

# The Four Functions of Behavior

Do you ever wonder why your child behaves a certain way? According to B.F. Skinner, every voluntary behavior has a function, or reason it is occurring. All behavior can be categorized into four "functions" which can be determined by the consequence, or result of that behavior. No function is inherently good or bad, and the same behavior can have a different function for different people or at different times. Understanding the function behind a behavior is the first step in reducing unwanted behavior or increasing good behavior!

## Tangible

Behavior with a tangible function occurs in order to gain access to a preferred item or activity. A child who cries when mom tells him "No more cookies!" is crying in order to obtain the cookie. If mom gives in and gives him the cookie, next time he is denied a treat he may cry again or cry even harder to obtain the cookie! More examples include a child who asks for a cookie nicely or who finishes all of her chores quickly in order to go to the park as a reward.



## Escape/Avoidance

This kind of behavior happens in order to escape or avoid an unpleasant situation. Some examples are running away from parents to avoid bedtime, procrastinating a homework assignment by talking to friends, or turning off the radio to avoid hearing a song that bugs you! If a child is able to stop or avoid experiencing an unwanted event by engaging in a certain behavior, that behavior is likely to happen again in similar situations

## Attention

Some behavior happens because a person desires certain reactions from others. A child may sing every day after a classmate tells her she has a beautiful voice, or she may bring her mother flowers frequently because she likes to see mom smile. Some children engage in problematic behavior when parents aren't paying attention to them... even if the result is a scolding!



## Sensory/ Automatic

Automatic behavior occurs simply because it feels good! Someone may curl their hair around their fingers, or snuggle up to a loved one because of the physical sensation of those activities. Other people may flap their hands or engage in repetitive sounds in order to enjoy the sensory stimulation of those actions. Anything that satisfies the 5 senses can have an automatic component!

