

Who Really
Has

Inappropriate Behavior

From the www.disabilityisnatural.com E-Newsletter by Kathie Snow

“Inappropriate behavior”—it’s a biggie in Disability World. Sometimes we use other descriptors like “problem behavior” or “challenging behavior.” In response, we write “behavior management programs,” create plans for “positive behavior supports,” and/or institute other remedies. It’s been reported that “behavior specialist” is one of the fastest-growing career opportunities. We define something as a problem (behavior), and then we need to create jobs to fix the problem!

Is there consensus on what constitutes inappropriate/problem/challenging behavior? No. What’s inappropriate in one person’s mind may not be perceived that way by others.

And I’ve always wondered: who is the behavior a problem *for* or challenging *to*? Not the person who’s doing the behavior, right? It’s a problem and/or is challenging to those *around* him/her! Words like “problem,” “challenging,” and/or others seem to be euphemisms (and are attached to the person doing the behavior). If we’re honest, we might say “irritating behavior” or “aggravating behavior”—words that indicate how a person’s behavior makes *us* feel! When we attach the words to the person, we feel justified in trying to change/manage the person instead of trying to change ourselves. And how does one *manage* another’s behavior anyway? Would you like someone to try to manage *your* behavior? What would that look like and how might you respond?

I’m always unsettled by conference break-out sessions with titles like “Managing Problem Behavior.” I’ve seen these same titles for 25 years; have we made so little progress in the field?

When my children attended an inclusive elementary school way back in the 1990s, this progressive school was different from many schools in a variety of ways. Students in one classroom sat immobile at their perfectly lined-up desks while Mrs. C lectured at the blackboard in the front of the room (standard

stuff). It was a very quiet environment. But in another classroom, desks were askew along the perimeter of the room; Mrs. M roamed the classroom assisting her students, as necessary, who were all over the room: one group worked together standing up at the blackboard; another group was on the floor (some students were lying down); a third group sat on the wide windowsills; and in a fourth group, the girls and boys sat atop tables they pulled together. There was lots of movement, lots of noise, and lots of learning going on.

**Revolt against
authority was, and
remains to this day, the
original sin, the classic
crime, of the individual.**

Thomas Szasz, M.D.

No doubt Mrs. C would feel the students in Mrs. M’s class were engaging in inappropriate classroom behavior (sitting on tables or lying on the floor—tsk, tsk!). Simultaneously, Mrs. M might believe Mrs. C had *inappropriate teaching behavior* (boring lectures).

When Charlie hangs out with friends at the bar on Sunday night to watch the football game, the room is full of maniacal screaming, high-fives, friendly arm-punches, and more—all of it is appropriate Sunday-night-football-watching-behavior. However, when Charlie was at church earlier in the day, he and his fellow church members were quiet and reserved, as befits that environment. At a different church, the Sunday morning service is punctuated by waving arms, swaying bodies, and loud, emotional outcries. These behaviors would not be appropriate at Charlie’s church; and vice-versa!

A person’s behavior is often the result of—or related to—the environment; it might also be situational and/or age-related. I was a monster when I was a child—the baby of the family who routinely threw temper tantrums and worse. When I was calmer and more mature at age 16, I asked my mom, “How could you *stand me* when I was younger—*I was awful!*” She smiled and said, “Well, I figured you’d grow out of it, and you did.”

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In “Joe Schiappacasse on Everyone’s Behavior” (<http://www.disabilityisnatural.com/images/PDF/behaviorjs.pdf>), Joe says, “...many forms of behavior—especially what’s called ‘problem behavior’—is a *symptom* of something not working right in a person’s life. All behavior meets a need or serves a purpose. One behavior may meet multiple needs, while the very same behavior can mean two or more *different* things.”

Many of us recognize that behavior is a form of communication, and Joe adds: “Not only is behavior communication, but it is frequently *more valid* than typical communication. It takes much more effort to lie with your behavior than to lie with your words. My older brother, who has been labeled with a variety of disabilities, taught me, ‘The truth is in what you do, not what you say.’”

A school superintendent once told me that they assigned a one-to-one aide to a sixth-grader “Marty” because he couldn’t get from class to class on time, without dawdling, misbehaving, etc. I asked how that worked out. He said the boy’s behavior worsened, so they assigned *two* aides to escort Marty. *Really?* What was Marty feeling? Incompetent, stupid, and more. *Of course* his behavior got “worse” after a grown woman was stuck to him like glue going down the hallways—and then two! Having a disability doesn’t mean you’re stupid. Marty was no doubt aware that he’s the only kid in school with a grown-up attached to him. His dignity is being assaulted and he’ll communicate his feelings (and retaliate) through his behavior. It doesn’t take a behavior specialist to predict the outcome of this situation—it’s common sense!

How much of a person’s so-called inappropriate/problem behavior is actually communication *in response* to his environment: the physical setting; the smells, sights, sounds, lights, feel of the place, and more; and/or to the social atmosphere (how he’s perceived and treated by others)? Do we listen—really

listen—to the person’s communication (verbal, non-verbal, and behavior) to discern what’s really going on, and then make environmental changes, including our attitudes and actions toward the person?

Why didn’t the school encourage some of Marty’s classmates to walk with him? Is it possible that people without disabilities exhibit inappropriate behavior toward people with disabilities?

Can we relax our “rules” about what’s “inappropriate,” like Mrs. M did in her classroom? Can we also recognize when a person’s actions might be situational and/or age-related and realize (like my mom did), “This, too, shall pass...”? Can we do some of these things, instead of deciding to write behavior goals, institute a behavior plan, and/or put the person in a more restrictive setting until she can “prove” that her behavior is “appropriate”? Can we be more patient, more understanding, more caring, and more light-hearted?

Little value comes out of the belief that people will respond progressively better by treating them progressively worse.

Eric Harvey

Can we try different strategies? I remember the wisdom from someone (can’t remember who) when my children were young: when you feel like swatting them, give them a big hug instead. It worked!

Can we recognize that many children and adults with disabilities have been “sheltered” in segregated settings and *they may not have had opportunities to learn how to “be” in normal (inclusive) environments*. Segregated settings are vastly different than regular/inclusive settings; lowered expectations, unusual behaviors, and a different set of “rules” are usually the norm. Being in aberrant environments leads to aberrant behavior. We need to be patient as children or adults with disabilities learn how to “be” in an ordinary environment.

All of us, at times, behave inappropriately. If we’re lucky, our families, friends, and co-workers chalk it up to stress, frustration, sadness, anger, etc. Hopefully, they help us through it, instead of punishing us; they forgive and forget, and don’t hold it against us forever and a day. Can’t we do the same for the children and adults with disabilities in our lives?