

# ACR 211 final draft

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behavior, sensory, function, challenging behavior, sensory input, student, reinforcement, cope, fba, automatic, smell, escape, talk, classroom, internal, people, engaging, situation, behavioral, autism

## SPEAKERS

Veronica

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Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom, to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. I am Dr. Christine Reeve and I am your host, and you are listening to Episode 211. And we have been doing a series on challenging behavior.

And today I want to put some myths to bed about behavior. And I want to talk a little bit about how we talk about behavior and how that impacts how we approach it. So with that introduction, let's get started.

Over the years, and I've been doing this for many, many years, I have seen so many things, from books to posts asking if challenging behavior is sensory, or behavior. And I am really happy that people understand that all behaviors are not deliberately manipulative, which I think is what they are intending to say, that it is a result of a sensory overload or a sensory issue, not something that they're doing purposefully to be problematic. You know, they're making the differentiation between what we think of as willful behavior that assumes that challenging behavior is deliberate, and behavior that is resulting from something about sensory input that is causing a problem in their environment.

But there are some serious myths and misconceptions about this approach. And I think that those things go beyond just semantics. So that's what I want to talk about today.

So why is it sensory or behavior the wrong question? Well, I'm the behavior geek. And I think we all

So why is it sensory or behavior the wrong question? Well, I'm the behavior geek. And I think we all know that by now. If you've listened to this for any amount of time, I'm a board certified behavior analyst. But most of my work has been in special education, working with students with communication and behavioral issues. And essentially, in behavior analysis, anything that we do, whether it's good or bad, appropriate, or inappropriate, expected or unexpected, whatever description you want to use for it, anything we do is behavior.

And, you know, the classic definition that behavior analysts use is anything a dead man can't do is behavior. Anything that is being done by a person at any time of day is behavior. And let's face it, whatever its function, whether the behavior is intentional or not, calling it sensory really doesn't make it less challenging. And it shouldn't make it something that isn't challenging us to figure out how to help the student.

We have to take the reins, to figure out why the behavior is happening and how we can help the student to cope more successfully, whether the behavior is serving a sensory function or adjusting to a sensory situation, or whether the behavior is to gain attention, or to get out of something. They're dealing with something that the behavior has been more successful at getting their needs met, or the result of that environment, a mismatch of their behavior in the context that they're in more than something they are willfully doing. It's something that we have to help them to figure out a better way to cope with it.

So another issue that I have with it is that it presumes that all other behavior that doesn't have a sensory capacity, is willful. That students are doing them manipulatively or on purpose. Most challenging behaviors, and we all have challenging behaviors, just like we all have sensory behaviors. Most of those develop over time as a pattern of behavior very much like habits form. And while certainly there are instances when a challenging behavior is something that is intentional, that even those intentional, challenging behaviors come from a place of other behaviors or other skills are not working.

So think of a classic example of a student who engages in behavior because in the past, they're having trouble reading, engaging in the behavior removes the reading from them, and they don't have to do it. It's not that they are manipulative in trying to get out of it. It's that they don't know how to handle a situation in which they're asked to do something that reliably they feel they are not good at.

So most chronic behaviors are reactions that have developed to get a need met. That is what the function of behavior is all about. I'm sure that you've seen situations in your own life, where you respond to certain triggers, or situations from a family member, your significant other, or your mom or, you know, we often refer to it as that person pushes my buttons. We might apologize for it later. And we might try to keep from doing it. But over time, this is a habit or response that we have learned over time to cope with this context.

That's true. whether it is a sensory context where I'm overwhelmed by the stimulation at the North

...that's true, whether it is a sensory context where I'm overwhelmed by the stimulation at the North Carolina State Fair and I need to step away and get out of it. Or whether it is I'm being given something that I don't have the tools to complete and I don't know how to get assistance in doing it, which would be a different kind of function.

Many times, those types of behaviors are not a sensory function. It doesn't happen in the absence of an apparent antecedent, or when there's nothing else going on. And I'll talk a little bit about that function today. But those kinds of behaviors can look like they're sensory, when in fact, they are just the way we cope with the context and it just looks like sensory.

One of the things that would happen frequently, when I would talk about this in my graduate classes was, I would ask people to, you know, figure out the functions and behaviors of students that they were observing. And one of the things that would always come back is if it involved one of the five senses, they considered it sensory. The student was putting things in his mouth, and therefore it was a sensory behavior. Could it be a sensory function or an automatic function? Absolutely. But it could also be because when I put things in my mouth, a whole bunch of people descend on me to get things out of my mouth. So it may be that it's getting reaction from the environment, or it's getting something removed from my environment, because everybody's focusing on something else. So just because it involves a sense does not mean it is a sensory behavior.

So what is the right question? We know that we have many students who have sensory differences, and in all honesty, we all have sensory differences. The difference is how well we're able to cope with them, and probably the severity with which they impact us. Individuals with autism, for instance, often have sensory issues that impact them with more magnitude, than say I do.

Things are louder or softer, they're brighter or dimmer, they might have more difficulty screening things out to focus on something. So what we want to know, is not is the behavior sensory? In which case it always implies to me if I don't need to do anything about it, it's like, yes, so do. Or is it behavior? Well, everything's behavior, we've covered that.

What we need to know is whether there is a sensory function or reinforcer, or some sort of sensory component to the challenging behavior. And that is an absolutely fine question to be asking. So to me, the right question to ask is whether the behavior that is the one you want to change is related to aspects of sensory input.

There are basically three functions of challenging behavior, there's two areas, I get something, or I get rid of something. That is true of sensory input as well. We have a function that we've referred to as automatic reinforcement. Many people call it a sensory function. But the idea behind it is that everyone has sensory needs. And many of us, all of us, whether we have a disability or not, engage in behaviors that would look like they have an automatic reinforcement property.

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People who bite their nails. This is a good example of not they don't like necessarily like the nail biting, but maybe it relieves an internal anxiety for a non behavioral term for those behavior analysts out there.

We assess whether or not something has an automatic function by looking at whether or not it's happening when there's nothing else going on. There's no demands. There's no other people to interact with. I'm just hanging out. Many times we will see those behaviors crop up during those situations. That tells us that the reinforcement is coming from inside the person.

We have some research that indicates that some self injury serves an automatic reinforcement because it's reinforced by an internal sensation. Very young children two and three years old, or even infants, if they have an ear infection, they will head bang. And the theory is that that displaces the fluid temporarily and makes the ear pain lesson. That's an internal automatic function.

The question is whether or not you develop the skills over time to be able to tell somebody that your ear is hurting and get something to address it. So one question that we want to ask is whether the challenging behavior would occur if there's nothing else going on. And then it might have an internal component. Typically, automatic reinforcement is seeking reinforcement from an internal sensation.

But another way that sensory might be involved in challenging behavior and the function, is when I'm escaping from a sensory situation, a sensory overload, a sensory experience that I'm not enjoying, it doesn't have to be overloaded. And remember that overloading is individual to the person. Just because it doesn't seem overloading to me does not mean it's not overloading to them. And I think that's a really critical element when we're talking with people with sensory differences.

So in this case, the function would actually be an escape function. And the data tells you that it's to escape from a situation because it involves being removed from the situation. They might, again, be something that's overwhelming or bothering.

I'll give you a good example of something that most people would not think is a problem. Many times, I had a very, very sensitive sense of smell. It's something that's developed over time, medically for me, and consequently, things like perfumes and things like that give me a really bad headache.

I can get on an elevator that has no one in it, that had somebody in it that had on very strong perfume or aftershave and I can smell it. And it bothers me. I'm not to a point now where I would get off the elevator. But if it was bothering me that much, that is how I would cope with it. That is something that most of you would go, I don't even know what your problem is, like, I don't even smell it.

So we all have different levels of sensory modulation. And they differ at times. Something that's a problem, you know, when I'm really stressed might not be a problem when I'm feeling okay. So it's really important.

But sometimes we engage in behaviors to escape. If that smell really bothered me, I would get off and take a different elevator. I would escape in an adaptive way. So you might have a situation that's too loud or too smelly, or too bright or too crowded. I don't like crowds, that's another really good one.

These behaviors are not providing automatic reinforcement, they're not giving us some sort of internal reinforcement that's causing us to continue the behavior. But they help us escape from situations in which that sensory experience is too intense. And so sometimes we will have behaviors that will escape from a situation that may be triggered by sensory input.

So in short, the question that we really want to be asking, is whether the behavior has a sensory component. Is it internally reinforcing? Or is it an attempt to gain or escape from a sensory experience. But don't assume that just because the behavior involves a sense, like putting things in their mouth, that it's a sensory behavior. You know, mine involves a sense of smell. But if I were to have a challenging behavior in relation to that, it's not to get the challenging smell, it's actually to get rid of it.

This form of behavior may happen because people come running, pay lots of attention, there's other consequences going on in the environment. And that's why the outside context of the behavior when we do functional behavior assessment is so important. Because we really need to know what is going on. And it's really only trying to gain that sensory input when they're left alone.

Now, if I see things that are like, we're in a transition, maybe they're overwhelmed. We're waiting for something, well, maybe that is something where they're engaging in a behavior. You know, just like I might twirl my ring, to fill the time, I might do other things to fill the time. Are they engaging in those kinds of behaviors.

So we want to think about that. Long and short, as with everything, it's always about the function of the behavior. And that's really what we want to look at. And the more information that you have about the function of the behavior, the better, you're going to be able to make an informed decision and put strategies in place to really help support that student.

So don't take my title of this as meaning that people don't have sensory seeking behavior. We all do. The question is teaching people how to cope with it in a more effective way.

So I will be back next month. And I will be back next month. I will be back next month. I will be back next month.

So I will be back next week. And I will actually be talking about how we can address some of the sensory functions of behavior because they are some of the toughest that we can deal with. So I will have three ways that you can address those kinds of situations.

If you're looking for more information on how to make your FBA more descriptive, and better able to give you the information you need to create the context where the student can be successful, I would refer you to Episode 13. So if you go to [autismclassroomresources.com/episode13](http://autismclassroomresources.com/episode13), you will get an episode that is all about writing useful FBA hypothesis statements. Because when we write our hypothesis statements, we really want to make sure it includes this information so it leads us to our intervention.

I would really love it. If you are interested in this series, if you would hop over to Apple podcasts and leave me a rating or review. And I'll make sure if you're not on Apple already that that link is in the show notes.

And if you're looking for more ideas about how to deal with challenging behavior, check out our free behavior webinar on preventing challenging behavior. It will address a lot of things you can put in place before you can get the FBA done.

And if you are interested in learning more about how to create hypothesis statements that are based on clear FBA data and make your decisions about intervention on them, come and join us in the Special Educator Academy, where we have a workshop on functional communication training, and a whole course on positive behavioral support, but most significantly on behavioral problem solving.

And so I'll be back next week with an episode talking about how we can actually address some of those behaviors that do have an automatic or sensory function.

And until then, if you are interested in more ideas about how to get really good hypothesis statements, and really figure out the function of the behavior to lead to your intervention, come join us at [specialeducatoracademy.com](http://specialeducatoracademy.com). And you can take our course on behavioral problem solving. It walks you through the FBA process for data collection, identifying the behavior, all the way through writing hypothesis statements that are going to lead directly into creating your behavioral support plan, and it walks you through that as well.

We have lots of other resources there as well for special educators to support them in dealing with challenging behavior, as well as other types of classroom strategies. So again, you can find that at [specialeducatoracademy.com](http://specialeducatoracademy.com). You can join us for a seven day free trial and find out what it's all about. I'll be back next week we'll talk some more about sensory and until then, I'll talk to you soon.

Thanks so much for listening to today's episode of the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. For more

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