

How Caving or Giving in to Whining, Crying or Tantrums Makes Parenting More Difficult



Parenting is difficult. Sometimes it even seems impossible, especially given the other daily stresses we juggle like work, paying bills, preparing meals and making sure homework is handled.

We have all been there in trying to make it through a day. And we have all been on the edge of “caving” or giving in.

At that moment, it is an instant reward for us. It is also an instant reward to the child. For example, your child is crying or throwing a tantrum to get something he/she wants (like candy at the grocery store checkout line), or whining/crying to maintain access to something that he/she likes (like an iPad).

by Amy Smith Wiech,
Ph.D, BCBA-D, LBA

We want the negative behavior to stop, right? So we caved to the child to stop the crying. It worked! Your child stops crying and throwing a tantrum!

Now we need to talk about what is really happening here. Let’s unpack it and do the analysis. You should first know that there is a science that explains why people do the things they do. It is called Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). We can use this science to guide keiki (and adults) to behave in a particular manner.



We have all been on the edge of “caving” or giving in.

It all boils down to four functions of behavior that are the reasons why people do the things they do.

1. Attention: People gain attention in some way as a consequence of their behavior, like talking to that person, scolding, eye contact, etc.

2. Tangible: People gain access or maintain access to something they like or prefer. For example, the child is allowed to keep the iPad after being told “iPad time is over” by screaming and throwing a tantrum, or allowed to remain in the toy store, even though they are not following

THE ABCS OF BEHAVIOR

	ANTECEDENT What happens before the behavior of interest	BEHAVIOR What the person does	CONSEQUENCE What happens after the behavior of interest	HYPOTHESIZED FUNCTION what did the person “get” from performing that behavior?
ANALYSIS OF CHILD’S BEHAVIOR	Mom says, “It’s 7pm! Time to go to bed!”	Child whines, screams, cries, and falls on the floor	Mom says, “Okay, you can stay up 30 more minutes. I can’t stand to hear you carry on and cry like this!”	TANGIBLE: the child got 30 more minutes of time staying up ATTENTION: child got some verbal attention for his behavior ESCAPE/AVOID: the child got to avoid going to bed
ANALYSIS OF MOM’S BEHAVIOR	7pm is bedtime for the child. The clock says 7pm	“It’s 7pm! Time for bed!” says Mom	Child whines, screams, cries and tantrum/falls on floor	NONE
	Child screams, cries and tantrums	“Ok, you can stay up for 30 more minutes. I can’t stand to hear you carry on and cry!”	Child stops crying/whining	ESCAPE/AVOID: mom got to escape or terminate the child’s crying/tantruming



Always remember that you will receive the behavior that you reinforce.

the rules of holding hands with mom/dad.

3. Escape or Avoidance: People are allowed to escape or avoid a situation they don't like, such as negative situations, activities, people or items. The escape or avoidance provides relief, so to speak.

4. Sensory/Automatic: People do things because they feel good, like twirling hair, biting nails, clicking a pen or bouncing a knee. This is the only function that does not require another person to allow/provide the consequence to reinforce/reward the behavior. The person can do it alone.

So what just happened here is that the parent caved and “escaped” or terminated the crying/tantrum. As a result, you received negative reinforcement or relief for your caving behavior because your child stopped crying. That will, in essence, increase the likelihood that you will “cave” or give in again in the future so that you can get your child to stop crying or throwing tantrums in the moment.

This also likely positively reinforced or rewarded a child's crying/tantrum behavior as it was able to access the item want-

ed or maintain access to it. It is highly likely your child will cry or tantrum again in a similar circumstance to get the same need met. The child just learned that by crying/whining, the world will become better. The child will be offered cool rewards for crying/whining, such as staying awake longer and being able to play iPad longer.

Moral of this story: The same situation resulted in rewards for both you and your child. Always remember that you will receive the behavior that you reinforce. In some way, shape or form, behavior that is continuing to occur is being rewarded in some manner, by someone, and even can be inadvertently rewarded.

Use the ABCs of behavior to help figure out the reasons for the behaviors. And be sure to seek the expertise of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA), who is also a Licensed Behavior Analyst (LBA) in the State of Hawaii. You will find BCBA's in your area by searching the Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB) registry at BACB.com 