

Understanding motivations for behavior can be helpful for children with autism

January 26 2017, by Sheena Rice

For many families, normal activities, such as going to a large family gathering or an amusement park, can be difficult to navigate with a child with autism, as the child may act out due to being overwhelmed by extra noises and stimulation. To help families deal with such situations, specialists at the University of Missouri Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders have been successfully integrating applied behavior analysis (ABA), the science of understanding why people behave in various ways and how understanding those motivations can shape behavior. SungWoo Kahng, associate professor of health psychology in the School of Health Professions, says that parents and caregivers can work with therapists to implement ABA-based activities at home to support the overall behavior treatment plan.

"The question we get asked most often is, 'Why is my kid doing this?' Kahng said. "That's exactly the kind of question ABA can try to answer. However, the answer will be different for every patient. We look at what motivates that person to behave in a certain way. For example, they could be avoiding completing a task or trying to attract attention. Once we know the 'why' behind a specific behavior, we can help [parents](#) and caregivers address behavioral issues for children with autism."

ABA specialists are able to analyze behaviors and determine what motivates that person to reform [problematic behaviors](#). Once the reason for a behavior is understood, specialists can help to reduce [problem behaviors](#) and increase appropriate behaviors. Kahng says parents and caregivers can help children with autism live happy and productive lives

by monitoring the ABA treatment and participating in training sessions and consultations with the ABA specialist.

"Parents and caregivers can help support a child's treatment by planning ahead, particularly for public outings or large family gatherings," Kahng said. "To plan ahead, parents should understand what the challenges might be and talk to the host in advance to explain plans to handle potential problems. For example, parents might identify a quiet place where the child can take a break if things get too overwhelming or they might bring something the child prefers, like a favorite toy or comfort item, so that appropriate [behavior](#) can be rewarded while away from home."

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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