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The Messages of Behavior

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Autism And Behavior

Over the past decade, millions of people around the world have seen the movie Rain Man, starring Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise. For many people, the movie provided them with their first glimpse into the world of someone with the disability of autism. Perhaps this was also your introduction to autism spectrum disorders.**

Even now, when you hear the word "autism," are images of scenes from that unforgettable movie evoked inside your head? Many of us still can picture Raymond learning how to dance, getting his first kiss, and counting cards and toothpicks. But Rain Man was not just about positive or exceptional events in the life of a person with autism. This movie was also about the evolution of relationships and the harsh reality of the stresses related to having this disability. We saw Raymond get upset when he thought he might miss seeing Judge Wapner in People's Court. We saw him rocking when he was distressed. We also heard his screams when the smoke detector was suddenly activated while he was cooking in his brother's kitchen. These latter less positive images are also a part of autism.

Some of us know people who have autism and we can see additional mental images that emerge from our real life experiences. Maybe you have similar images swirling inside your head. Perhaps you can picture the following scenarios:

Scene #1

A young adult paces the living room of his home. He repeatedly slaps himself in the face. Periodically, he vigorously bangs his head against the wall.

Scene #2

A middle-aged man in a workshop for people with disabilities sits working at an assembly task. Suddenly, he angrily begins to throw the assembly parts around the room.

Scene #3

An elementary school child sits in a classroom with 30 other children. After sitting passively for 10 minutes, he deliberately puts his head down on his desk. He steadfastly refuses to begin his schoolwork.

Regardless of whether we personally know someone who has autism or if our knowledge is limited to our exposure to Rain Man, our minds will seek to attach a label or a word to describe or classify such images. Chances are the word "behavior" with a negative connotation will be one of the associated words. It is less likely that we would use the notion or idea of a communication problem to describe these mental pictures.

In the movies and in reality, autism, communication, and behavior problems can intertwine. We are not accustomed to thinking that a person may have a communication disability when we see him or her engaged in what we might call "negative behaviors." Not only are we not used to thinking of communication and behavior as related, but we may not be able to see any messages hidden within the behavior. We may need to learn how to look for the masked messages. We may also need to learn how to interpret the messages and how to respond to them. This may take time and training. We can begin, however, by understanding the connection between communication and behavior. Let us use our three previous negative behavior scenes to explore this concept.



The Messages of Behavior

The three negative behaviors described above are examples of potential communicative messages. The exact meaning of any one of them would depend upon the circumstances surrounding each real situation. Sometimes a behavior such as screaming may represent two different messages in what seem like identical circumstances. To help you understand the idea of messages hidden in behavior, let's re-examine the three scenes.

Scene #1

In the self-injury situation, the person might have been protesting an unexpected change in his daily activity schedule. He was expecting to go out to eat. No one remembered to tell him in advance that the activity was postponed until tomorrow. To put it mildly, he is upset and disappointed.

Scene #2

In the throwing of materials situation, the person might be communicating: (a) boredom with the task at hand, and (b) the need for a break. Because of an inability to talk, this man cannot tell anyone in a direct fashion how bored he is with doing the same task day after day. He needs a break, but, more importantly, he needs a greater variety of challenging tasks to fill his day.

Scene #3

In the non-compliance situation, the child might be confused about the assignment and needs help or an explanation. He may have been unable to process all of the spoken instructions when they were given to the class ten minutes ago. Now he does not know what to do and feels he is a failure.

Why Use Negative Behavior?

A reasonable question to ask is "If someone really wants to communicate a message, why would he or she use a negative behavior?" The reason is that some people with autism spectrum disorders have difficulty producing conventional communication. You and I may have skills that the person with autism may not have. You and I would know what to do in each situation. You could tell someone that you needed a break. I could seek a reason for the schedule change. We both would raise our hands and ask for additional directions. Some individuals with autism may be unable to do any of these things unless someone actively teaches them better communication skills. Other individuals may need reminders before they will use the more positive communication strategies.

Many people with autism cannot speak. Others: (a) may have some ability to talk, but may have limited skills (remember Raymond in Rain Man?); (b) may become inarticulate and not be able to use their skills when they are in a distressing situation; or (c) may freeze and not be able to find or retrieve the right words to clearly express their message when they are under stress. Instead, people with autism often use a means of communicating that is immediate and effective, i.e., negative behaviors.

A negative behavior almost certainly will get someone's attention. It also may quickly achieve the desired intent. The person with autism may have learned the effectiveness of a given negative behavior when more subtle communicative messages were ignored. For example, in the wanting-a-break situation (scene #2), the following may have occurred:

-  His wiggling around in a chair was too subtle of a message. No one had a clue that he needed a break and they overlooked or ignored the wiggling.
-  His standing up was not an effective cue either. The person with autism was told to sit down.
-  His throwing of materials, however, communicated a clear message. The excitement broke the boredom. The person got to leave the task. As punishment, he was sent to a time out area. He may not have perceived time out as a punishment. He may have seen it as a welcome relief from his dreary assigned task.



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A Behavior Plan That Addresses Communication Skills

A major component of any behavior plan involves teaching the person with autism a socially acceptable way of communicating a message. This means giving the person the power to communicate in a better way. Punishment will not teach positive skills. Instead, punishment may ensure that the behavior occurs again. For example, the next time the person wants a break, he may immediately throw materials. Why shouldn't he do this? After all, the negative behavior previously got him the desired outcome. We all tend to use behaviors that work effectively.

Whenever you think of a person with autism, remember that behavior and communication go hand in hand. Whenever you have opportunities for interacting with people with autism, resist your impulse to get angry when a negative behavior occurs. Resist your impulse to punish. Think about the link between behavior and communication problems.

Ask yourself these questions after a behavioral incident:

-  What might the person really be communicating?
-  What other means could the person have used to give you the same message?
-  Would a communication board or picture message board have helped?
-  How could you become involved in teaching him/her better ways to communicate?

We can influence the behavior of a person with autism if we learn strategies, which foster good communication skills development. It makes sense to help each individual become a better communicator. As a result, he or she should become less dependent on using negative behaviors to communicate. With improved communication skills, the person with autism may have a better relationship with you and with other people. Better relationships and lifelong friendships don't occur just in the movies. They also can occur in our own personal Rain Man experiences with people who have autism spectrum disorders. We, however, may need to play an active role in fostering these types of positive outcomes.

See the following publication for more information:

Reichle, J., & Wacker, D. (1993). **Communicative alternatives to challenging behaviors: Integrating functional assessment and intervention strategies**. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

* The emphasis upon negative behavior in this publication represents a strategy designed to draw attention to the link between communication skills and behavior. The staff of the IRCA clearly recognize and value the positive qualities and talents of individuals with autism. No offense to people with autism is intended.

** Autism spectrum disorders is another term for the DSM IV category of Pervasive Developmental Disorder. The continuum includes autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Rett's Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder - NOS (not otherwise specified).

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