How to teach a child to ask instead.

Esta lección en español

What it is. **Functional communication training** (FCT) teaches a simple, acceptable way to ask for the exact thing a problem behavior was getting: attention, an item, a break, or help. The new way to ask is called the **replacement**.

Why it matters. A behavior that works keeps happening. Stopping it without teaching another way to get the same thing leaves the need in place, and the behavior, or a new one, comes back. FCT is one of the most common and effective treatments for serious problem behavior (Tiger, Hanley & Bruzek, 2008).

HOW TO DO IT YOURSELF

How to teach a replacement yourself, in six steps.

1. **Find out what the behavior gets, first.** Attention, a thing, a break, or the feeling itself. 4-term data and the four functions show you how. The ask only works if it gets the same thing.
2. **Pick an ask that's easier than the behavior.** A word, a sign, a picture card, a button. If screaming gets there faster than finding the card, screaming wins.
3. **Teach it in calm moments, before the hard part.** Set up a small version of the situation, help them make the ask right away, and give the thing the moment they ask. Every time, at first.
4. **Stop paying the old behavior, as far as it's safe.** The behavior no longer gets the thing; the ask does. Expect it to get worse for a short while before it gets better. For

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hitting, biting, self-injury or anything unsafe, do this step with a BCBA.

5. **Fade your help on the ask** until they ask alone. That is prompt fading.
6. **Only then, teach waiting.** Once the ask is steady, stretch it: “Yes, in one minute,” then longer, so “not right now” stops meaning “never.”

IT GETS ATTENTION

“Play with me,” a tap on the arm, “Look!”

IT GETS A THING

“Tablet, please,” or a picture card of the thing.

IT GETS A BREAK

“Break, please,” or a break card. If the work is too hard, teach “Help, please” too.

IT FEELS GOOD BY ITSELF

An ask fits less well here, because the behavior makes its own payoff. Talk with your BCBA about activities that give the same feeling.

Settled: this is one of the most tested treatments in behavior analysis. In the first study of it, children whose behavior problems showed up when adult attention was low, or when work was hard, were taught to ask for attention or for help, and the problems dropped (Carr & Durand, 1985). The 2020 national review of autism interventions lists it as evidence-based (Steinbrenner and colleagues, 2020).

WORKED EXAMPLE

Eli, the worksheet, and a break card.

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Made-up example. The child, the school and the numbers below are invented to show the method.

Eli is six. He throws his worksheet a few times a day, and the 4-term data say the same thing every time: the throw ends the worksheet. That is a break, so his team teaches a break card.

When	Throws a day	Break card a day	What changed
Before	9	0	Throwing ended the worksheet.
Week 1	6	11	Card on the desk. At the first frown, the aide helps him hand it over: one minute away, right away. Throwing no longer ends the worksheet.
Week 2	2	14	He reaches for the card on his own most of the time.
Week 4	0	8	The team starts waiting: finish one row, then the break.

The card worked because it got exactly what throwing got, faster and without trouble. Week 1 still had throws: an old behavior fades, it doesn't vanish on day one. And the waiting came last, after the card was solid.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Ways a replacement fails.

- An ask for the wrong thing, like a break card for behavior that gets attention.

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- An ask that’s harder than the behavior: a full sentence when one scream works.
- Honoring the ask only sometimes. At first, every ask gets the thing, right away.
- Letting the old behavior still work. Then the child has two ways to ask, and the loud one is faster.
- Starting the waiting too early. Stretch it only after the ask is steady.

TRY IT

One question, then the answer.

A made-up case: Ruby screams at dinner, and the 4-term data show that screaming gets her mom to come and sit next to her. Which replacement fits, and why not a break card?

▼ Show the answer, and why

An ask for attention, like tapping her mom’s arm or saying “Sit with me.” The screaming gets company, not a break. A break card would teach an ask for something Ruby isn’t after, and the screaming would keep working, because it would still be the fastest way to get her mom.

Something to keep

Ask cards and a one-page plan.

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draw or glue a picture

Break, please

draw or glue a picture

Help, please

draw or glue a picture

Play with me

draw or glue a picture

I want ____

Replacement plan	
The behavior, so a stranger could spot it	
What it gets (attention, a thing, a break, the feeling)	
The new ask (word, sign or card)	
When we practice it, calm and before the hard part	
When they ask, we	Give it right away, every time, at first.

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When the old behavior happens, we (the BCBA's plan)	
When we start teaching waiting	

WHERE DRAGEN HELPS

Do the hard parts with a behavior analyst.

FCT is simple to describe and easy to get slightly wrong: the wrong function, an ask that's too hard, a plan that pays both behaviors.

DRAGENfamily, the hub at home, logs what you see as it happens and shows the last two weeks as a graph, so every adult works from the same page. The paper version above works tonight.

Free on this page, and yours to keep: the lesson and its 2 printable sheets. No email, no login.

SOURCE

Where this comes from.

Carr & Durand (1985), *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 18, 111–126: the first study of FCT. Tiger, Hanley & Bruzek (2008), *Behavior Analysis in Practice*, 1(1), 16–23: a review and practical guide. Steinbrenner and colleagues (2020), *Evidence-Based Practices for Children, Youth, and Young Adults with Autism*, National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice.

Examples on this page are made up. They contain no client, student or family information. This lesson teaches a method; it does not replace your BCBA, your program, or your payer's

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written rules. If a behavior is dangerous to the child or anyone else, start with a BCBA.

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