



## Understanding the Reinforcement “Trap”—and How to Escape It!

Coping with a child who sometimes acts out, screams, kicks or bites is a major stressor for parents of children with fragile X syndrome (FXS). Parents need sound advice about how to deal with these behaviors, and while there is plenty of homespun advice out there, what families really need is factual information to help their child.

Experience shows that understanding why the behavior occurs in the first place is the most important factor. To start this process off, think about your child’s problem behavior and try to answer the following simple questions:

Do these behaviors mostly occur:

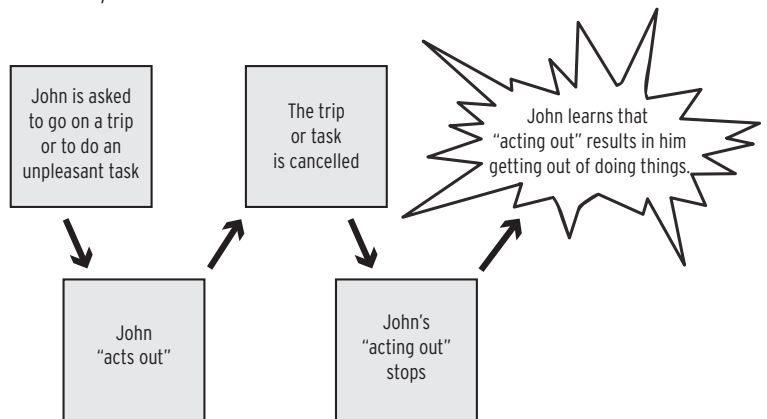
- When your child is asked to do something?
- When your child is asked to go somewhere he or she doesn’t want to go?
- As a way for your child to get out of a situation?
- As a way for your child to get others to leave him or her alone?
- When your child doesn’t want to join in an activity?
- When your child seems to be saying “Leave me alone!” or “Stop asking me to do this!”?

If you answered yes on at least one of these questions, then you are well on the way to understanding your child. What this is telling you is that there is a function or purpose behind your child’s behavior. In this case, your child is using the behavior to *escape* or *avoid* unpleasant activities. He or she is trying to communicate with you by using the behavior to say, “I don’t want to do this.” This seems to be one of the fundamental reasons why children with FXS engage in problem behaviors. While other reasons may sometimes be factors, I want to focus on this *escape* function first. In future columns like this, I hope to cover other factors.

Imagine the following scenario. You need to take Johnny to the doctor’s office. You ask him to get into the car, but he starts acting out (screaming, swearing, hitting, etc.). The more

you push him to get into the car, the worse his behavior gets. Finally, you get him into the car and tentatively start off down the road. But, once you’re on the freeway, he starts jumping up and down on the back seat, unbuckles his seat belt and bangs on the door. Finally, after much coaxing and pleading (while you’re still keeping both eyes on the road!), you give in, turn around and ultimately cancel the appointment. He calms down. Whew...

It turns out, however, that this “giving in” strategy is the very reason why your child is acting out so much—he’s learned that by doing so, he can escape from unpleasant activities. The technical name for this is *negative reinforcement*. Here’s how it works:



So, while his behavior has stopped in the short term, in the long term, he’s learned a very useful strategy for how to get out of doing unpleasant activities.

O.K, so now that we know *why* your child is misbehaving (i.e., to escape from unpleasant tasks or situations), what should we do about it? What we need to do is tailor the treatment to the reason behind the behavior. Here are just three examples of strategies that can be adopted in this case:

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**1** Remember, each time you give in, you are teaching your child to act out in order to escape a situation. So the first order of business is to try *not* to remove your child from the situation when he or she engages in the problem behavior. You want your child to learn that “acting out” does not result in unpleasant activities being cancelled.

As a remedy, closely examine the unwanted situation and break it down into smaller components. Gradually expose your child to smaller (and presumably less unpleasant) parts of the situation, and reward him or her for *not* showing the problem behavior during these times.

For example, to get your child to go on trips, practice simply getting into the car and buckling up. Then give your child a reward, and take him or her back into the house. Then, on another day, practice getting into the car and buckling up, but this time drive a short distance before returning to the house. Reward your child at each step if there is no problem behavior. By gradually increasing exposure to the unpleasant activity (driving longer distances without problem behavior), and making the experience more enjoyable with lots of rewards at each step, you can build up tolerance to the unpleasant activity. This is similar to a technique for treating simple phobias.

**2** Think about why your child finds the experience unpleasant. Is there an alternative way in which the task could be completed? Give your child a choice in the activities that he or she is asked to do. If the task appears too difficult, introduce into the mix some tasks that your child can easily complete. The trick here is to make the overall task or experience less aversive to your child.

**3** When he or she asks or communicates appropriately, *do* occasionally remove your child from the unwanted situation. For example, if your child says, “Please, I don’t want to go just now,” then respect that decision and cancel the appointment if at all possible. You are now teaching your child more appropriate ways of getting out of doing things.

Of course, all of this is often easier said than done. I do not want to minimize how difficult it is for parents to keep a cool head when their child is acting out. The instinct is to protect your child and maintain order (not to mention your sanity), and the most efficient way to do that, at least in the short term, is to give in to what he or she wants and get the problem behavior to stop. Many parents ultimately back down

and give in to their child’s behavior. This is an unwise strategy because it lures you into a “reinforcement trap.” While giving in certainly stops the behavior in the short term, it is only reinforcing the behavior and ensuring that it persists in the future.

Incidentally, many professionals advocate the use of “time out”—removing a child from a situation when a problem behavior occurs—as a strategy to decrease problem behaviors. Time-out strategies can certainly be useful in situations when the child is looking for attention and engagement rather than

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escape. And in the situations I have been describing here, it may stop the negative behaviors in the short term. But in the long run you are teaching the child the following communicative strategy: “If I don’t want to do something, all I need to do is to start acting out, have a temper tantrum, kick, scream etc., and presto, Mom removes me from the situation and stops asking me to do something!”

Keep studying the diagram on the opposite page. Once you understand how it works and recognize that this scenario is happening with your child, you are well on the way to helping your child better control his or her behavior.

We all learn from experience, and children with FXS are no different. In fact, children with FXS are especially good at learning to get out of doing unwanted activities. They are the great escape artists!

The bottom line is this: Don’t let your child become the greatest escape artist of all time—so don’t get ensnared in the negative reinforcement trap! ☹

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