

Practical Functional Assessment and Skill-Based Treatment of Severe Problem Behavior **Presented by Dr. Gregory Hanley**

The main take home points

Severe problem behavior (e.g., self-injury, aggression, property destruction) is prevalent among person with autism.

Severe problem behavior persists, in large part, because it produces personally relevant outcomes (reinforcers) for the person who exhibits it.

All children with autism and their families are capable of living a life free from severe problem behavior.

Freedom from problem behavior is possible and probable when the skills of communication, toleration, and a range of contextually appropriate behaviors are taught in a context in which problem behavior was shown to occur and then generalized to additional contexts and to relevant people and places.

The process

A practical functional assessment (PFA) is used to inform the skill-based treatment (SBT) process. A PFA involves an interview and then a brief analysis. This occurs in one or two visits. The priorities in a PFA process are safety, dignity, and rapport building; an understanding of why problem behavior is occurring follows.

The first PFA step is to gather information via interview about the personally relevant outcomes and the situations in which problem behavior is typically evoked.

The second PFA step is to design, and have the child/client experience, a context in which the personally relevant reinforcers are freely and continuously available; this is done to establish rapport and trust and to ensure that zero levels of problem behavior and high levels of engagement can be achieved.

Once it is evident that a child/client is happy, relaxed, and engaged, the third PFA step is to introduce an evocative situation, usually by signaling then progressively removing the personally relevant reinforcers, and then immediately providing access to all reinforcers following the initial instance of a problem behavior or an observable indicator that it may occur. This step allows the team to understand whether the child is motivated and whether they can safely turn off problem behavior once it starts to occur. By repeating these interactions, the child learns that they are effective in this context while the team learns that they have a properly motivating context to teach skills.

The skill-based treatment (SBT) process follows directly from the PFA

The skills of communication, toleration, and a range of contextually appropriate behaviors (CABs) are progressively developed through repeated practice sessions in the same context that was shown to be sufficiently safe and motivating in the PFA. Common CAB chains include transitioning to and completing academic work, playing independently, completing hygiene activities and chores, or holding a multi-topic conversation.

All SBT processes start by consistently providing access to all of the personally relevant reinforcers for simple communication responses. A somewhat errorless process then ensues to stretch the developmental appropriateness of responses while teaching the child/client what to do when they cannot have their way.

The skills of communication, toleration, and CABs then persist because they are reinforced on an unpredictable and intermittent schedule, the same schedule that presumably resulted in their repertoire of problem behavior. By providing immediate access to personally relevant reinforcers for all important behaviors some of the time, they maintain while children/clients learn how to behave appropriately despite ambiguity, delay, and disappointment. In other words, trust in relationships is retained and hope is fostered within this process.