

The ABC's of Charting Behavior

What is the concern?

Sometimes it feels like no matter what you do, some of your child's challenging behaviors are hard to change. Due to busy schedules and feelings of frustration, many parents are unsure how often and under what circumstances their child's behaviors even happen. Some parents feel at a loss about how to understand and manage their child's behavior.

Why should I chart my child's behavior?

When simpler solutions don't seem to be working, charting makes you more aware of what leads to your child's behavior. It can help you figure out whether a behavior is positive or negative, how often it actually happens, and gives you clues about how to change it.

How do I chart my child's behavior?

Use "Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence" or an ABC chart to record behavior. This involves writing down what triggered the behavior (what happened just before the behavior occurred - known as the Antecedent), the actual Behavior, and what happened afterward as a result (the Consequence). For example:

- **Antecedent** – A child was told to do homework.
- **Behavior** – He said no and left the room.
- **Consequence*** – He watched TV.

*The term "consequence" can be tricky because we often think of it to mean punishment. In this case, consequence simply means the result of the behavior.

Think about charting both behaviors you want to increase – like playing nicely – and decrease – like fighting. Overall, a child's behavior changes much faster when you work on decreasing one behavior, "Stop fighting with your sister," while increasing another desired behavior, "Play nicely with your sister."

For each behavior you should record how often it happens, the intensity (low to high), and how long it went on.

Once you have about 10 incidents recorded, you may see patterns about what is causing your child's behavior. You'll have a better idea of what sets it off and what type of consequences keep it going; for example, if a child's hitting behavior leads to more one-on-one attention from adults.

Tips for Charting

- Involve each caregiver in counting and recording the behavior. Each may record at different times of the day.
- If the behavior occurs often, you can get a good idea of its overall pattern by recording just one to two hours per day.
- If the behavior occurs less often, you may have to keep track all day. If there are specific situations where the behavior occurs, then you might only have to record at those times, such as at dinner time or when you are on the phone.



Tips to Remember:

- Charting helps determine how often behaviors occur.
- Use ABC to keep track of behaviors:
 - **A-Antecedent** – What triggered the behavior?
 - **B-Behavior** – What was the behavior, how long did it last, and how intense was it?
 - **C-Consequence** – What happened just after?
- Explain to your child why you're charting and keep the chart in a visible place.
- If you need help planning your next steps, please talk with your child's health care provider for more ideas.

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- ALWAYS explain why you are charting to your child. For example, “I want us to have fewer problems at home. One of the problems we want to work on is having you and your sister fight less often with each other. So we’re going to first count how often you fight with each other AND how often you play nicely together.”
- Keep the chart in a very visible place, like taped to the refrigerator door. This will remind your child what you are charting and remind you to count the behaviors.

Sample ABC Chart

Antecedent (what happened just before? What time of day? Where?)	Behavior	How long did it last?	How intense? (Low to high)	Consequence (what happened just after?)
<i>4:30 before dinner I told Sheila to clean up her toys.</i>	<i>She threw her toys at her sister.</i>	<i>15 seconds</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>I yelled at her and picked up the toys.</i>