

S.E.A.T. · Functions of Behavior

Behavior is communication. When you can name the function, you can support the need.



Sensory

WHY?

To get sensory input that feels good or is enjoyable.

WHEN?

Anytime — often even when the person is alone.

EXAMPLE BEHAVIORS

- Rocking, humming, or hand-flapping to self-regulate
- Pressing on eyes to see 'lights'
- Seeking deep pressure, spinning, or specific textures

HOW TO HELP

If it isn't harmful, allow it — it is meeting a real need. If it is harmful, offer a safer activity that gives the same sensory feedback.

PROACTIVE SUPPORTS

- ✓ Offer safe sensory items throughout the day
- ✓ Build in regulation and movement breaks
- ✓ Learn the person's sensory profile — what soothes vs. overwhelms



Escape

WHY?

To get out of unwanted tasks, interactions, or environments.

WHEN?

Something is hard, boring, stressful, or overwhelming.

EXAMPLE BEHAVIORS

- Throwing materials when asked to clean up
- Running from a noisy classroom
- Refusing a demand or shutting down

HOW TO HELP

Shrink the demand, teach 'break,' and reinforce small successes. Don't simply remove the task — that teaches the behavior works.

PROACTIVE SUPPORTS

- ✓ Break tasks into small steps; praise each success
- ✓ Teach and honor 'break' requests
- ✓ Pair hard activities with fun ones; set up wins



Attention

WHY?

To get access to people or interaction.

WHEN?

Not getting enough attention or connection from others.

EXAMPLE BEHAVIORS

- Yelling while adults are talking to each other
- Silly or 'annoying' behavior when ignored
- Asking the same question repeatedly

HOW TO HELP

Let them know how to earn attention now — 'once you're quiet I'll come over' — then follow through immediately with warmth.

PROACTIVE SUPPORTS

- ✓ Give lots of positive attention freely, before it's asked for
- ✓ Teach an appropriate way to request attention
- ✓ Praise and respond quickly when they ask well



Tangible

WHY?

To get access to items or activities they want or need.

WHEN?

Something they want isn't available or is being denied.

EXAMPLE BEHAVIORS

- Yelling because a preferred snack is gone
- Grabbing a peer's toy
- Meltdown when a screen is turned off

HOW TO HELP

Offer an alternative ('not this, but you can have A or B') or a first/then ('first this, then that'). Avoid caving after the behavior.

PROACTIVE SUPPORTS

- ✓ Use first/then language routinely
- ✓ Offer real choices from what IS available
- ✓ Signal transitions with a timer before ending activities

Ask yourself: WHY is this behavior happening?

The same behavior can serve different functions — and sometimes more than one at once.