

Eating as a Learned Behavior – The “ABC” Model

Eating is not instinctual – it is learned. Most people are “pre-wired” to develop a hunger drive. However, many environmental and contextual cues are involved in learning how to satisfy that drive by eating. The pre-wiring can be interfered with by medical complications due to premature birth, medical disorders, or by sensory dysfunctions.

If eating is consistently (or intermittently) paired with pain or discomfort (e.g., reflux, other pain), the individual will try to avoid eating. Or, perhaps, over time, the hunger drive is diminished due to negative experiences with food.

A child’s lack of motivation to eat can be increased by environmental factors. In order to learn what these factors are, and how best to counter them, we use the A-B-C model. It is called a “functional assessment” of the behavior. To understand behavior, we need to look beyond just the behavior itself to the conditions surrounding its occurrence.

A – Antecedent

Includes the setting, situation, people, time, what is being said, etc., and everything else that occurs right before the behavior.

B- Behavior

Any action (or inaction) by the individual.

C- Consequence

The actions or events that follow the behavior. Behaviors followed by pleasant consequences (praise, attention, reward) are more likely to happen again in the future. Those behaviors followed by an unpleasant consequence are less likely to occur in the future.

A knowledge of antecedents and consequences and their combined effects on behavior allows us to manage behavior in a systematic way.

Examples of A – B – C’s in a feeding situation:

A – Antecedent

B – Behavior

C – Consequence

Spoon with food

push spoon away

spoon is removed

Food is presented

take a bite

verbal praise

Take a bite of solid food

gag

food taken away,
Comforting words

Child asked to come to table

crying, saying “no,”
kicking

ask child again, try to
coax him/her
(attention)

Can you think of others?

By identifying the A’s and C’s that may assist in maintaining problem or undesired behaviors, we can begin to understand what can increase or decrease the behavior.

In order to change behavior, we need to change the A’s and C’s that may help maintain it, or create new A’s and C’s that will increase wanted behavior.

(The following strategies should be individualized and may be different for each child)

Change the Consequence

* Remove positive consequences (attention, toys, removal of food, etc.) from problem behaviors (such as crying, pushing, etc.).

Example: Ignore pushing the food away by not giving eye contact, no verbal/physical contact, and do not remove the undesired item.

This is often simple to explain, but hard to do in the situation, especially when the child is disruptive/resistant.

* Provide positive reinforcement for desired behavior

Example: When child shows a positive behavior with food, praise and give attention. Or, you can provide other desired items contingent on the behavior (access to a brief period of time (30 seconds) to preferred toy/TV. Use of a timer may be helpful to structure the access time. For children who are developmentally 4 years or older, a token economy system may be used, where tokens or points can be provided contingently for desired behaviors, and then exchanged later for pre-determined items/activities preferred by the child.

(more natural tendency for parents/caregivers is to give attention to undesired behaviors)

Example: “Shaping” technique – the Hierarchy

Praise/reward successive approximations to the desired behavior (smelling, touching, etc. leading to biting and swallowing).

Change the Antecedents:

* Structure, timing

* presentation of food

* wording (e.g, “Do you want to try some new foods today?” versus “We’re going to try new foods today”)

* Other, individualized antecedents