

# What's "a behavior"?

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow

Heard in places here and there is a newly-coined phrase, "He had a behavior." Now what, pray tell, does this mean, and why, for Pete's sake, are people using these words?

Let me digress for a moment and state a maxim which, if adopted by all, could have an extremely positive impact on people with disabilities and their status in society. Here it is: if it's not right for a person *without* a disability, it's not right for a person *with* a disability.

What is "it"? Anything! The way a person is treated, talked to, talked about, and anything else.

Thus, most of us would not say, "He/she had a behavior," when talking about a husband or wife, a co-worker, or a boss. (You *wouldn't*, would you?) Therefore, *we shouldn't say it about people who have disabilities!*

Based on the context of the conversations, when parents and professionals (but *never* people with disabilities) say, "He had a behavior," I'm going to infer this means the person misbehaved (according to the speaker). And I'm going to assume this terminology is supposed to replace the more familiar terms, "acted up," "threw a fit," "had a tantrum," and so forth. Furthermore, I'm assuming this phrase refers specifically to one or more particular actions which the person with a disability is supposed to know he is not to do; e.g., his "behavior plan" details actions which are big no-no's and which have definite consequences and/or punishments. (But we must wonder if *he* knows what's in his "behavior plan," and if he was involved in the writing of same.)

Furthermore, it seems "a behavior" is a phrase intended to identify actions relative to a person's label and/or environment. When a person with autism bites himself, that's "a behavior." When a person with a cognitive disability refuses to "comply," that's "a behavior." And maybe when a resident of a group home or a worker

in a segregated work setting doesn't follow the rules, the action might be called "a behavior."

What's the *purpose* of this new way of talking? I'm not really sure. But one of the *outcomes* is that *any and all behaviors* of a person with a disability are frequently attributed to the disability! When a six-year-old with a disability is not interested in the boring lesson at school, her refusal to complete the project is labeled "manipulation." The teacher "knows" that "all children with disabilities learn to be manipulative at an early age." But the same behavior in a six-year-old *without* a disability does not evoke the same response.

I've learned from many wonderful experts (Joe Schiappacasse, Herb Lovett, and others) that *behavior is communication*, whether one has a disability or not. Biting, head banging, withdrawal, outbursts, and other typical and not so typical actions are *all* forms of communication.

People with disabilities who don't have effective means of communication (oral speech, communication device, etc.), as well as *those who have never been listened to*, may have no other way to communicate their wants, needs, or feelings *except* by physical actions. And in too many instances, parents, teachers, service providers, professionals, and others don't see this; instead, they view these actions as "inappropriate behaviors." Consequences or punishments are delivered; the person tries to communicate his resulting sadness, fear, or frustration through physical actions; these are once again viewed as "inappropriate behavior" and the cycle continues and even escalates!

In another article, Joe Schiappacasse acquaints us with "enviable behavior supports." There's much to learn about communication and behavior. Instead of saying, "He had a behavior," perhaps we could more accurately and respectfully state, "*He's trying to tell us something.*"