



# Positive Behavior Strategies for Kids with Autism

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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>01</b>
<b>Chapter I: Understanding Behavior In Autism</b>	<b>02</b>
<b>Chapter II: Preventing Problem Behaviors</b>	<b>04</b>
<b>Chapter III: Responding to Challenging Behaviors</b>	<b>06</b>
<b>Chapter IV: Encouraging Positive Behaviors</b>	<b>07</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>08</b>

## INTRODUCTION

# Hello, I'm your parenting coach and educator, LaTanya Parsley, BCBA.

Parenting is an incredible adventure, filled with love, learning, and moments of joy that warm your heart. But let's be honest—every adventure has its challenges, especially when raising a child with autism. Some days might feel like you've got it all figured out, and others might feel like you're navigating uncharted waters without a map. And that's okay! You're here, showing up, learning, and growing alongside your child—and that's what truly matters.

As a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) specializing in applying evidence-based practices to support children with diverse needs, I have worked with hundreds of parents. Although every parent's experience and story is quite different, I have observed a common link between them all—parents simply want to know the best ways that they can support their child.



Here's to growth and connection along your parenting journey. As your parent coach and educator, I am here to guide, support and celebrate you every step of the way!

*LaTanya Parsley,*  
**BCBA**

CHAPTER I

# Understanding Behavior in Autism

Let's dive in together and demystify the behaviors that sometimes feel like puzzles. With the right tools, a dash of patience, and a whole lot of love, you'll be amazed at how much you and your child can accomplish.



## BEHAVIOR BASICS

We may see our child's behavior and instantly become baffled as to why he or she may be acting that way. Sometimes, the behaviors our kids display just don't seem to make sense. "Why is he crying? I just bought him his favorite toy" or, "why is she not doing what I'm asking her to do?". The first step is to understand that **all behavior is a form of communication**. For children with Autism, this communication often takes on unique forms that may be influenced by sensory issues, challenges in social interaction, and language barriers. Understanding the underlying reasons behind your child's behaviors is the first step towards addressing those behaviors effectively and compassionately. Let's break down those behavior basics.

### The ABCs of Behavior

**Antecedent:** What happens immediately before the behavior? This might include environmental factors, sensory stimuli, or specific interactions. For example, you may have asked your child to clean up their toys, or perhaps there was a loud noise right outside such as sirens. Another way of looking at the antecedent is the trigger that sets the behavior off.

**Behavior:** This is the observable action itself, such as screaming, hitting, or running away.

**Consequence:** What happens immediately after the behavior? This could include attention from a caregiver, access to a desired item, or removal from an overwhelming environment. The consequence provided after the behavior occurs usually determines whether or not the behavior will keep occurring in the future, also referred to as reinforcing the behavior.

By identifying patterns in the ABCs, as parents, you can better understand what triggers certain behaviors and what reinforces them, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

## CHAPTER 1 CONTINUED

**The Functions of Behavior**

Every behavior serves a purpose, often categorized into four primary functions:

**Escape:** The child wants to avoid or get away from an activity, person, or situation. For instance, a child may start to scream loudly every time you ask him to do his homework.

**Attention:** The behavior seeks to gain attention from others, such as crying to get a parent's focus.

**Access to Tangibles:** The child engages in the behavior to obtain a desired object or activity, like whining to get a toy.

**Sensory:** Some behaviors provide internal sensory stimulation or help the child manage overwhelming sensory input, such as rocking back and forth or flapping hands.

When you understand the function of a behavior, it will help you as parents respond appropriately. For example, if a child is seeking sensory input through mouthing objects that are potentially harmful, you can offer the child a safer alternative such as a chew toy. Or if your child constantly throws a tantrum to get a toy or another desired object, you can teach the child more appropriate ways to ask for the toy instead of throwing a tantrum.

**Unique Challenges in Autism**

Children with autism often experience behaviors shaped by their unique neurological and sensory profiles. These challenges may include:

- **Sensory Sensitivities:** Many children with autism are hypersensitive or hyposensitive to sensory input. So in a hypersensitive child, bright lights, loud sounds, or certain textures can be overwhelming, leading to behaviors like covering ears, avoiding certain foods, or having meltdowns. Whereas, in a hyposensitive child for example, they may seem nonreactive to painful stimuli like falling down and scraping their knee .
- **Communication Barriers:** Difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication can make it hard for children to express their needs. When they cannot articulate feelings like frustration, hunger, or fatigue, behaviors such as crying or aggression may become their form of expression.
- **Emotional Regulation:** Difficulty identifying and managing emotions can lead to intense reactions to seemingly small triggers. A slight change in routine, for instance, might cause significant distress.

**The Importance of Observation**

Effective behavior management starts with observation. As parents, you can use tools like behavior charts or journals to document when behaviors occur, what happens before and after, and any patterns that emerge. For example, you might notice that your child consistently has meltdowns during transitions from playtime to dinner. This insight can guide proactive strategies like using a visual schedule or offering a countdown timer for transitions.

Understanding behavior in autism is about seeing beyond the surface. Behaviors are not "good" or "bad" but rather clues to your child's needs and experiences. By approaching behaviors with curiosity and empathy, you as the parent can create an environment where your child feels understood and supported, paving the way for growth and connection.

CHAPTER II

# Preventing Problem Behavior



**Preventing problem behaviors is one of the most effective ways to support your child with autism. By addressing the environment, routines, and strategies before a problem arises, you can set your child up for success. Prevention is proactive, focusing on minimizing triggers and teaching alternative skills, ultimately reducing frustration for both you and your child.**

## **Setting Your Child Up for Success**

A predictable and structured environment can work wonders for your child. Many children thrive on routines, as they provide a sense of stability and security. Uncertainty can lead to anxiety, which often manifests as problem behavior. By establishing clear daily routines, you can help your child feel prepared and confident about what comes next.

Visual schedules are powerful tools for promoting predictability. Using pictures, icons, or words, these schedules outline the day's events in a way that children can easily understand. For example, a visual schedule might show breakfast, playtime, therapy, lunch, and naptime. Incorporating "first-then" language ("First homework, then screen time") as well as verbal warnings, ("You have 5 minutes until we move on to the next activity") can also help your child transition between activities with less resistance.

Social stories are another valuable resource. These personalized, simple narratives describe social situations and appropriate behaviors, helping your child prepare for events that might otherwise be overwhelming. For instance, a social story about visiting the dentist might include step-by-step descriptions of what will happen, reducing anxiety about the unknown.

## **Adapting the Environment**

The physical environment plays a critical role in preventing problem behaviors. Sensory sensitivities are common in children with autism, and an overwhelming environment can easily trigger distress.

Creating sensory-friendly spaces at home can help your child self-regulate. This might include a quiet corner with calming items like weighted blankets, noise-canceling headphones, or soft lighting. Reducing clutter and minimizing loud noises or bright lights in shared spaces can also create a more calming atmosphere.

Proactively identifying and addressing potential triggers is another key step. For example, if large crowds or noisy environments are overwhelming, you might choose quieter times to visit public places or use headphones to buffer sound.

### **The Role of Positive Reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement is a cornerstone of preventing problem behaviors. By focusing on rewarding desired behaviors, you can encourage your child to repeat those actions in the future.

For example, if your child uses words or gestures to request a toy instead of grabbing it, immediately acknowledging and rewarding the effort to use words or gestures instead of grabbing the toy, reinforces or increases the occurrence of the desirable communication skill happening in the future. Rewards don't have to be elaborate—they can include verbal praise, a favorite activity, or a small treat. The key is to make the reinforcement immediate and meaningful to the child.

Consistency is crucial when using positive reinforcement. Everyone involved in your child's care should work together to ensure that appropriate behaviors are consistently acknowledged and rewarded. This unified approach helps your child learn that these behaviors are beneficial in all settings, not just at home or during therapy.

### **Empowering Your Child Through Choices**

Allowing children to make choices is another effective prevention strategy. Giving a child a sense of control—such as choosing between two snack options or deciding which activity to do first—can reduce power struggles and increase cooperation. Simple choices empower children while helping them feel respected and understood.

### **Building Skills to Prevent Escalation**

Prevention isn't just about avoiding problems—it's also about teaching children skills to manage challenges before they escalate. Teaching coping strategies, such as deep breathing, using a calming tool, or asking for help, equips children to navigate stressful situations more effectively.

Functional communication training (FCT) is especially impactful. For nonverbal or minimally verbal children, teaching alternative communication methods—such as using sign language, communication boards, or speech devices—can drastically reduce frustration-related behaviors. When your child learns they can communicate their needs effectively, they're less likely to resort to problem behaviors.

Preventing problem behaviors requires a proactive, compassionate approach that addresses your child's environment, routines, and skill set. By creating a predictable and sensory-friendly environment, using tools like visual schedules and social stories, and employing positive reinforcement, you can significantly reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviors. Prevention is about understanding your child's needs and equipping them with the tools to succeed—before problems arise. When prevention strategies are implemented effectively, families can focus less on managing behaviors and more on celebrating progress and connection.

## CHAPTER III

# Responding to Challenging Behaviors

**Challenging behaviors are a reality for many families raising children with autism. These behaviors can be frustrating, confusing, and even exhausting, but they are also opportunities to understand your child better and teach them new skills. Responding effectively to challenging behaviors requires a calm, thoughtful approach that focuses on addressing the behavior's underlying cause, not just the behavior itself.**



## Staying Calm Under Pressure

The first step in responding to any challenging behavior is managing your own emotions. Children often pick up on their caregivers' emotional states, and staying calm can help de-escalate a situation before it worsens. This is easier said than done, especially when emotions are running high, but practicing self-regulation techniques can make a big difference. Simple strategies such as taking deep breaths, stepping away for a brief moment (when safe to do so), or reminding yourself that the behavior is a form of communication (remember every behavior has a purpose) can help you stay composed. Modeling calm behavior also sets an example for your child, showing them how to navigate difficult emotions.

## Understanding Escalation

Challenging behaviors often follow a predictable pattern of escalation. Recognizing the early signs can help you intervene before the behavior intensifies. The escalation process typically includes:

1. **Trigger Phase:** Something happens that begins to upset the child, such as a sensory overload or unmet need.
2. **Agitation Phase:** The child begins to show signs of distress, such as pacing, whining, or fidgeting.
3. **Meltdown or Crisis Phase:** The child engages in the peak of the challenging behavior, such as yelling, hitting, or crying.

By responding early during the trigger or agitation phase, you can prevent the behavior from reaching its peak. This might involve redirecting the child, offering a calming activity, or addressing their unmet need.



## Using De-escalation Strategies

When a challenging behavior occurs, de-escalation techniques can help reduce tension and bring the situation under control.

- **Redirect Attention:** If your child is fixated on something upsetting, redirecting their attention to a preferred activity or item can help them shift focus.
- **Offer a Break:** Creating a safe, quiet space for your child to calm down can be highly effective. Let them know it's okay to take a moment to regroup.
- **Provide Clear, Simple Instructions:** During moments of distress, children with autism may struggle to process complex language. Using short, clear instructions can help them understand what to do next.

## Avoiding Power Struggles

Power struggles can quickly escalate challenging behaviors. Instead of insisting on immediate compliance, offer choices or negotiate a compromise. For example, if your child resists cleaning up their toys, you might say, "Would you like to clean up the blocks first or the cars?" Providing options empowers your child and reduces resistance.





CHAPTER IV

# Encouraging Positive Behaviors

## **The Power of Positive Reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement is one of the most effective tools for encouraging positive behaviors. When children receive meaningful rewards for their actions, they are more likely to repeat those behaviors in the future.

Reinforcers can take many forms, such as praise, a favorite toy, a special activity, or even a simple high-five. The key is to make the reinforcement immediate and meaningful to the child. For example, if your child uses words instead of crying to ask for a snack, immediately acknowledge their effort: "Great job using your words! Here's your snack."

## **Shaping New Behaviors**

Shaping is a technique that involves breaking a desired behavior into small, manageable steps and reinforcing progress along the way. For example, if you want to encourage your child to brush their teeth independently, start by praising them for holding the toothbrush, then for putting toothpaste on it, and eventually for brushing without assistance. By celebrating each small step, you build momentum toward the larger goal.

## **Modeling Positive Behaviors**

Children with autism often learn by observing those around them. Modeling positive behaviors, such as sharing, taking turns, or using polite language, helps them understand what is expected. Narrate your actions as you demonstrate these behaviors: "I'm going to take turns with the ball now. Your turn is next!" This approach provides a clear example for your child to follow.



## CONCLUSION

# Each Step Forward is a Victory Worth Celebrating

In this book, we explored practical strategies to handle challenging behaviors, foster positive interactions, and build a stronger connection with your child. My hope is that you now understand that every behavior—no matter how confusing or frustrating it may seem—has a reason behind it. Once we understand the why, we can figure out the how: how to respond, how to support, and how to create an environment where your child can thrive.

Think of this book as a friendly guide, not a rulebook. Every child with autism is wonderfully unique, so not every tip will be a perfect fit. That's okay! Take what resonates, adapt it to your family's needs, and leave the rest.

Above all, know this: you are not alone. There's a whole community of parents, caregivers, and professionals who are cheering you on. Whether you're just beginning this journey or have been on the road for years, you are doing amazing work.

Encouraging positive behaviors in children with autism is a journey of perseverance, compassion, and celebration. By using strategies such as positive reinforcement, shaping new behaviors, and creating a supportive environment, you can guide your child towards success.

Remember, progress isn't always linear, and every small step forward is a victory worth celebrating. With determination, solicitude, and the tools you've gained from this book, you have what it takes to support your child and empower them to reach their fullest potential.

If you're looking for more personalized guidance, we're here to help. Sign up for 1:1 parent coaching and training to dive deeper into your family's unique challenges and create a tailored roadmap for success. Together, we'll work toward solutions that meet your child's needs and strengthen your family dynamic. Visit [www.latanyaparsley.com](http://www.latanyaparsley.com) to get started.

You've already proven your commitment by seeking out resources and learning new strategies. Now, let's take the next step together. Your child deserves the best—and so do you.