Escape Extinction: 
A “scientific” look at why we try not to let kids get out of doing stuff they don’t like

A brief vocabulary lesson:

**Reinforcement:** When something is either given (positive) or taken away (negative) following the occurrence of a behavior that increases the chance that the behavior will happen more (increase, strengthen).

**Extinction:** when a previously reinforced behavior no longer receives reinforcement (positive or negative).

*Examples:* A student typically gets attention while crying, stops getting attention while crying. A student hits someone while doing writing and gets out of (escapes) writing, then stops getting out of it for hitting.

**Escape:** (also called negative reinforcement) when the removal of a stimulus following a behavior increases or strengthens the behavior.

Putting it together: Escape Extinction! Which means, *not allowing escape from something aversive contingent upon problem behavior (including non-compliance).*

*Examples:* A student is presented with something (food, demand, non-preferred person) and begins crying/screaming. To prevent escape from the “aversive” stimulus, either prompting is used to support him through the task, or the stimulus remains present until compliance with the demand. **THE ONLY WAY TO GET RID OF THE AVERSIVE STIMULUS IS TO GET THROUGH IT, EVEN WITH PROMPTING.** If EE is effective, data will show that the student’s levels of independence at activity-completion/engagement are *increasing* and the frequency, intensity, and duration of the problem behavior is *decreasing.*

But remember the BURST! On 100% of situations using extinction, a burst occurs which means a *sudden and temporary increase in the frequency, intensity, or duration of the behavior prior to it becoming extinguished.* It MUST be possible to work through the extinction burst in order for this to be an effective strategy. If you “give in” during the higher level behavior, you have now reinforced that behavior and the student will likely try that level of behavior again next time to escape the aversive stimulus!

ALSO, and perhaps most importantly, there must be differential reinforcement of other behaviors at the same time as extinction:

- **DRA**—differential reinforcement of alternate behavior (functionally-equivalent)
- **DRO**—differential reinforcement of other behavior (anything but the problem behavior)
- **DRI**—differential reinforcement of incompatible behavior (something that can’t be done at the same time as the problem behavior)
We MUST teach an alternate skill during extinction to ensure the burst is just a burst.

Your real-life example to tie all this together:

During lunchtime, a student is presented with new food. He begins crying and refuses to put the food in his mouth. The staff member removes the food from his plate. Next time a new food is presented, the student cries and the new food goes away. Consequently, the student only eats chips and cookies for the rest of his life.

What’s happening here?

Here’s what we can do instead (Escape Extinction):

During lunchtime, a student is presented with a new food. He sees a preferred food nearby. He begins crying and refuses to put the new food in his mouth. The staff member keeps the new food in close proximity to the student’s mouth until he takes a bite. Once he takes the bite, the new/aversive food is removed and he is allowed access to the preferred food. Next time a new/aversive food is presented and a preferred food is nearby, the student takes a bite of the new food and gets access to the preferred food. Consequently, the student learns to tolerate new foods that may be healthier than his typically preferred foods.