



## FACT SHEET

### REPETITIVE BEHAVIORS

### Pennsylvania Chapter

#### ***What are repetitive behaviors?***

Repetitive behaviors are physical or verbal behaviors that a child engages in repeatedly. The most common repetitive behaviors are head banging, thumb sucking, and rocking. These common examples may not be problem behaviors. Other examples may be hand flapping, repeated play or constant return to a specific play pattern or particular toy, spinning objects, saying the same sounds or words over and over, or walking repeatedly in the same pattern around a room. Sometimes these behaviors appear to be nervous tics. These repetitive behaviors may interfere with a child's learning or social interactions.

#### ***Why would a child engage in repetitive behaviors?***

There are many possible reasons.

- Boredom.
- Anxiety or worry.
- To avoid a task or activity.
- Self-stimulation or self-soothing.
- To gain attention.
- The child does not know how to approach a situation or activity.
- Difficulty in self-regulation, such as dealing with emotions, comfort, or falling asleep.
- A characteristic of a specific condition or disability.

If you are not sure why the behavior happens, ask yourself "What does the behavior accomplish?" You may be able to figure out a reason. In some cases, children may engage in repetitive behaviors and adults may not be able to figure out the reason.

#### ***What can parents and child care providers do to reduce common repetitive behaviors?***

- Create a predictable and structured environment that encourages self-regulation, independence, and choice. For example, put up a set of pictures to let children know the schedule for the day. Use a musical tone to warn children that they will need to change their activity in two minutes.
- Change routines or schedules to meet individual needs. For example, if the children seem particularly active on a given day, shorten their time sitting and increase their time in outdoor play.
- Try to control stimuli such as noise, light, people, and confusion. You may use carpeting, soft lighting, or soothing background music to reduce stimulation. Speak in a conversational tone and do not yell.
- Provide opportunities for children to make choices. For example, you can ask children whether they want to drink milk or juice at lunch and to choose their toys.
- Introduce the child to new places, procedures, and people in small steps. Warn children when a change is about to occur. You can say, "We are going to meet a new person this afternoon."
- Encourage functional and useful activities. For example, show a child how to roll a toy car and play with it appropriately rather than spin it around. Show the child the pictures in the magazine rather than let the child simply flip through the pages.

- Encourage social interaction skills with peers. Children use repetitive behaviors when they are alone. You can often get a child to join the group by bringing out a toy that all the children really like.

***What can be done to reduce persistent and difficult repetitive behaviors?***

- Encourage the child to use a functional communication system. You can say, “I like when you tell me with words that you are angry.”
- Be positive and praise desirable behaviors. You can say, “You thought of a new way to use that toy. Good job.”
- Use clear and simple language to tell the child what you want him/her **to do**, not what **not to do**. You can say, “Please tell me with your words that you do not know how to do this.”
- Provide appropriate modeling experiences and opportunities for making choices. For example, if the child does a repetitive behavior to avoid a task, offer a choice between two tasks. For example, you can say, “It is clean-up time. Do you want to throw away the paper cups or wipe the table with the sponge?”
- If the child engages in repetitive behaviors, redirect him/her to something else that is appropriate. We call this finding a “functional equivalent.” You can redirect by getting the child’s attention and changing the material or activity. For example, if the child is repeating the same phrase over and over, see if you can get him to sing a song.
- Praise or reward the child for the appropriate new response or successive approximations of the desired behavior.

The children who are of greatest concern are those who injure themselves or others, do not respond to the steps described, or who have other delays or behavior problems. Be sure to discuss with the parents the behaviors you have seen and the steps you have taken to reduce those behaviors. Refer children who are of concern for a further assessment of development or behavior to a health professional or agency.

**Prepared by:** Leslie McKinney, M.Ed., UCLID Center at the University of Pittsburgh, 1998

**Reviewed by:** Susan S. Aronson, MD, FAAP 11-04

