

Challenging Behavior

Navigating Behavioral Issues at Church

Managing challenging behaviors is simple, although not necessarily easy. There is no “silver bullet” to “perfect behavior.” But we can look for the reasons behind behavior and seek ways to promote more appropriate behavior. You can’t control behavior, but you can do things that make it easier for your students to do the right thing. Helping promote appropriate behaviors is a means to an end; the opportunity to hear the gospel, grow in Christ, and fellowship with other believers.

Some keys to understanding behavior:

All behavior is communication For every effect, there is a cause! Outside stimuli like bright lights, loud noises, and disrupted routines may be the cause of a particular behavior. As you get to know each individual, you will likely notice patterns. Talking with parents or caregivers will provide important information for determining the triggers that cause challenging behaviors. Challenging behavior may not be bad behavior but instead be their way of saying, “I’m overstimulated and don’t know how to ask for help.”

Consistency is essential Individuals with behavioral issues may struggle to understand the flow of a weekly program. Walking around and talking are appropriate behaviors during free time, but inappropriate behaviors during a teaching time. Keeping a consistent schedule of activities helps everyone anticipate and prepare for what’s coming next. Reinforcement systems (rewards and punishments) should similarly be used with consistency. What might seem like bad behavior may actually be a misunderstanding of what is expected at a given moment.

Overstimulation is not bad behavior Many individuals with autism have sensory processing issues, which may cause extreme reactions to things like fluorescent lights, loud noises, or strong scents. Sensory processing issues may also cause sensory seeking behavior, such as foot stomping, touching a certain texture, or chewing on objects. Rather than dealing with these behaviors as character issues, seek first to address the sensory issue.

Some guidelines for easing overstimulation include, but are not limited to:

- Limit options for playtime to 2-3 choices
- Change activities every 5-10 minutes
- Keep general noise levels to a lower volume
- Set firm boundaries and stick to them
- Provide sensory “breaks” in quiet areas
- Provide sensory fidget toys (prickly balls, Play-Doh) during high concentration times, like a story or teaching time.

What about extreme behaviors? Volcanoes don't erupt without warning. And yet, for those who aren't paying attention, the explosion seems to come in an instant. Behavior doesn't occur in a vacuum, either. Techniques for managing behaviors are meant to prevent "volcanic eruptions," but sometimes, the volcano erupts anyway. What do we do when there is an extreme behavior?

Meltdowns

- Stay calm
- Create distance between the child and their peers.
- Seek help from another leader. (An adult should never be alone with a child.)
- Do your best to determine and eliminate the cause of the meltdown.
- Resist the urge to immediately contact parents, unless the child is a danger to themselves or others.

Lack of Cooperation

- Stay calm and clarify expectations.
- Use first/then language. Tell the child, "first _____, then _____," so that the child is aware of the next activity.
- Introduce reward incentives. Find what motivates and excites your friend. "If you sit quietly during the story you can swing for 3 minutes."

Runners

- Limit the number of exits.
- If a child does exit from a classroom, a minimum of two people should follow.
- Students exhibiting this behavior are likely running from or to something, so unlocking the trigger is key.
- Introduce measures to help your friend understand the schedule and transitions for the day.
- Visual schedules, timers, and one-on-one buddies are helpful tools. Visual timers help people who struggle with "feeling" how long things should last. They might be thinking, "I'm done with crafts and after the craft is done we go to the car," and then try to run to the parking lot because they think that's what comes next.

Conclusion You do not need to be an expert on behavioral strategies, nor are you engaging in behavioral therapy at church. However, continuity between how behaviors are managed at school and at home can be a great benefit at church. Don't be afraid to ask parents, caregivers, and the professional therapists in an individual's life for tips on what will also work at church.

And remember, we want church to be a loving, positive, fun experience! You will have days that are incredibly challenging—a day you are certain you won't ever unlock the key to success with a child or adult. Don't quit. Look to find joy in each person for who they are. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and He will.

Many of these techniques will apply to adults with intellectual or developmental disabilities. **But be sure to treat them as adults!*