze your parenting style in the context of the issues discussed during this session. For example, you can experiment with being more specific, can make a list of consequences that are meaningful to the teen, or can try more frequent feedback. Finally, you are not to "give up" anymore.