

Know your A-B-Cs!



Antecedent - Behavior - Consequence

The A-B-C Model states that prior to all human behaviors, a person is presented with an antecedent situation. Based on that situation, a person has certain self-talk (thoughts) that give rise to feelings and then to the behavior that they choose to exhibit. This behavior then results in consequences.

ANTECEDENT EVENTS

This is the situation or condition immediately preceding a behavior. Often this antecedent is a “cue” to the person to perform the behavior. For example, a doorbell ringing is a cue to go to the door and answer it. If you examine the antecedents, you can start determining patterns of behavior. For example, a youth may argue when told “No” but not when asked to complete a task. By determining the pattern, one knows where to focus the intervention. Changing the antecedent may change the behavior. For example, certain behaviors by the adult may be followed by a youth temper tantrum. Revising the adult behavior may change the youth behavior. For example, a child throws a tantrum when told to go to bed. The antecedent, however, is the parent interrupting the child’s favorite TV show and telling her to go to bed. Negotiating a bedtime after the show can change the child’s behavior. Vague situations, especially vague verbal or nonverbal responses are easily distorted or misinterpreted by problematic youth can be “cues” that trigger unexpected behaviors.



BEHAVIORS



Behaviors are actions that are **FUNCTIONAL**: all behaviors occur within a context of environmental events. A youth engages in a particular behavior to have some effect on his/her surroundings. The result of the youth’s behavior then has an effect on the youth. This “bi-directional” relationship is what “functional” means.

CONSEQUENT EVENTS

These are the events or outcomes that follow a particular behavior. They may be punishing or extinguishing (reducing the probability of repeating the behavior), or reinforcing (increasing the probability of repeating the behavior). While punishment can reduce a behavior, it also creates strong emotional reactions and may end up just increasing the probability of another negative behavior. Whether events are punishing or reinforcing is determined by whether the behavior increases or decreases, not by whether the person controlling the consequence believes the event is punishing or rewarding. Responding or criticizing “nuisance” behaviors can reinforce them simply because the behavior received attention. Careful examination of the A-B-C patterns over time can determine whether the consequence is affecting the particular behavior with the desired results.



USING A-B-C

Rarely does one antecedent or one consequence explain a behavior. Antecedents include learned patterns of behavior, perceptions of cues or situations (self-talk), the immediate physical environment (temperature, air quality, food quality), the immediate social environment (peer interaction and behavior, staff attitude, family interaction [visits, phone calls]). Changing behavior requires modifying antecedents, consequences, and thinking to be most effective. Changing the antecedents changes the cues for the behavior. Changing the consequence changes the probability of the behavior. Changing the thinking changes perceptions of the antecedent/cues and the consequences; it enables breaking the link between the antecedent and the behavior (self-talk/feelings).

