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DU SPECTRE  
DE L'AUTISME



**"Autism and screens: a complex relationship"**

**January 18th, 2023 – 9 AM to 4 PM**

**Strategies to Promote Healthy  
Screen Habits in Autistic Youth**



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# Strategies to Promote Healthy Screen Habits in Autistic Youth

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## Learning Objectives

- *Describe daily routine challenges that occur in relation to screen use*
- *Summarize how to prevent challenges around screen access and use*
- *Recommend ways to encourage healthy screen habits*

## Understanding Screen Use

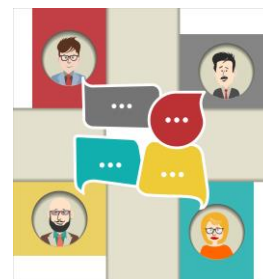
Screens have become a normative part of life for youth

- School laptops given for school/homework
- Means of social connection
  - Facetime/Whatsapp, Snapchat
- Entertainment
  - Video games
  - Streaming
  - Tiktok, Instagram



## Understanding Added Value of Screens for Autistic Individuals

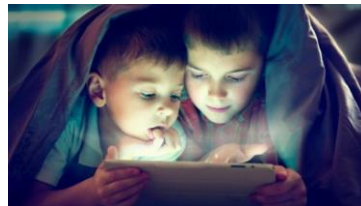
- Communication tools
  - Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Devices
- Academic tool
  - Learning apps
  - Language models
  - IEP supporting typed vs. written assignments
- Social Connection tool
  - Online/multiplayer gaming
  - Preferred means for social engagement (e.g., asynchronous)
  - Access to others with similar interests



## What Screen Use Challenges Are You Seeing?

### So What Screen Use Challenges Are We Seeing?

- “Excessive” screen use\*
- Difficulties with self-monitoring usage
- Preference for screens over other leisure activities\*
- Engagement in screens instead of daily living skills
- Disruptions in daily routines (morning, bedtime)
- Difficulties transitioning off of devices
- Accessing screens late at night, impacting sleep



## Potential Behavioral Outcomes



- Meltdowns
- “Overstimulation” once off of screens
- Reduced independence/engagement in self-care
- Impact on health behaviors (sleep, exercise)
- Impact on social engagement opportunities\*

A caregiver goal is to support autistic individuals in meeting their full potential, including independence around self-care, academics, and skills of daily living

Challenges occur when access/use of screens interferes with these opportunities

How do we create a healthy balance that incorporates the positive aspects of screen use while minimizing potential negative impacts?

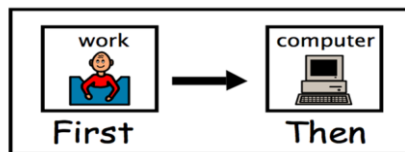
## Building Healthy Screen Habits Requires:

- Noting this does not have to be an “all or nothing” approach
- Understanding what is contributing to current challenges around screen use
- Promotion of clear expectations around screen access/use
- Strategies that support follow through with screen rules
- Consideration of how positive screen habits can be honored



## Understanding Unique Needs of Autistic Individuals

- Appreciating role of “setting events” (sensory issues, overstimulation, anxiety)
- “Noncompliance” can be rooted in rigidities
  - “Can’t” vs. “Won’t”
- Importance of visual strategies (telling vs. seeing)



## How to Understand Behaviors: 3 Key Concepts

### 1) Behaviors are *learned*:

*Environment sets up the likelihood the behavior will happen*

*Response increases or decreases the likelihood the behavior will happen again*

- Toilet Training
- Meltdown when told to get off tablet to brush teeth
- Sneaking screens at 1am

## Afternoon Routine

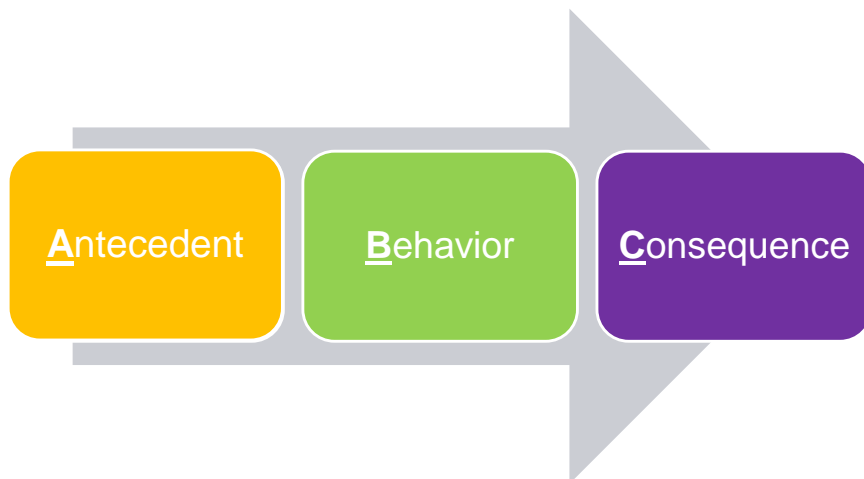
- Ben is an 11-year old male. As soon as he comes home from school, he likes to get on his tablet to watch his favorite show.
- Mom knows that school is stressful and wants Ben to have “decompression” time.
- After about 30 minutes of screens, mom comes over and asks Ben to wind down his screen time so he can get ready to start his homework.
- Mom returns 15 minutes later and Ben is still on his tablet.
- When she tells him to turn it off, Ben ignores her.
- Mom raises her voice and demands Ben turn the tablet off.
- After arguing for almost 20 minutes, which escalates to Ben engaging in physical aggression and destructive behavior, and mom threatening several times to take away the tablet, Ben’s mom walks away.



## Afternoon Routine

- Decompression time is great. Does it have to be screens?
- Are there reasonable expectations about Ben's ability to self-monitor his screen use? Or Is there a way to support Ben's self-management around transitioning off of screens?
- Mom is giving ambiguous prompts to transition. Is there a way that the transition expectation could be made more clearly?
- Are there ways to reinforce Ben for following what will hopefully be clearer instructions?
- Can Ben be supported to communicate differently his need for more time?

## Three-Term Contingency



## Antecedent

- Demands:
  - “Hand me the tablet”
  - “Turn off the TV”
- Restrictions:
  - Saying “no” you can’t have screens right now
  - Taking the screen away



## Behavior

- Anything the person does
- Observed
  - describe what I would see if I were watching
- Measured
  - Timed
  - Counted

## Consequence

- What comes *after* behavior
- All behaviors have a consequence:
  - Planned or unplanned
  - Positive, negative, or neutral



## How to Understand Behaviors: 3 Key Concepts

### 2) Behaviors are a Form of Communication

What is the individual trying to say through this behavior?

**BEHAVIOR**  
IS  
**COMMUNICATION**

## How to Think about Behaviors: 3 Key Concepts

### 3) Behaviors serve a *function*

- Their job is to get a need (or want) met

## 4 Possible Functions of Behavior

Escape: “Get away” from aversive event/stimuli  
(task, people, place)

Tangible: “Get access to what I want”  
(preferred toy, food, video)

Attention: “Pay attention to me”  
(peer, caregiver, parent)

Automatic: “I like the way that feels”  
(produce a + internal state or reduce a - state)

## ABCs and Functions: In Practice

Sara is playing a game on the computer when her mother tells her that it is time for to turn it off so she can start her homework. Sara falls to the floor, screaming and kicking. In an attempt to stop Sara from waking up her baby sister from her nap, Sara mother tells her that she can have a few more minutes on the computer.

Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Possible Function

## Prevention Strategies

### Control the Environment

- Blocked/restricted access to off limit items/websites, etc.
  - Apps, Controlling the internet, Lockbox



### Change How You Ask or Respond

- Avoid certain words (“No screens”)
  - Provide choices instead
- Avoid abrupt/unpredictable transitions
  - Give warnings (verbal, timers)
- Clarify implied/unclear behavior contingencies



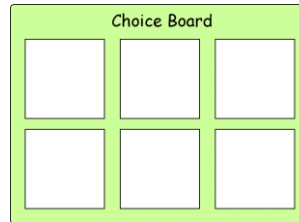
## Prevention Strategies

### Change the order of events

- Design routines so fun activities occur after nonpreferred activities
- Note positive response to “the quicker you get done with X, the more time you’ll have with Y.”

### Use Visual or Auditory Cues

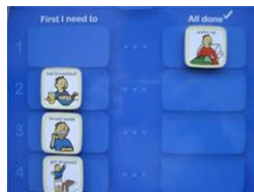
- Choice boards, First-Then visuals,
  - Tight First-Then contingencies with visual timer



## Prevention Strategies

### Establish a routine

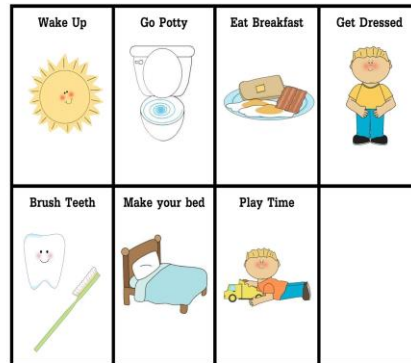
- Unpredictable routines/changes in routine may elicit challenging behavior
  - Help clarify expectations in daily routines and address difficulties with transitions
- Create structure during unstructured times
  - Non-screen decompression time



## Visual Schedules

- Structured, visual representation of schedule
  - Daily
  - Portion of the Day
    - Morning, evening
    - Free play

MORNING ROUTINE



## Daily Schedule Tracker

Time	Activity	Problem area or potential reinforcer	Potential Prevention Strategy
6:15	Wake up	Problem	
6:30	Eat Breakfast	Potential Reinforcer	
6:45	Watch TV	Potential Reinforcer	
7:00	Get dressed	Problem	Choices; Change the order of events
7:15	Brush Teeth	Problem	Visual Cue (pictures); Auditory cue (timer); Use fun activities to reward completion of less desired activities
7:20	Get back pack	Neither	
7:30	Get on the bus	Neither	

## Visual Schedule Format

Object	Photo	Icon	Sight word
*Little to no prior experience with visual schedules	*shows interest in photographs	*able to attach meaning to visual presentations other than photographs (ex: labels on boxes, cartoon images)	*a beginning reader
* a tactile and visual learner	*point to or name specific items within the picture		*Child is able to attach meaning to the written form of a word
*starting to associate meaning with an object or place	*able to attach meaning and/or gain information from photographs	*group items by at least one attribute	*match a visual representation of an item to the written word form
*Pictures and photographs still too abstract	*able to match an object to a photo of the same object	* match a photo to an icon representing the same item or place	*operates in a variety of settings where written text is displayed

## Reinforcement 101

Preference vs. Reinforcer

Properly weighted “scales of justice”

Youth is motivated to earn the reinforcer

- Very little can compete with screens
  - “Cherry on Top” syndrome
- Inclusion of ‘unique’ reinforcers/preoccupation

Role of natural reinforcers and privileges

Reinforcement vs. Bribery





## Functional Communication Training

- Behavior is a form of (inappropriate) communication
- Behavior serves a function
- Replace inappropriate behavior with functional communication tool
  - Words, pictures, gestures
  - E.g., “I need more time”, “Screens please”
- The replacement behavior should:
  - **work quickly**
  - **work every time**
  - require **less effort** than the challenging behavior.



## Pulling It All Together



- What behavior am I interested in targeting
  - Clearly defined
- What is the function of this behavior?
  - Informed by ABC Data
- Can I prevent it from happening?
- Can I change how I respond to it?
- Can I teach a new skill in its place?

## Afternoon Routine

- Ben is an 11-year old male. As soon as he comes home from school, he likes to get on his tablet to watch his favorite show.
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## Pulling It All Together: Example



- What behavior am I interested in targeting?
  - Argues when asked to get off of screens
- What is the function of this behavior?
  - Access to preferred item, escape from nonpreferred activity
- Can I prevent it from happening?
  - Establish a routine with visual support, change the order of events, use a visual timer, provide choices around non-screen decompression activities
- Can I change how I respond to it?
  - Reinforce listening/successfully transitioning
- Can I teach a new skill in its place?
  - Appropriately request for more time

## Clinical Example: Late Night Sneaks

9 y.o. autistic male with co-occurring ADHD

- Wakings between 1-3am
  - Explores house looking for screens
    - If accesses screens, goes back to room and stays on screens until AM

Questions:

- What sets up the likelihood of this behavior? (Antecedent)
- What contributes to this behavior continuing? (Consequence)
- What is driving this behavior? (Function – Access to preferred activity)
- What had been tried before? (Prior behavioral strategies)
- Can this child self-manage screen access? (Unlikely)

## Clinical Example: Late Night Sneaks

- Can I prevent it from happening?
  - Gather screens before bedtime and block access
  - Provide access to tools that may help with falling back asleep
    - Sound machine, music/audiobook
- Can I change how I respond to it?
  - Reinforce staying in room at night
- Can I teach a new skill in its place?
  - If goal is to have clear boundary around no screens after a certain time, we may not want to reinforce asking for more time after hours

## Developmental Considerations

- The A-B-C/Function model is age independent
- What strategies you use may be dependent on youth developmental level and skills
  - Format of strategy
    - Visual with photographs/pictures vs. written list
  - Look for opportunities to collaborate on strategy ideas
  - For older individuals the focus should be on developing self-monitoring strategies
    - Consider impact of co-occurring conditions, such as ADHD

**Resource:**

American Academy of Pediatrics Family Media Plan  
<https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/>



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