DRAGEN ACADEMY · FREE LESSON · PARENTS, TEACHERS, TECHNICIANS, NEW BCBAS · 9 MINUTES

How to tell the four functions of behavior apart.

Esta lección en español

What it is. A **function** is the job a behavior does for the person doing it. Behavior analysts sort the jobs into four: to get **attention**, to get a **thing or activity**, to get **out of** something, or because the behavior itself **feels a certain way**.

Why it matters. The same behavior — hitting, say — can have four different causes, and the fix for one makes another worse. Ignoring hitting that is for attention can work. Ignoring hitting that is for escape teaches the child to hit harder, because the task went away anyway. Function first, then plan.

THE FOUR

What each one looks like.

ATTENTION

Happens most when adults are busy or turned away. Stops when someone looks, talks, comforts — or scolds. **Scolding is attention.** Made-up example: Eli starts humming loudly the moment his mother picks up the phone, and stops when she says “Eli, please.”

TANGIBLE

Happens when something is taken away or refused (“no,” “later,” “all done”). Stops when they get it. Made-up example: Rosa screams when the tablet timer goes off, and the screaming stops the second it is handed back.

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ESCAPE

Happens when a task, demand or place shows up. Stops when the task is removed, delayed, or done for them. Made-up example: Theo tears the worksheet; the worksheet is removed; Theo is calm.

AUTOMATIC

Happens alone too, in an empty room, whoever is or is not there. The behavior is its own payoff — rocking, flapping, picking at skin, repeating a sound. Nobody has to react for it to keep going.

One behavior can do two jobs. Screaming can end the homework *and* bring Mom into the room. When the pattern looks messy, that is often why. Write both down.

HOW TO TELL

How to tell yourself: four questions to ask your 4-term sheet.

Take ten lines of 4-term data first (the previous lesson). Then ask:

1. **Does it happen when the person is alone?** If yes, and just as often, think automatic.
2. **Does it start when a demand appears and stop when the demand goes?** Think escape.
3. **Does it start when something is removed or refused and stop when it comes back?** Think tangible.
4. **Does it start when you are busy and stop when you turn to them?** Think attention.

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Tally which question your lines answer “yes” to. The tallest column is your best guess. That guess is what you bring to the BCBA or the school team. Confirming it — briefly setting up each condition and watching what happens — is called a **functional analysis**, and it is a trained job: a behavior analyst does it, with consent and a safety plan.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Leo, age nine, and the worksheets.

Made-up example. The names and numbers below are invented to show the method.

Behavior: *tears a worksheet into two or more pieces*. One school week of 4-term data, eight instances. Seven of eight began within a minute of independent work being handed out. In all eight the teacher removed the sheet and sent Leo to the calm corner. Never alone; never when something was taken from him; happened whether or not the teacher was busy.

Question	Yes, out of 8
Alone?	0
Demand appears, stops when it goes?	7
Something removed, stops when returned?	0
Adult busy, stops when adult turns?	1

Best guess: escape. The calm corner, meant as a consequence, was the reward. The team taught Leo to hold up a break card for a two-minute break before he tore anything, and honored it every time. Over the next two weeks tearing went from seven

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a week to one. That plan was the BCBA's to write; the family's sheet is what made it possible.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Guesses that feel like answers.

- Deciding "he does it for attention" from one afternoon. Ten lines minimum.
- Treating the label as the whole answer. Function tells you *why*; it does not tell you *what to teach instead* — that is the plan.
- Calling it "sensory" because you have not found the pattern yet. Automatic is a finding, not a fallback.
- Using removal as punishment for an escape behavior. You are paying the behavior in the currency it wants.
- Forgetting that the same behavior can have a different function at school than at home.

TRY IT

One question, then the answer.

Nia, age four (made up), screams when her brother takes the remote and stops the moment she has it back. She never screams when she is alone. Which function is the best guess?

▼ Show the answer, and why

Tangible. It starts when something is removed and stops when it is returned. "Never when alone" rules out automatic; nothing here says a demand appeared or

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that an adult was busy. Ten more lines would confirm it.

Something to keep

Function quick-check.

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Function	Happens most when...	Stops when...	Tally from my 4-term lines
Attention	Adults are busy, turned away, on the phone	Someone looks, talks, comforts, scolds	
Tangible	Something is taken away or refused	They get the thing or activity	
Escape	A task, demand or place shows up	The task is removed, delayed or done for them	
Automatic	Alone, or regardless of who is there	It does not depend on anyone reacting	

My best guess, to bring to the team (and one line of evidence):

WHERE DRAGEN HELPS

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The professional version of this page.

A functional behavior assessment is this lesson done properly: interviews, direct observation, and testing the explanation rather than assuming it. If a behavior is dangerous, or you are stuck, that assessment belongs with your child's own BCBA.

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 printable sheet. No email, no login.

SOURCE

Where this comes from.

Iwata, Dorsey, Slifer, Bauman & Richman (1982/1994), "Toward a functional analysis of self-injury," *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, is where the four-condition test comes from. Plain-language treatment: Cooper, Heron & Heward, *Applied Behavior Analysis* (3rd ed., 2020).

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 child's care team, your BCBA, or your payer's written rules.

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