

No Child Wakes Up Determined to Have a Bad Day

As a speech-language pathologist, many parents that I work with have heard some or all of these comments about their child:

“Johnny can be so manipulative.”

“Suzie knows what to do; she’s just choosing not to do it.”

“Billy is often non-compliant.”

These comments are typically made based on observable actions that are often labeled as “behaviors.” However, in children with language deficits, such as children with ASD, these “behaviors” are not the actions of an intentionally disruptive child. They result from the child’s language deficits, and are the child’s attempts to use language for reasoning and problem solving.

Asking for Help

A common expectation that adults have of children is that they ask for help when faced with a problem. The ability to ask for help is a very complex cognitive concept that requires a highly developed ability to use language for critical think-

ing. First, one needs to recognize that there is a problem. Then one needs to utilize world knowledge of previous times when there was a problem and how it was resolved. In addition, one needs to be able to compare the current situation with previous situations to problem solve a resolution to the perceived stressor. For children with ASD, this is very difficult and can result in increased anxiety and distress. The request for help may be expressed by the child in a non-verbal manner, e.g., shrugging his/her shoulders, crying or throwing things. Once again, these observable “behaviors” are not the actions of an intentionally disruptive child, but, rather, they result from the child’s language deficits. It may appear as if the child is at a loss for words; quite literally, the words are “lost” in the child’s brain.

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Answering Questions

The ability to answer open-ended questions such as, “What did you do at school today,” or “What should you do if the school bus forgets to pick you up,” also requires a child to use language for reasoning and problem solving. This is typically learned from one’s own experiences or by watching others perform an activity. Learning from past experiences and applying this to new situations can be extremely challenging and frustrating for children with ASD. A limited or impaired ability to interpret others’ actions can result in a child having difficulty with understanding non-verbal communication, such as: facial expressions and gestures, understanding other’s perspectives and idioms. A child can also have trouble with: organization and expression of thoughts, generating multiple solutions to situations, describing state of minds of others, timing conversational exchanges, remaining on topic or appropriate vs. inappropriate comments or actions.

Typical children learn each of the above mentioned skills by watching and practicing the skills during daily routines. For children with ASD, each of these skills must be explicitly taught via direct instruction. Direct instruction must include the sequencing of each

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cognitive activity—seemingly simple tasks can appear overwhelming. For example, the classroom rule of raising one's hand to ask or respond to a question involves multiple steps:

1. Raise your hand
2. Make eye contact with the teacher
3. Teacher looks at you
4. Teacher calls your name
5. Put your arm down and respond

For a child with ASD, not knowing the rules or steps involved in answering a question or solving a problem can result in “behaviors” that are deemed

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inappropriate, e.g., “blurting” or speaking at the same time as a conversation partner.

When a child is taught how to use language for reasoning and problem solving, “behaviors” magically diminish. No child wakes up determined to have a bad day. Once a child is able to express himself via language, he then begins to view himself as a successful communicator and learner.

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