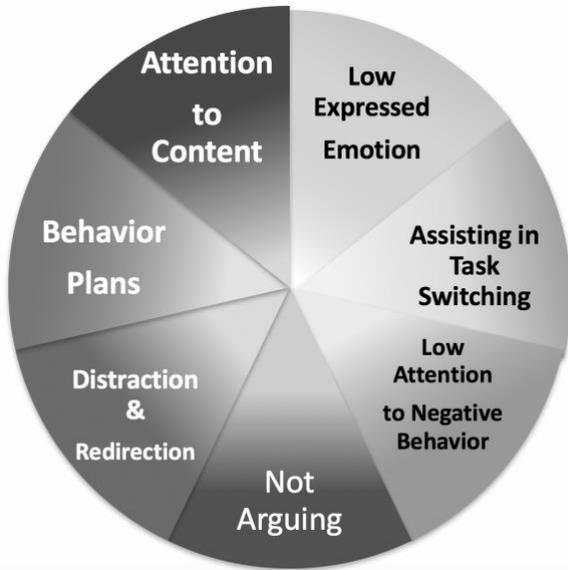


# THE BEHAVIOR BEACHBALL: BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT SKILLS FOR FAMILIES

Linda M. Gourash, MD



These are skills needed for working with noncompliant and disruptive behavior; they are predominantly preventative but *all come into play* at those times when de-escalation is needed during an outburst.

## *Low Expressed Emotion:*

All of us are quite sensitive to the emotion in other persons' voices, especially *anger* (annoyance, frustration, exasperation, impatience etc.) Emotion in another person's voice immediately evokes emotion in us! When talking to a person with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY it is especially important to keep emotion out of your voice for 2 major reasons 1) they are very likely to over-react to your emotion 2) they will cease processing your words as they react to your emotion.

This skill is called **Low Expressed Emotion** because it is not what you feel but what gets expressed that counts. **But** what you feel has a great influence with how much emotion you express.

Our (negative) feelings are usually triggered by some degree of disappointment; that is when expectations are not met. If caregivers understand EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY they will feel less objective disappointment. It helps if parents and other caregivers EXPECT that the person with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY may not comply immediately with a request, that he will argue, that he will manipulate or lie. If he or she has done any of these things in the past it is best for the caregiver to assume that these things will happen in the near future. This understanding helps the caregiver to take troublesome behaviors in stride and to respond with less underlying emotion.

But emotions will be triggered and then it is crucial for the parent or caregiver to be practiced in the art of *concealing* his negative emotions. **Emotions** are mainly **expressed** in the voice but facial expression and body language are also important to modulate.

Tone rather than volume is what needs the most attention. Your goal is a flat, matter-of fact or upbeat tone as if nothing provocative has happened. Start practicing this art today in ALL of your conversations and other relationships will go smoother.

## *Assisting in Task Switching*

Many conflicts arise out of the failure of persons with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY to do what they are asked. Failure to obey is generally NOT a sign of disrespect; it is not about YOU. Many of these events have more to do with the desire, even the need, to continue what they are already doing. They may have very little objection or opposition to what you want them to do only **difficulty** in making the switch. If you help them, you will get more cooperation.

- Begin a request with a pleasant upbeat tone.
- Wait 8-10 seconds
- Expect to have to repeat request
- Move in close; repeat request in same tone with same inflection.
- You may tell the child that you will remain there until he has done made the switch and started to do what you are requesting or, if necessary, until he has completed the task requested.

When you know from experience that a certain transition is going to be difficult you may add a step and expect to take more time:

- Move in close;
- Ask child about what he is doing. Engage him on what he is doing before asking him to stop.
- Begin a request to end the activity with a pleasant upbeat tone.
- Wait
- Expect to have to repeat request
- Repeat request in same tone with same inflection.

You may have to cycle through the last 3 steps multiple times. Depending on the circumstances, you may physically end the activity by removing the distraction. Expect an outburst and follow recommendations in ANATOMY OF A TANTRUM.

What does not work:

- Making a request from another room
- Scolding the person who “ought to know” it is time for a new activity
- Making the request and then going away before the person has made the switch or
- telling the person that a switch will be expected “in 10 minutes” and then expecting him to remember that and make the switch on his own in 10 minutes.
- DO NOT LEAVE THE AREA UNTIL YOU ARE CERTAIN THAT THE CHILD HAS STARTED OR COMPLETED TASK.

## *Low Attention To “Negative” Behavior*

“Negative” behavior is any unwanted behavior. It is a natural impulse to comment on negative behavior, scold or threaten with consequences but these tactics generally make matters worse. EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY in particular seems to be strongly reinforced by attention to undesirable behavior.

This skill can take some real acting talent. You must pretend that you do not notice or do not care about the behavior. Rather your comments and your movements are all directly pointed toward **the behavior that you want the person to be doing instead.**

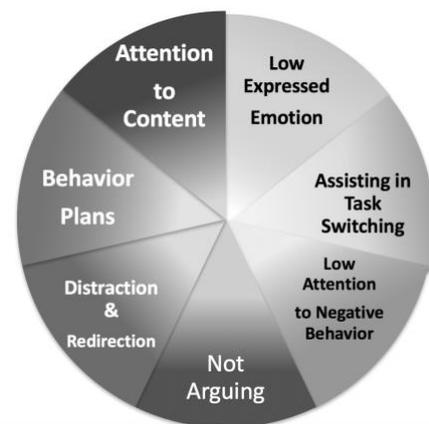
Therefore, in the prior skill of **Assisting in Task Switching**, you will NOT comment on the fact that the person is not doing as requested nor threaten consequences to try to speed him along. You will talk about anything else except the negative behavior or remain silent.

### **Important:**

**Low attention to the unwelcome behaviors does not mean you never address the behavior. (see below)**

## *Distraction and Redirection*

These are the things you are doing when the person with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY is not doing what you want him to do. They are what you are doing while you are giving **Low Attention** to his negative behavior as above. You may **distract** by talking about something you know interests him or about a preferred activity coming up in his schedule. You may redirect his attention to what you want him to do. Most of your verbal content will be devoted to what you want him to do with no remarks on the fact that he is not doing it. You may also talk about the incentives and rewards built into his daily plan. This is how to make the most use of **Behavior Plans** (below).



## *NOT Arguing*

- What is Arguing?
  - Arguing is point-counter point. Arguing gives reasons and support for your position.
- Why avoid Arguing?
  - Arguing back validates the child’s arguing
  - Arguing pulls you off message
  - Arguing empowers the child and allows him to set the agenda.

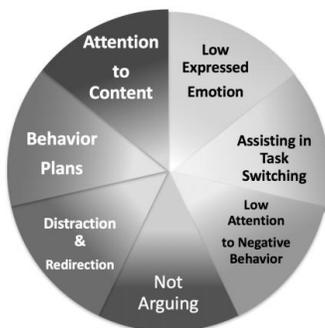
Having witnessed families and caregivers fall into the trap of arguing with a person with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY, it is very clear that for some people, this skill is very difficult to exercise. It may help to point out that you can virtually never “win” an argument with a person with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY. For 3 reasons:

- Arguing encourages more arguing.
- People with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY often LOVE arguing
- The person with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY is not necessarily bound by logic or facts.

By not arguing, you are giving **Low Attention To Negative Behavior**. Instead of Arguing you will use other skills discussed here, especially **Distraction** and **Redirection**.

## Behavior Plans

These comments are not about how to develop behavior plans, rather on your communication to support an existing behavior plan. Many caregivers view mistakenly that the loss of the reward will effectively change behavior. This rarely works. (If punitive responses worked, the behavior plan would not be needed!)



Building behavior plans is a separate topic covered in another handout. But supporting a child’s behavior plan or planned daily schedule is very much a skill needed by caregivers and families. One of the benefits of the existence of a behavior plan is that you have something to talk about when you are giving low attention to negative behavior

The verbal support that you give a behavior plan is crucial. The *single most common mistake* is to think that talking about consequences will be helpful. Rather, your verbal content should be focused on what you want him to do and the incentives he will receive for doing it. Primarily you will talk about the incentives he will receive on the same day rather than a long-term reward. The behavior plan is an opportunity for you to be a cheerleader for the child rather than his opponent. How you talk about behavior plans can completely sabotage the effectiveness of the plan. Upbeat statements such as,

“I want you to earn your points for the afternoon! Let’s do it!”

are far more likely to aid compliance than any threats or reminders of consequences. If any caregiver has the mindset that a Behavior Plan functions by “*teaching him a lesson*”, he is likely to render the plan ineffective with inappropriate and negative remarks.

## Attention to Content

In addition to HOW you speak to someone with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY, experienced caregivers generally recognize that one must be selective and thoughtful about WHAT one says to a person with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY and WHEN one says it. Caregivers are trying to avoid talking about

events until they are certain of the plan and that there will be no surprises or disruptions to the plan. Outright lying is risky but withholding information is essential and sometimes saying you do not know when you do know is necessary.

The reasons for filtering your content is that too much information can cause anxiety and intense perseveration while at the same time not enough information can have the same effect. People with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY are stressed by uncertainties/possibilities and disappointments. Experienced parents are constantly on the lookout for these in their conversations. The more important the issue is to the person with EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY, the more important it is to manage the uncertainties and disappointments in his life.

### ***SAVE IT FOR LATER!***

***During*** an incident of disobedient or disruptive behavior you will want to **stick with only one topic:**

what you want him to do, either:

- to help him to calm down or
- to move toward what you need him to do.

### **Important:**

**Low attention to the unwelcome behaviors does not mean you never address the behavior. Your first focus at the time is to keep everyone safe and to follow through with either helping your child to calm or to follow through with your request. LATER, when 1) you are calm and 2) your child is calm, you may discuss the behavior with him and what you expect from him. If you turn this into a scolding you will only create resentment. Children LARGELY resent being scolded, insulted, criticized much more than they resent your rules and expectations.**

SHOWING RESPECT: ***Speak to him as you hope he will speak to you.***

Listen to yourself. Do you insult your child, call him names or call his actions “stupid” or worse? Do you swear or in any other way speak to your child in a way that would be disrespectful if he spoke to you that way? You are the AUTHORITY but that does not give you license to be disrespectful to your child. Imagine him grown and you old and dependent. ***Speak to him as you hope he will speak to you.***

Do you bring up past misbehavior? This is never useful; stick to the present.

It is usually not useful to talk about how inconvenienced or upset you are by his actions. Save that for later, if at all.