

Observing Your Child's Challenging Behavior

A guide for parents and families

by Jarrod Green

Children are pretty complicated. (You may have noticed.) Carefully observing them when you're in the midst of dealing with a frustrating behavior can feel nearly impossible. But our memories for these things are notoriously unreliable, and taking notes can be tremendously useful. A few well-taken notes can help you see things you didn't see before, and understand both your child and yourself better.

To make sure they're writing down all the important stuff, educators often use the "Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence" model, or "ABC" for short. Don't let the big words put you off. *Antecedent* just means "what happened right beforehand"; *behavior* means "what happened"; and *consequence* means "what happened right after." Here's a chart with some explanations and examples:

<p>Antecedent: What happened before? When did it happen? What was going on? Was it loud or quiet? Crowded or empty? Hot or cold? What was the child doing? What were other people doing?</p>	<p>Antecedent: <i>End of breakfast, getting ready to leave house. Cold morning. Everyone rushing around finding things. Zach finishing his toast alone at table.</i></p>
<p>Behavior: What happened?</p>	<p>Behavior: <i>Me: "Zach, time to get yr shoes on." Zach: "I don't want shoes!" & knocked his plate off table, ran into his room, hid under covers.</i></p>
<p>Consequence: What happened after? How did people nearby react? How did they treat the child? What changed? How long was it until things got "back to normal"? What happened to make things better (or worse)?</p>	<p>Consequence: <i>I went to him, "It's time to go, you have to come downstairs." No response. I picked him up, carried him to car without talking to him any more. Brother carried Z's shoes. (No one cleaned up toast.) Zach sulked in car seat for awhile, but singing by the time we got to school. I put shoes on him, he went into school without problem.</i></p>

Pro-Tips: Write down as many quotes and specific details as you can remember—instead of "*He yelled,*" write "*He yelled 'I feel so mad!'*" And try to write down actions, not feelings—instead of "*She got mad,*" write "*She stamped her foot and made a fist.*"

I know, it's a lot to ask. In the moment, when stressful things are going on, taking notes is the last thing on your mind. But it does get easier with a little practice. Just do as much as you can—you can add more later from memory if you have to. On the next page there's a blank chart you can fill in—print out a few and carry them around. (Sometimes you can even have the child help you. "Zach, remember this morning the thing with the shoes? I was trying to write down what I said. Can you help me remember?" Seriously, they remember, and talking through it later can be helpful sometimes.)

The good news is, if you manage to take these kinds of notes even just a few times, it almost always helps show patterns that will help you help your child, and you'll see things you didn't see before. It's worth your while, I promise.

Antecedent: What happened before?	Behavior: What happened?	Consequence: What happened after?
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