**Factors That Explain *WHY* - Defined**

Following are descriptions of factors often related to challenging behaviors. These factors help explain why a child/youth is doing what she does. Put another way, factors assist in understanding the function of behavior. Often, there is no single factor that fully explains the behavior in question. Instead, there is a complex interaction of circumstances across settings and time. This is especially true when trauma is involved. Traumatic situations can alter brain architecture, leaving the child neurodevelopmentally unable to do required academic or social tasks. Understanding that some tasks may be beyond the child’s current capability is the first step in designing effective supports.

**1. Biological Regulation**The human brain predicts and responds to environmental conditions. While doing so, the brain regulates the release of chemicals to keep bodily systems running. Traumatic events can impact this prediction/response process and influence over-all brain development, resulting in biological regulation issues. Lack of biological regulation may result in behaviors considered to be inappropriate, even aggressive. Biological regulation issues are related to a variety of conditions to include sleep deprivation, nutrition problems, and numerous mental health conditions (anxiety, depression, stress & fear responses, etc.).

Depending upon underlying reasons for biological regulation issues, supports might include rest, food, therapy or medication. Movement is often important in helping a person maintain or regain regulation. Likewise, a person may need access to a safe, quiet space. Regulatory supports may be needed over a very long period of time when behaviors are associated with overly active traumatic neuropathways.

|  |
| --- |
| **2. Social Connectedness** Relationships are key to understanding social connectedness. Humans require social connections to feel safe, valued, and supported. Children lacking social connections usually experience few or no friendships. Development of trust relationships with adults is extremely difficult. In addition, there are few positive social encounters within an hour or day. Absence of positive relationships results in awkward, inappropriate interactions and can impede child/youth capacity to handle perceived threats.  It is critical to assist with resolution of social connectedness challenges. Going beyond typical attention-seeking remedies, necessary supports address the child’s​ n​eed to feel safe and to be accepted. Supports include establishment of meaningful relationships with adults and peers. Relationship development strategies abound, and often involve creation of roles where the child/youth is a valued and important member of the class and school. |
| **3. Emotional Regulation** To understand this highly complex factor, consider the following: The child needs assistance in recognizing emotions - first in himself and later in others. Next, guidance is required to develop appropriate responses to emotions. Finally, emotions are directly tied to biology.  Capacity to recognize and respond to emotions is usually learned through infant and childhood experiences. This learning occurs within the context of a lived relationship with another person who genuinely cares for the child; it cannot be faked. All emotions are learned first in a primal relationship and then used in relationships with others. Some children do not have implicit memory regarding emotional regulation and need help with skill development. When trauma is suspected, it is especially important to remember biological regulation issues. Trauma can impact neurological development, and over-all brain function to include emotional responses.  Emotions include the full range of feelings: happiness, anger, sadness, and fear. The emotional impact of daily schooling requires constant scrutiny and engineering. Classroom and school-wide practices can be structured to ease emotional burden, especially within the context of a preferred relationship with an adult. Common practices can also escalate inappropriate emotional responses. Harmful practices include some disciplinary procedures (punishment, for example), instructional techniques such as ability grouping, and a high tolerance for insensitive social interactions. When school setting conditions contribute to emotional overload, adults in charge need to rethink and restructure.  Emotional regulation issues can be addressed through a variety of curricula. Conceptually based approaches to teaching emotional regulation are effective when the child has sufficient developmental capacity for engagement. But be careful! When neurological development is insufficient, exposure to some social/emotional curricula can actually trigger extreme outbursts. Such children function at an earlier developmental stage and will need lived experiences with a caring adult, on-going sensory opportunities to understand “becoming calm,” and practice in identifying and dealing with strong emotions. |
| **4. Access to Curriculum/Instruction** This factor is isolated for scrutiny due to extreme prevalence, especially when associated with academic success or failure. Avoidance of classroom activities may be related to​ f​ear of failure or lack of pleasure associated with school work. Thus curriculum/instruction issues often occur in conjunction with avoidance challenges.  Every child/youth needs academic work that is rigorous, enjoyable, and provides the opportunity for personal growth. Extensive research surrounding curriculum and instructional differentiation provides guidance for engaging every learner. When avoidance of school work is considered to be the primary factor behind inappropriate conduct, educators have a wonderful opportunity to utilize best instructional practices. Rethink what is being taught and/or how it is being taught. |

**5. Communication Skills**Communications skills allow people to interact verbally and nonverbally, to learn, to understand others, to be understood and to be valued. Put another way, communication skills are central to the human experience. When a person experiences communication challenges, even relatively minor ones, social consequences can be catastrophic. Unmet need for communication results in a variety of aberrant behaviors such as aggression, self-injury, substance abuse, stealing, lying, cheating, and property destruction. Individuals with communication issues often have difficulties initiating or sustaining healthy relationships. Communication issues can be interpreted as evidence of emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, or conduct disorder. Children dealing with communication challenges are often misunderstood, blamed for bad behavior, and punished accordingly.

An alternative communication system, combined with a predictable, visual schedule are useful supports when helping a child to express needs. Speech and language pathologists can provide targeted, highly effective therapy. Speech/language therapy, especially when delivered in an emotionally safe environment with a trusted adult, can be foundational in assisting with communication challenges.

**6. Cultural Environmental Skills**This factor encompasses social, emotional regulation, and character development skills, as part of clearly articulated school expectations that are taught and modeled. Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS) and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) are methods by which educators design and implement strategies to maximize positive skill acquisition.

When it is hypothesized that cultural environmental issues are the root cause of behavioral issue, it makes sense to first examine school and classroom environments. Consider problems associated with inconsistent or inappropriate expectations, expectations that have not been taught, or situations where adults fail to model expectations. Problems of this type present challenges for many children and must be remedied prior to focus upon an individual child. Once school/classroom environments are universally supportive of healthy social/emotional skills and character development, progress to differentiated teaching for youth who need extended learning opportunities.

7. OTHER!

No list of factors or functions will ever cover every possibility regarding human behavior. Based upon information drawn from family, friends, community resources, data, both qualitative and quantitative in nature, the support team might hypothesize reasons behind behavior that are NOT reflected in the six factors above. When attempting to understand another person’s behavior, always be open to new resources and insights.

Adapted with permission from Aldridge, L. & Harrison, R. (2019). S​ix factors related to functions of behavior. U​npublished document in preparation. Revised 8.26.2020.