

Traumatic Brain Injury Resource Bundle for American Indians

Understanding Behavior Changes After Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Possible Behavior Changes After TBI

After falling off a horse and sustaining a moderate TBI a year ago, Summer sometimes has sudden shifts in behavior. She once loved school, but now she doesn't enjoy it and even missed the bus this morning.



Other Common Behavior Changes After TBI Include...

Restlessness



People with a TBI may fidget, pace, or move in a repetitive way.

Problems With Social Behavior



People with a TBI may avoid others or interrupt others. They may say things that do not fit the situation or are hurtful.

Difficulty Starting Tasks



People with a TBI may have trouble starting tasks or conversations, even if these are things they want to do.

Behavior changes are common after TBI. These changes often occur soon after the TBI and may change over time.

Behavior changes usually get better as time passes.



Why Do Changes In Behavior Happen?

Changes in behavior after TBI happen for many reasons. One cause is changes in the way the brain works. The most common changes include...

Problems with focusing, processing information, or communicating. These issues can make it hard to keep up with a conversation or understand a situation.



Problems with thinking skills. This can make the person feel irritated, refuse to do things, or not do things that they agreed to do. They also may have a hard time making choices.



Poor impulse control. This can make it hard for them to filter what they say or control their thoughts and actions.



People with a TBI may not be fully aware of their current issues. This can make it hard for them to follow recommendations meant to help them be independent, keep them safe, and recover.

Summer, it's time to do your homework.

I don't want to. I'm good!

Follow the ABC Approach to Manage Problem Behaviors

I'd like to share a helpful strategy called the ABC approach that we can use together to support Summer in managing some of her challenging behaviors.

Welcome to the parent teacher meeting. I noticed Summer had a few challenging behaviors recently at school. The school counselor and I would like to discuss them with you.



A



Summer, it's important to do your homework.

"A" is for antecedent. This is what happened right before a problem behavior occurred. Take notes on everything you remember to identify triggers. In Summer's case, one of her triggers is not wanting to do homework.

B

No!!!



"B" is for behavior. This is the problem behavior that stems from the antecedent. When problem behaviors occur, note how often the behavior happens. Note how long it lasts and the intensity of the behavior.

C

YOU CAN'T DO THAT!!!

You won't be going to the movies with your friends then.

“C” is for consequence. This is what happens right after the problem behavior occurs. Take notes on all changes you see right after the behavior. Did the person get something from the behavior? Did they avoid something because of the behavior?

Set Realistic Goals for Behavior Change

Spend time identifying a list of triggers and ways to prevent a problem behavior. If you cannot avoid triggers, find ways to decrease the impact of those triggers.

Sorry you had to miss the movie with your friends. Let's come up with a list of triggers to help prevent these situations.



After you do your homework, you can have a friends' night out.

Okay!

Aim to reduce the number of times that problem behaviors happen and their intensity. Try to reinforce positive behavior. You can do this by rewarding the person with something they enjoy.

Do not expect to prevent all problem behaviors.

Aim to make small changes over time. Do not expect changes to happen quickly.

Just leave me alone!

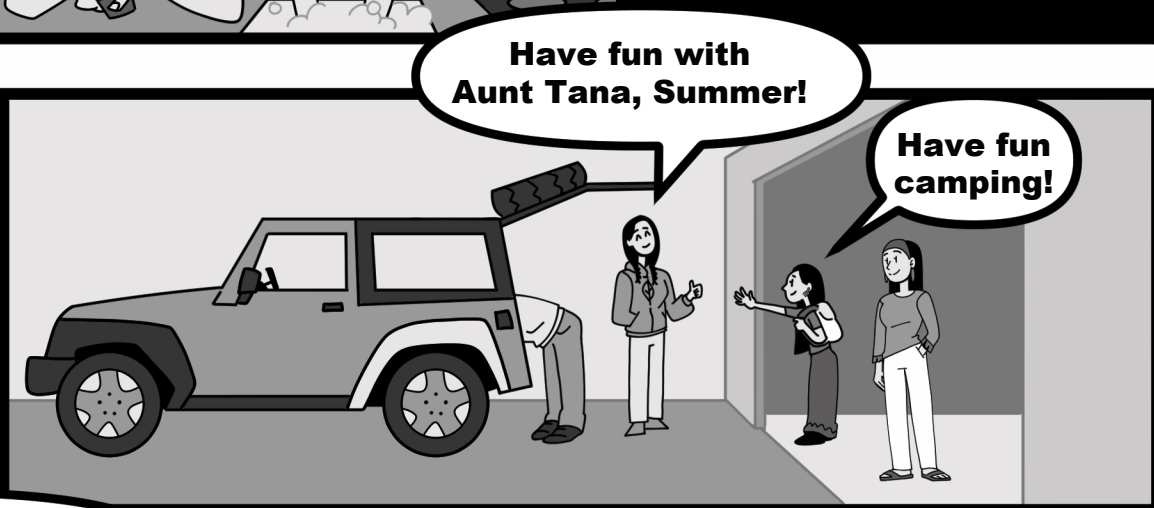
Summer, it's time to do your homework. Afterwards, you can hang out with your friends.





Focus first on the behaviors that are easy to recognize and occur often. As you build your confidence and make progress changing behavior, you can focus on behaviors that are more challenging.

Problem behaviors can be exhausting for everyone. Take time for yourself and get help from others if you need it.



Once you have had some success with changing behavior, slowly reduce positive reinforcements.

The goal for behavior change is to reach a point where the person does not expect positive reinforcements every time.





Example A-B-C Chart

The ABC framework can be highly effective, but it requires persistence and motivation to achieve meaningful results. Progress may be gradual, and sustained effort is needed to apply the principles consistently over time.

A-B-C Plan: Changing the Antecedent (to “Prevent” or “Improve” Problem Behavior)				
A Antecedent	B Behavior	C Consequence	Ideas for Change	Results
It was time for Summer to do her homework after school	Too tired and refuses to do homework Screaming When angry locks herself in her room	Did not do homework Parents upset Summer was not allowed to go out	Give Summer some time to decompress after school instead of having her do homework right away Provide rewards for doing homework such as getting to do her favorite activities	Summer complains less about doing homework Parents are less stressed about Summer completing homework on time

Blank A-B-C Chart

A-B-C Plan: Changing the Antecedent (to “Prevent” or “Improve” Problem Behavior)				
A Antecedent	B Behavior	C Consequence	Ideas for Change	Results

Source: The content of this infocomic was adapted from the factsheet entitled *Understanding Problem Behavior Changes After Moderate to Severe Traumatic Brain Injury* developed by Sean Hollis, PhD; Phillip Klebine, MA; Risa Nakase-Richardson, PhD, FACRM; Tom Novack, PhD, ABPP-CN; and Summar Reslan, PhD, ABPP-CN, in collaboration with the Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center (<https://msktc.org>).

Disclaimer: This information is not meant to replace the advice of a medical professional. You should consult your health care provider regarding specific medical concerns or treatment. The contents of the infographic were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number 90DPKT0008). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this infographic do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

Copyright © 2025 American Institutes for Research. May be reproduced and distributed freely with appropriate attribution. Prior permission must be obtained for inclusion in fee-based materials.



Traumatic Brain Injury Resource Bundle for American Indians

