

Behavior & Discipleship

In all instances of misbehavior, we need to ask the question, **why?** *Why have the rules that are set been put into place? Why has my response to misbehavior been chosen?* It is vital that our response be seen through the lens of discipleship. It is not merely a means to gain control or enforce preferences, but to evaluate situations and our responses with greater clarity and Gospel focus.

BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION THAT EXPRESSES:

- Something is wrong (ex: sensory overload).
- A child doesn't know what to do (ex: processing overload or malfunction).
- Physical exhaustion or illness.
- Lack of skills.

BEHAVIOR CAN BE CAUSED BY:

- Mental health diagnoses (ADD/ODD/Bipolar/Schizo, Depression, Anxiety)
- Side effects of medication
- Trauma/post-traumatic stress
- Brain injury
- Child abuse/neglect
- Attachment disorders
- Sensory integration
- Puberty/hormones
- Emotional dysregulation
- Other contributing factors:
 - Exhaustion/sleep deprivation
 - Malnutrition/dehydration
 - Family circumstances
 - School stress

COMMON BEHAVIORS THAT CAN OCCUR:

- Running
- Distraction
- Inability to maintain eye contact
- Disengaged/shutdown
- Crying
- Big and uncontrolled emotion
- Aggression
- Outbursts
- Vocalizations
- Fight or flight
- Task avoidance
- Repetitive stereotypic movements or stimming (which may be a child's attempt to emotionally regulate themselves)
- Tantrums and meltdowns*

* There is a significant difference for children with special needs between a **TANTRUM** and a **MELTDOWN**.

- **TANTRUMS** communicate the desire to manipulate your behavior as a leader.
- **MELTDOWNS** communicate a lack of skills in regulating their response to something that is overwhelming.

TANTRUMS and **MELTDOWNS** are best addressed in different ways.

- When a student is experiencing a **TANTRUM**, set clear boundaries.
- When a student is experiencing a **MELTDOWN**, handle them with gentleness and the knowledge that you are right there with them.
- Distractions are a great tool to help kids break loose from the emotional tidal wave of a **MELTDOWN**.



Simple Strategies to Help with Behavior

Create clear ministry standards.

Train and equip your **WHOLE** team.

- Push for consistency across leadership by having uniform responses to specific situations.
- Consider allergies when planning food and activities (ex: latex balloons).

Join students on their level.

- Don't ask questions.
Children are concrete thinkers. Tell and instruct.
- Provide options to help them with decision-making.
Example: "You have two choices, Jason, you can sit with us for the Bible story or you can take a break in the quiet room. Let's make a choice!"
- Don't skip steps when giving instructions.
Example: If you expect a child to do A and B, arriving at C, don't verbalize A and C and assume the child knows B.
- Create a plan for elopers, tantrums, and meltdowns.
- Build accommodations and prompts.
Accommodations are amazing tools that support children affected by special needs. A child's success is measured by their ability to do something or participate, and celebrated - with or without accommodation.

*Learn more at www.aacandautism.com/lamp

** Learn more at www.pecsusa.com/pecs/

Communicate with kids clearly and effectively.

- Lower your voice. Don't raise it.
- Limit inferences, words with dual meanings, metaphors, similes, or idioms.
- Learn communication devices, sign language, or necessary communication systems Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)*, Language Acquisition through Motor Planning (LAMP)** , etc.

Remember that behavior is communication and not always an issue of compliance.

- Reduce triggers and unnecessary stimuli.
- Give choices within parameters.
- Walk students through problem-solving.
- Offer replacement behavior.

Develop a plan.

- Regulate yourself first in difficult situations.
- Help the child regulate until they can do it on their own.
- Document and implement strategies to de-escalate.

Plan ahead of time for change and transition.

- Discuss skills and strategies with families.
- Contact parents with schedule changes or substitute/absent leaders.
- Provide visual schedules or social stories.
- Be careful of time references unless you plan to honor them.

For more insight on discipling kids and students with special needs check out
Awana's Special Needs Guide.