



Understanding Behavior as Communication

A practical guide for families, educators, and support teams

Why This Matters

Behavior is often misunderstood.
When behavior is challenging, disruptive, or unexpected, it's easy to focus on stopping the behavior rather than understanding it.

At THRIVE, we start from a different place:

Behavior is communication.

Every behavior — positive or challenging — is a child's way of telling us something.
When we understand *what* a behavior is communicating, we can respond with support instead of punishment.

What Does “Behavior as Communication” Mean?

Behavior communicates needs, skills, and experiences — especially when a student does not yet have the tools to express them in another way.

A child may be communicating:

- “This is too hard.”
- “I don't understand.”
- “I'm overwhelmed.”
- “I need help.”
- “I need a break.”
- “I don't feel safe.”
- “I want attention or connection.”

Understanding behavior as communication helps teams move from asking:
“How do we stop this?”
to
“What is this behavior telling us?”

What Is the “Function of Behavior”?

The function of behavior is the *reason* a behavior happens — what the student is getting or avoiding by engaging in it.

Most behaviors fall into one (or more) of these common functions:

1. To Get Attention

The student may be seeking:

- Adult attention
- Peer interaction
- Connection or reassurance

This can look like calling out, joking, interrupting, or acting out.

2. To Escape or Avoid

The student may be trying to avoid:

- A difficult task
- A non-preferred activity
- Sensory overload
- Anxiety-provoking situations

This can look like refusal, leaving the area, shutdown, or disruptive behavior.

3. To Get Something Tangible

The student wants access to:

- An item
- A preferred activity
- A specific person

This may show up as grabbing, arguing, or repeated requests.

4. Sensory or Regulation Needs

The behavior itself helps the student:

- Regulate their body

- Manage sensory input
- Calm or stimulate themselves

Examples include movement, noise-making, fidgeting, or repetitive actions.

Why Understanding the Function Matters

If we respond to behavior without understanding its function, supports often fail.

For example:

- Giving consequences for escape-based behavior can increase anxiety
- Ignoring attention-seeking behavior without teaching replacement skills can escalate it
- Removing sensory supports can make regulation harder, not better

When we understand the *why*, we can:

- Teach new skills
 - Reduce stress and frustration
 - Create proactive supports
 - Build trust and safety
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Behavior Is Not About “Good” or “Bad”

Behavior is not:

- A moral failure
- A lack of motivation
- A lack of effort
- “Manipulation”

Behavior reflects skill gaps, unmet needs, and nervous system responses.

When students are supported — not shamed — behavior improves.

What This Means for Support Plans

Effective support plans focus on:

- Prevention (what we can change before behavior happens)
- Skill-building (what the student needs to learn)
- Regulation (how the student can feel safe and calm)
- Consistency (how adults respond)

This is why tools like:

- Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs)
- Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs)
- Trauma-informed practices

are so important — they look beyond the surface behavior.

Helpful Questions for Teams

When behavior shows up, teams can ask:

- What might the student be communicating?
 - When does this behavior happen most often?
 - What happens right before and right after?
 - What skills might be missing?
 - How can we support regulation and safety first?
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A Gentle Reminder

All behavior makes sense in context.

When we slow down, get curious, and work together, we create environments where students can learn, grow, and feel understood.

Need Support?

THRIVE Student Support & Behavior Consulting partners with families and schools to:

- Understand behavior
- Identify underlying needs
- Build practical, compassionate support plans

 info@thrivessbc.com
 <https://thrivessbc.com>