

# Office of Developmental Primary Care

Improving outcomes for people with developmental disabilities

## Evaluation of Behavior Change

In people with communication disorders, illness typically presents as a change in behavior or function. Behavior can be a form of communication. People with communication disorders can usually give important information about their health. They may need supports such as visuals, choices, or access to augmentative and alternative communication. Any patient with a change in behavior or function should receive a medical evaluation.

The **HURTS** mnemonic provides a differential diagnosis of the most common medical causes of behavior change in people with developmental disabilities.

**H**ead, including cervical spine: migraines, hearing, vision, dental, and neck injury

**U**rinary tract: kidney stones, urinary tract infections, and obstruction

**R**eflux and gastrointestinal problems

**T**hyroid and trauma

**S**eizures and side effects of medication: seizures can present as inattention, behavioral tics or emotional lability

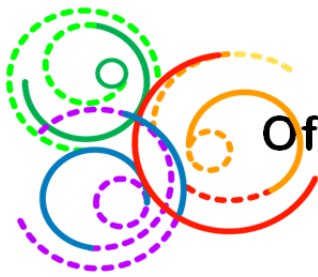
Behavior changes can also signal:

- Abuse or other stressors
- Escape or avoidance of demands
- Increase in arousal or self-stimulation
- Means of accessing preferred activity or objects
- Mental illness
- Need for social attention
- Pursuit of power and control
- Reduction of arousal that leads to anxiety
- Sensory problem: vision, hearing or sensory integration
- Substance abuse
- Unrecognized pain or discomfort

### References

1. Zelenski, SG. Evaluation for and use of psychopharmacologic treatment in crisis intervention for people with mental retardation and mental illness. In: Hanson R, Wieselers K, Lakin C, Braddock DL, eds. *Crisis: Prevention & Response in the Community*. Washington, DC: American Association on Mental Retardation; 2002:243-256.

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## Managing a Behavioral Crisis

### Safe

- Introduce yourself
- Use plain, clear, concise words
- Explain your intentions
- Avoid sudden touch or grab
- Formally end your contact, e.g. "I am going to leave now."
- Wait it out (Don't just do something, stand there)

### Calm

- Control your affect and behavior
- Redirect attention to something concrete, factual, and non-emotional
- Stand back to avoid getting injured
- Be aware of your position in relation to person (flight is better than fight)
- Remove objects that can be weaponized and extra people

### Affirmation

- Set clear limits
- Minimize distractions
- Use kind, encouraging words
- Repeat a positive mantra
- Allow breaks

### Routine

- Redirect to task at hand
- Cue person
- Provide visual support
- Be consistent

### Empathy

- Ask what happened to you; not what is wrong with you
- Offer another way to get need met
- Avoid repeatedly disagreeing

### Develop intervention plan

Lipsky, D, Richards, W. Managing Meltdowns Using the S.C.A.R.E.D. Calming Technique with Children and Adults with Autism. 2009. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. London.

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