

**Communication Strategies to
Improve and Prevent
Challenging Behaviors
for Minimally Verbal Children
October 6, 2020**

"A world in which all children
affected by neurologic
disorders reach their full
potential."

- CNF Vision



Thank you to our partners





Families tell us



96%	Behavior impacts the child's interaction with adults, peers, and family members
95%	Behavior impacts overall happiness
86%	Behavior impacts the child's ability to comply with a treatment plan
70%	Behavior impacts the child's ability to attend school regularly
83%	Behavior impacts the family's ability to relax at home



Kristina Gerencser, PhD, BCBA-D

Program Manager

Language and Learning Program, Marcus Autism Center

Assistant Professor

Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics



Communication Strategies to Improve and Prevent Challenging Behaviors for Minimally Verbal Children

Kristina R. Gerencser, PhD, BCBA-D
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Polling Question #1

What is your role in attending this webinar?



Polling Question #2

What is the most common way your child communicates their wants or needs?





Goals

1. Challenging behaviors and why they occur
2. Problems with “cookie cutter” interventions
3. Strategies for promoting a communicative skills, requesting, to replace and decrease challenging behavior(s)
4. Q&A for additional follow-up questions

Challenging Behavior & Communication

- When a child can't communicate about the things that are most important to him/her, then it is up to everyone else to provide the right things at the right times
- This can be extremely frustrating for both the child and the communication partner which can lead to finding other ways to communicate such as challenging behaviors:
 - Screaming/crying
 - Aggressive behaviors (e.g., hitting, kicking)
 - Disruptive behaviors (e.g., throwing items, ripping items)
 - Self-injurious behaviors (e.g., head hitting, biting self)
 - Tantrums (e.g., a combination of the above behaviors)



Challenging Behavior

Impact

- These behaviors that occur to frequently falls outside the “typical” range for a given behavior can present several concerns or barriers:
 - May limit a child’s access to the community, family, life, and other things that are meaningful
 - Can effect learning and skill growth
 - Can cause physical harm to self or others
 - Can significantly impact the family system



Challenging Behavior

- Often times it can be difficult for those around the child to figure out why these behaviors are occurring
- Some of the behaviors we want to reduce may serve important needs
 - Acting a certain way may result in going outside to play, getting candy at the check-out line or getting a toy when out shopping, or getting attention when diverted, etc.



“Cookie Cutter” Approach

- “Cookie cutter” interventions are those that are not specific to each case and does not look at the specific antecedent and consequence of the behavior
- “Cookie cutter” interventions do not take in consideration the function of the behavior (*i.e., why is the behavior occurring*) and may inadvertently be reinforcing an inappropriate behavior
- Examples of “cookie cutter” interventions:
 - Planned ignoring
 - Time out



VIGNETTE: BETHANY

- Bethany is 8 years old girl with a developmental delay
- She has limited functional communication skills (primarily leads adults by hand or gets items herself)
- Bethany sometimes *hits* her caregivers...
 1. when they *take away* the iPad and
 2. when they *tell her* she has to brush her teeth



Relationship Between Topography & Treatment

- Topography refers to the form of the behavior
 - *What the behavior looks like → Bethany = hitting*
- If we prescribed treatments based on the topography:
 - Challenging behavior “X” = Treatment “Y”
Hitting = Time out

Every time Bethany hits her caregivers she should go to time out



Vignette: Bethany

Topography & Treatment

- Topographically Prescribed Treatment → Hitting = Time out
- (1) When Bethany hits her caregivers after they take her iPad away she goes to time out
“When I hit, not only do I not get to have my iPad, I don’t get to do anything!”
- (2) When Bethany hits her caregivers after being told to brush her teeth she goes to time out

“When I hit I don’t have to brush my teeth!”



Relationship Between Function & Treatment

- **Function:** the consequence that maintain a response (i.e., the purpose a behavior serves for the individual)
- **Function-based treatment:** problem behavior maintained by consequence $X = \text{Treatment "Y"}$



Vignette: Bethany

Function & Treatment

- Function-Based Treatments:
 - Hitting maintained by *access to preferred activities* = time out
 - Hitting maintained by *escape from demands (brush teeth)* = follow through with demand
- (1) When Bethany hits her caregivers after they take her iPad away she goes to *time out*

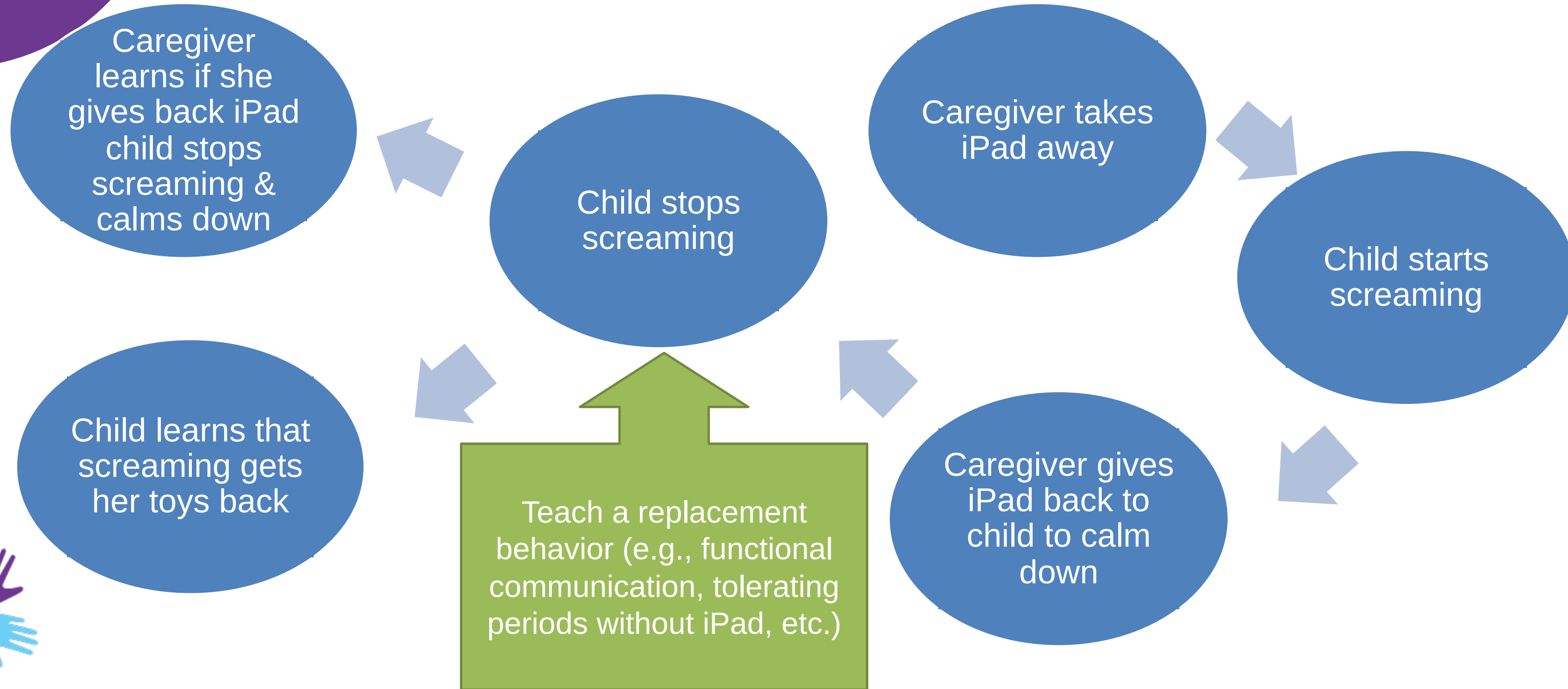
“When I hit, not only do I not get to have my iPad, I don’t get to do anything!”
- (2) When Bethany hits her caregivers after being told to brush her teeth, caregivers *follow through* until she brushes her teeth

“When I hit I STILL have to brush my teeth!”



Example

Cycle of Challenging Behavior



Functions of Behavior

Function = purpose the behavior serves

1. Access to attention
 - *Getting attention from others because of the behavior*
2. Access to preferred items
 - *Getting items or activities that you want be engaging in the behavior*
3. Escape or avoidance
 - *Avoiding or getting out of a situation you don't like*
4. Automatic
 - *An internal reinforcer that we cannot see or control (e.g., sensory stimulation)*

Note: Behaviors can be multiply-maintained and the function of behavior may change over time



Polling Question #3

At the grocery store, Bethany points to candy. Caregiver says “No.” Bethany falls to the floor and screams. Caregiver says “Get up, you are embarrassing me. If you get up and behave you can have the candy.” Caregiver gives candy to Bethany.

- What is the function of Bethany’s behavior in this situation?



What's the Function?

Questions you can ask yourself to give some insight to function

- “What is he/she “trying to say” with this behavior?”
- “Does it consistently occur more frequently in certain times/places/settings?”
- “What would happen if...[restrict preferred items; restrict attention; present a demand]”
- “When are some times/situations when the problem behavior never occurs?”
- “What is the one thing I could do that would guarantee [the problem behavior] will occur?”
- “What would calm your child down?”

Note: The most precise information on the causes of behavior can be collected via a formal functional analysis; consult school or other trained professionals in behavior analysis



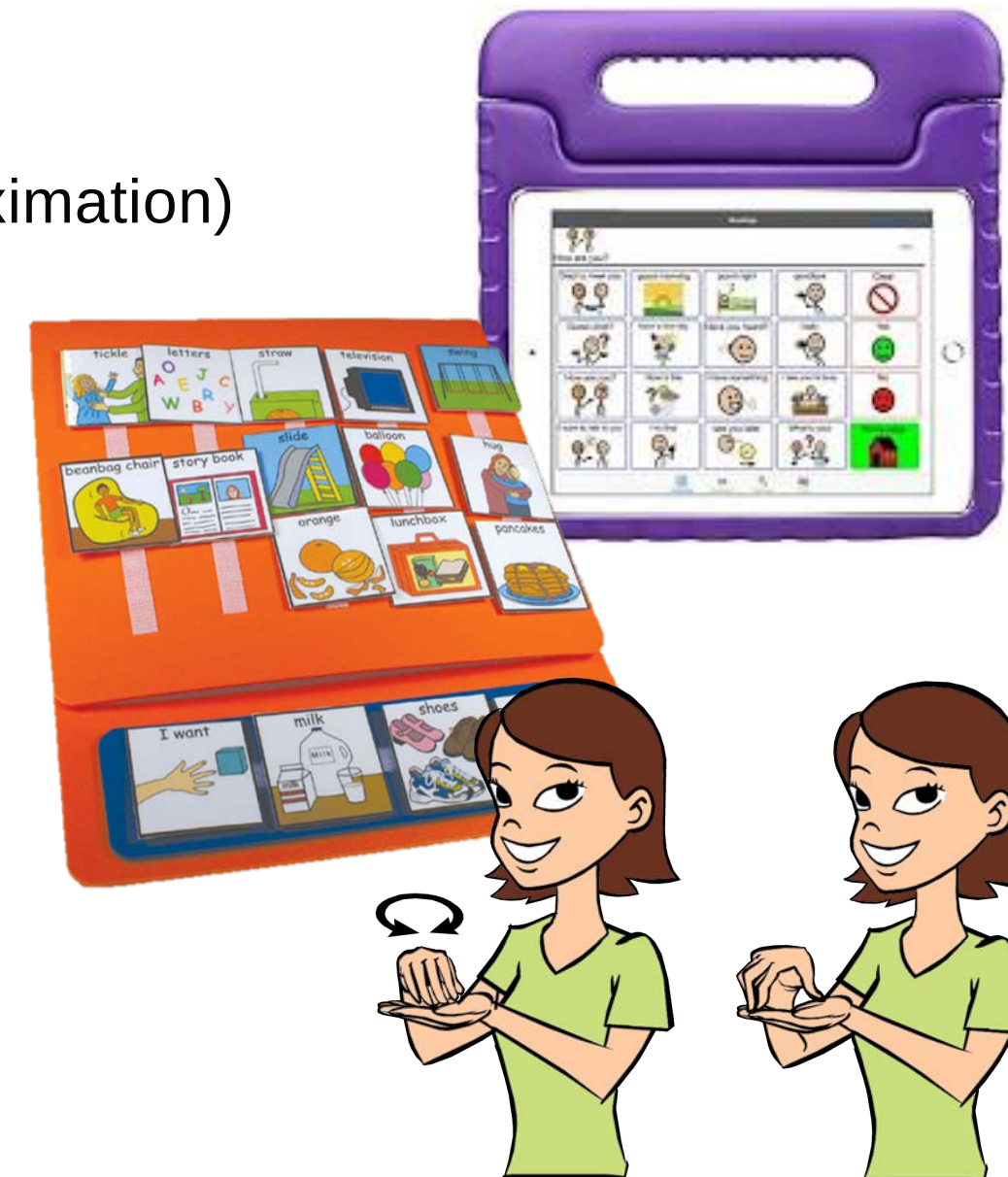


How to Teach a Replacement Behavior: Requesting

Identify a Communication Modality



- Communication can come in many different forms or modalities:
 - Vocal speech (e.g., saying “I want juice” or other vocal approximation)
 - Sign language (e.g., signing juice)
 - Pictures (e.g., exchanging an icon of juice)
 - Speech generating devices
 - Pointing
 - Eye contact or eye gaze



Where to Start?



- When selecting a communication modality consider your child's current skill level and motor abilities
- You first want to select a skill that is easy for your child and will be less effortful than engaging in challenging behavior
 - Start with pointing and expand the complexity of communication as your child is successful



Sign language:
consider gross and fine motor skills; ease of use in natural environment with other caregivers



Pictures: consider book will need to be present and available for communication; ability to scan and discriminate pictures

Polling Question #4

- What communication modality would you most likely start teaching your child?





Steps to Teaching a Request



**Watch for an
*indicating response***



***Prompt* the request**



**Give the item and
PRAISE**

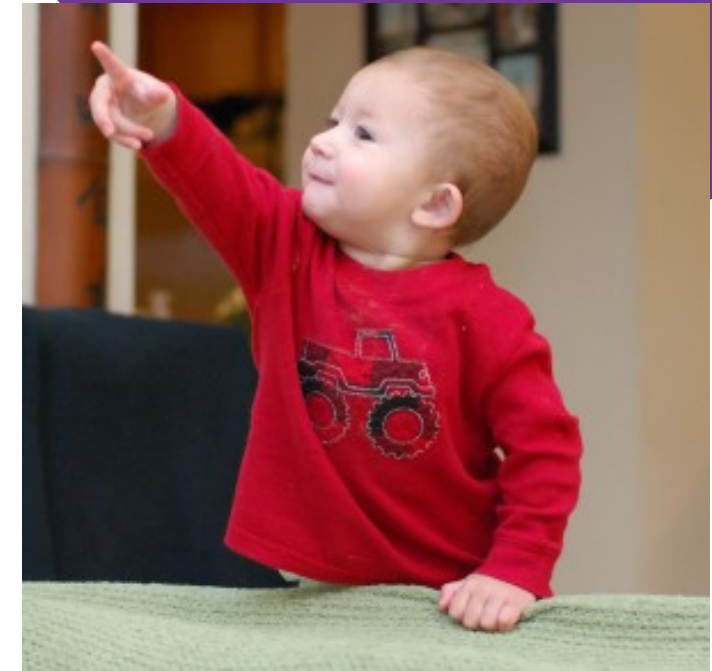


**Fade prompts over
time**

How to Teach Requests

Step 1: Watch for an Indicating Response

- These are behaviors that give you clues as to when your child wants/needs something
- Types of indicating responses:
 - Reaching
 - Pointing
 - Orienting body toward something
 - Placing your hand on an item
 - Looking at an item
 - Interested/ happy/ excited facial expression
 - Minor challenging behaviors (precursors)
- *What are your child's typical indicating responses?*



How to Teach Requests

Step 2: Prompt the Request

- Prompts are supplemental supports that help your child engage in the communication response
 - Physical prompts
 - Guide your child to engage in the communication response, such as hand over hand guidance
 - Imitative prompt (model)
 - Provide a model (sign for chip) or vocal model prompt (“chip”)



How to Teach Requests

Step 3: Give the item and PRAISE!

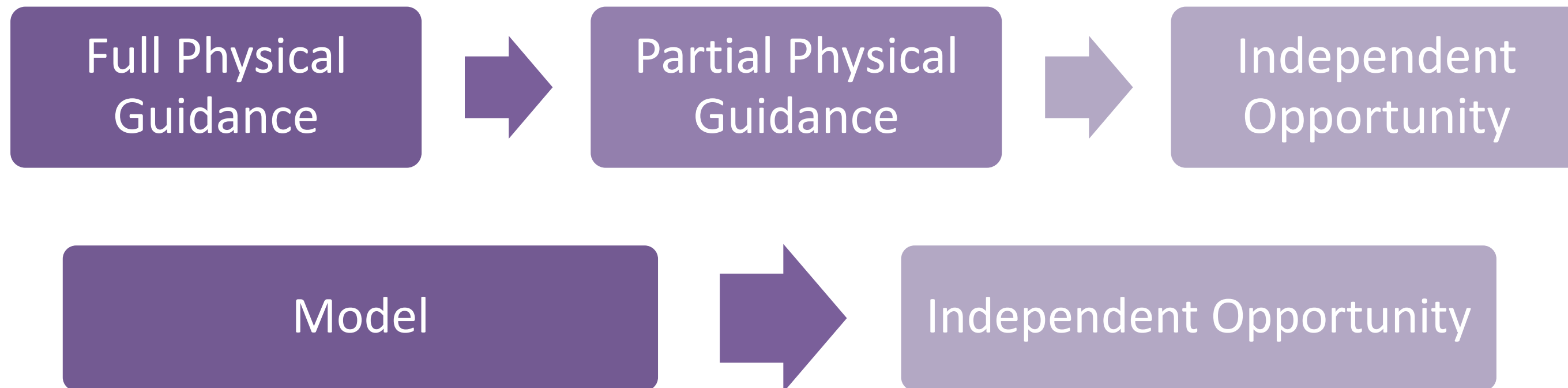
- Once your child successfully follows your prompt, immediately give your child the item they requested, label the item, and provide praise
- It is vital that your child gets the item as soon as possible after the successfully request – even if you helped initially
- Your help (prompts) will be faded out as your child gets more and more practice



How to Teach Requests

Step 4: Fade prompts over time

- As your child consistently follows your prompts, you can begin to fade prompts out (i.e., help less) until they are independent
- Remember the type of prompts used may differ depending on the communication form (sign vs. picture exchange)



How to Teach Requests

Step 4: Fade prompts over time

- Provide occasional **INDEPENDENT OPPORTUNITIES** after several successful prompted trials
 - After a few successful prompted trials **WAIT** to give your prompt
 - If child responds independent give item and throw a huge party!
 - If your child doesn't responds within 3-5 s provide a prompt



Track Progress

- As you teach, keep track of your child's progress
- Write down how far they get each day
 - Did they request independently?
 - What was their best approximation?
 - Was I able to fade to a less intrusive prompt?
- This helps you know where to start the next time you teach and track progress over time



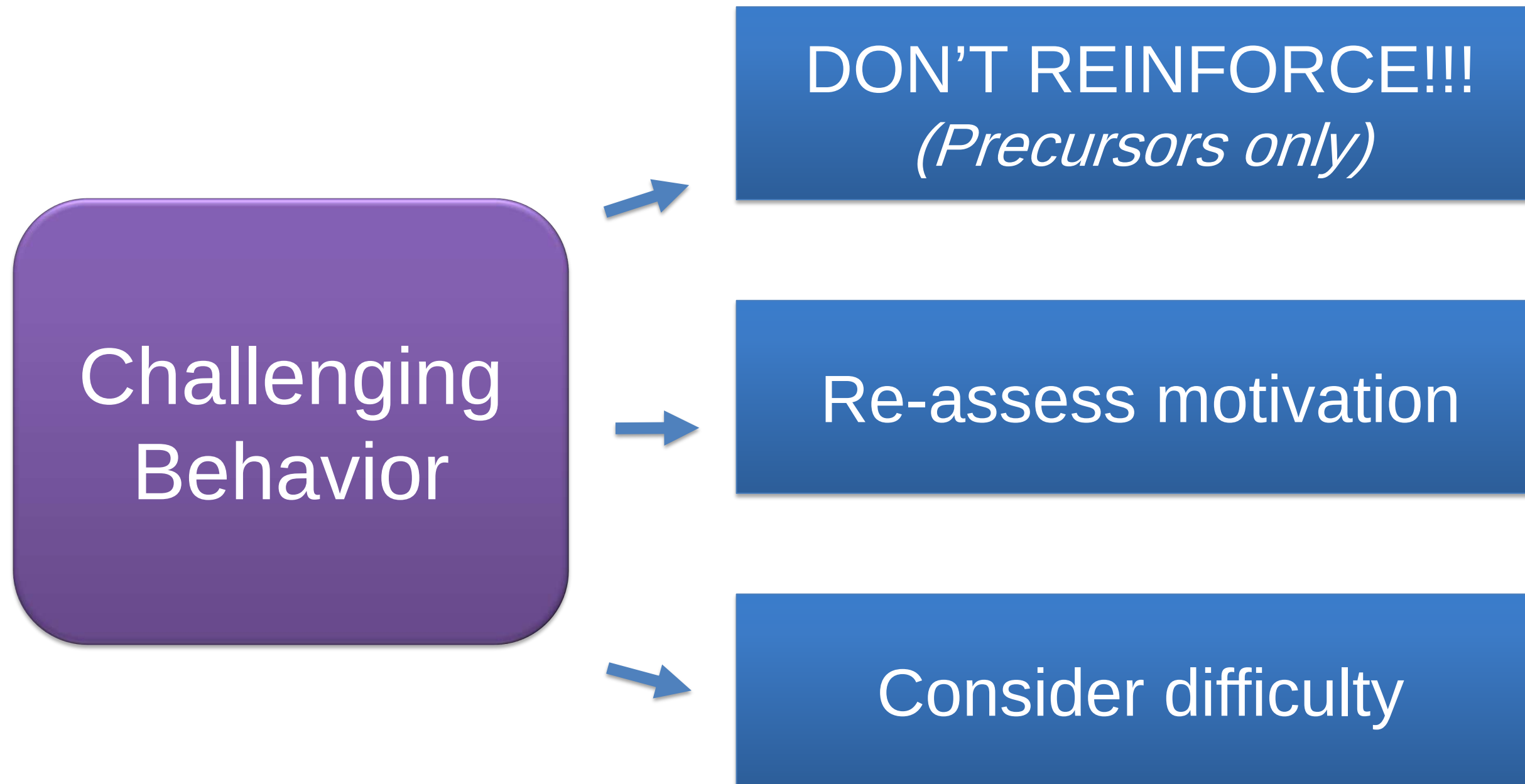
Things to Consider



- Start small and focus on 1-2 requests initially
 - Successful trials need to outnumber unsuccessful ones
- Watch out for over prompting
 - Fade prompts as quickly as possible
 - Avoid saying “What do you want?”
 - Instead wait for indicating responses, you can still provide kids with choices (mix it up)
- Use differential reinforcement
 - More independent responses = larger amounts (quantity/duration)



Things to Consider



Practice, Practice, and More Practice



- When teaching a new skill, like requesting, it will take time and may take many learning opportunities
- To help increase opportunities to teach this skill don't just rely on natural occurring opportunities – *contrive opportunities!*
 - Place preferred items in sight but out of reach; entice and watch for an indicating response
 - Select items or activities that are easy to give in small “chucks” or easy remove (e.g., snacks, bubbles)

Questions?





Thank you!



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