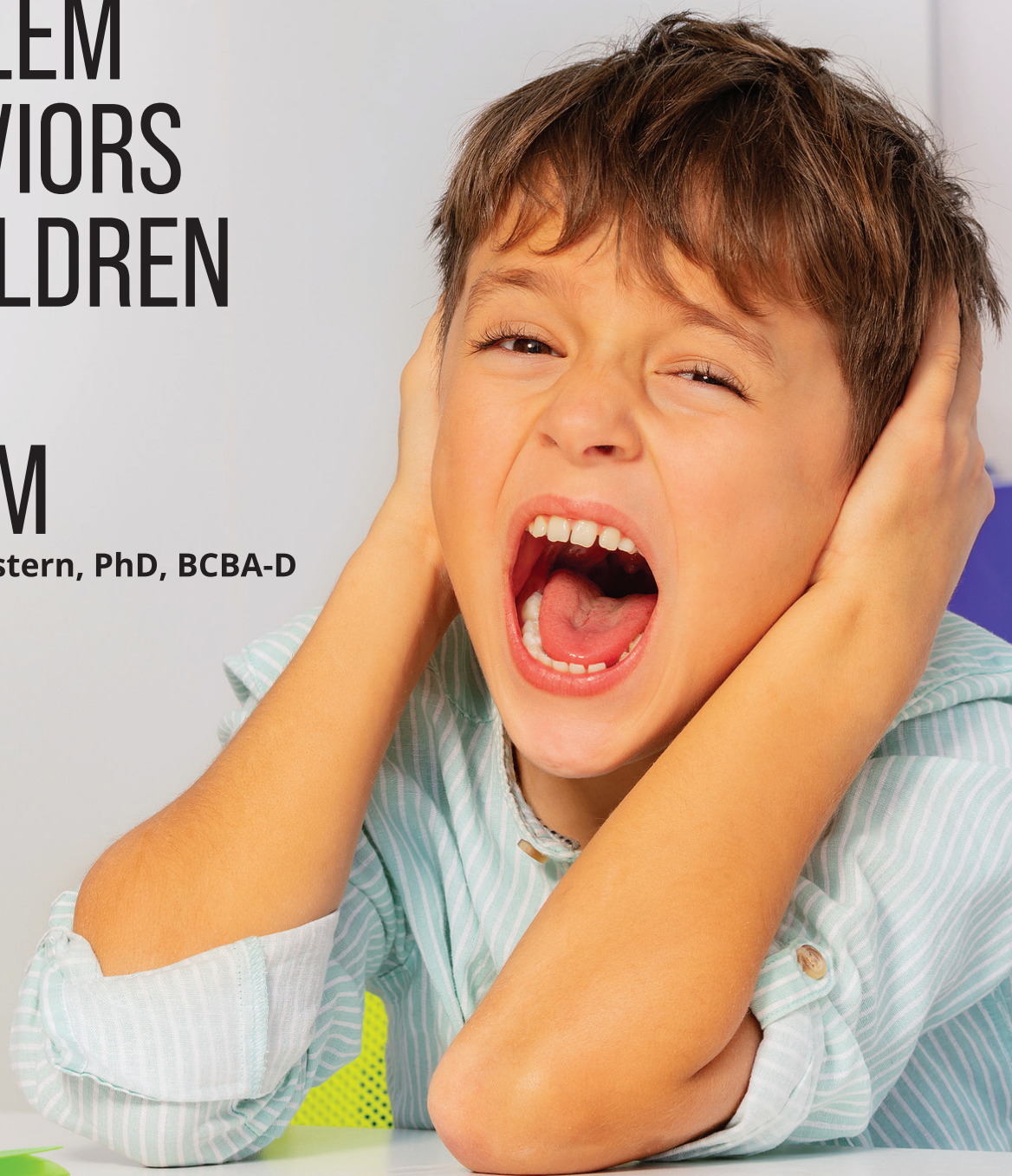


Recent Research
on the Treatment of

PROBLEM BEHAVIORS IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

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Children with autism can benefit from instruction in language, social skills, self-help skills, cognitive abilities, motor skills, and academics. If children have problem behaviors, however, it can interfere with their ability to learn these skills. Although estimates vary, between 50 and 64 percent of children with autism engage in significant problem behaviors.^{1,2} Parents often fear that their children's lifestyle will be dictated by these behaviors. Fortunately, effective treatments are available. Recent research in applied behavior analysis by Dr. Gregory Hanley and his colleagues has significantly improved our knowledge of the best way to treat problem behaviors. We now have convincing evidence that many children with autism can lead lives free of the restrictions that inevitably occur as a result of severe problem behaviors.

Focus on “Why” not “What”

For the last 40 years or so, behavior analysts have emphasized the importance of focusing on why problem behaviors occur rather than on the specific behaviors. Whether the problem behavior is throwing, hitting, or screaming, there is no specific treatment for such behaviors. Instead, treatment focuses on the reason for the behavior. Does the child hit because he/she wants something and was told no? Is it because he/she doesn't want to do something the adult requested? Perhaps he/she wants the adult to provide attention in a very specific way, or could even be seeking sensory stimulation. Although throwing, hitting, and screaming may look different depending on the child, it is likely that the reasons for the behaviors are similar.

In fact, researchers recently discovered that, in the vast majority of cases, the “whys” for an individual child are likely to be very similar for all types of behavior problems.³ This important finding has led to major improvements in our treatment approaches.

Do Things Get Worse Before They Get Better?

Many parents who have tried to get help with problem behaviors have been told, that it “gets worse before it gets better.” This can scare some parents away from seeking treatment. Other parents start treatment but decide not to continue if they see behavior problems increase. Fortunately, new research suggests that there are ways to treat problem behaviors without making them worse.

A child with autism who has behavioral issues usually engages in many different problem behaviors. This could include aggression, self-injurious behavior, tantrums, crying, screaming, falling to the floor, throwing objects, and destroying property. Often they are also accompanied by minor problem behaviors that parents may overlook, such as foot-stomping, grimacing, or table slapping. In the past, we assumed that we should focus on the most significant problem behaviors first, since we wouldn't focus on all at once. That was before we learned that a child might engage in a variety of different types of problem behaviors for reasons that may be very similar.

This new way of thinking allows us to do an assessment of foot stomping, for example, and then to treat that specific behavior. The result is that we rarely see any dangerous self-injury or aggression during treatment, and we successfully treat those behaviors. Such an approach improves the safety of the assessment and treatment process, and usually prevents the problem of things getting worse before they get better. The process becomes more positive, empowering, and dignified for the child. Recent research has shown that this approach is effective in producing meaningful outcomes.⁴ While there is always more to do and research is ongoing, this exciting development has been welcomed by many in the field.



Is There Only One Reason for Problem Behavior?

For many years, testing focused on determining the single cause of the problem behavior for each individual child with autism. Only if this was unsuccessful did attention turn to testing for multiple reasons. The reality is that most parents with an autistic child would identify many reasons for their child's problem behaviors. On occasion, science seems to lag behind what otherwise seems obvious. Now, research has clearly shown that there are often multiple reasons for problem behavior.⁵ This topic is still hotly debated by researchers and practitioners. While there is currently no consensus on the best way to assess and treat problem behaviors, treatment approaches that emphasize the likelihood of multiple reasons for the problem behaviors in most cases, have been successful.⁶

Focus on Skill Development

While any reduction in problem behavior is welcome, we are interested in an approach that promises long-term success. The way in which the behavior is reduced is very important. It is possible to reduce problem behaviors with a variety of temporary strategies that are unlikely to last. For example, if the child doesn't like math, a teacher may simply make the math easier or not present math at all. This may eliminate or reduce some problem behaviors. As soon as the teacher attempts to teach math again, however, the behaviors are likely to reappear.

To achieve long-term meaningful change, it is important to build skills that can serve as alternatives to the problem behaviors. It is not enough to simply avoid difficult situations or provide rewards for the absence of problem behaviors. The most critical skills that effectively compete with problem behaviors are communication, tolerance, and cooperation.

What's Next?

If you are struggling with a child who engages in severe problem behavior, there are many wonderful resources available to help you. Parents can successfully implement assessment and treatment for problem behavior when they receive proper training and coaching. In some cases, the initial implementation of treatment by professionals may be required before calling upon parents to take over the treatment. Since it can be difficult for parents to learn everything they need to know about treatment solely from books and online resources, it is important to find a qualified Board Certified Behavior Analyst with the appropriate training and experience to provide implementation assistance. To locate an analyst in your community, visit www.bacb.com/services.

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