Behaviour occurs for a reason. Understanding the 'WHY' of behaviour gives us tools and insights to manage negative behaviour and, ideally, prevent it before it occurs. Once we know the 'why', we can select more appropriate behaviours to replace the challenging ones.

The 4 main functions of behaviour are:

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ESCAPE

Children may engage in challenging behaviour to escape from a situation, demand, or people. For example, if a child cries and screams when told "It's time to go to bed" and is then allowed to stay up for 10 more minutes, she may learn that crying gets her out of going to bed.

ATTENTION

Children may engage in challenging behaviour to get the attention of adults or peers around them. This does not have to be positive attention, sometimes even a look in their direction or even scolding them still results in reinforcing negative behaviour. For example, if your child throws food on the floor during dinner while you're busy talking and then you turn to the child and tell them to stop – the child may learn that he can get your attention by throwing food. It's best to manage bids for attention by not giving attention to the challenging behaviour (but keeping everyone safe).

TANGIBLE

Children may engage in challenging behaviour to get access to a toy or item. For example, if a child wants a toy from another child and gets it by hitting that child, he will learn that hitting gets him what he wants.

Automatic

Children may engage in challenging behaviour because it's naturally reinforcing or it feels good. With these behaviours, the function is not clear and they may occur no matter what happens right before and right after. They are usually consistent across all people and environments. For example, nail biting, hand flapping, hair twirling.