Speaker 1: The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program, keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Nicki Donnelson: Life has been cultivated around the idea of socialization and communication. It's complex. For individuals with autism, it can be quite challenging to navigate. I'm Nicki Donnelson.

Today on the Missouri State Journal, I have Dr. Megan Boyle. She's an associate professor of special education at Missouri State University. She is a board-certified behavior analyst, runs a clinic for children with autism spectrum disorders, and prepares the next generation of educators for behavior issues in the classroom. This is the second in a two part series on autism.

Severe behaviors like running tantrums or aggression are not uncommon in children with autism, as they are learning to operate in the world. Boyle tells us about the assessments and analysis she uses to understand the why behind the behaviors and how she incorporates this into treatment for the behaviors.

Dr. Megan Boyle: The assessments and techniques that we use with the children and families that we work with are based on applied behavior analysis. We analyze behavior in terms of the antecedents and consequences that are associated with the behavior. We do functional assessments with severe behavior to identify why severe behavior is happening. That's kind of my specialization. And then, we employ function-based treatments to typically either teach or strengthen an appropriate response, often communication-based, to allow the individual to appropriately access whatever it was that the severe behavior was accessing.

Nicki Donnelson: When these children come to Boyle's clinic, they are little. Even so, these behaviors have become part of the life and learning history for the child and family. Caregivers have at least some knowledge of what the child wants or needs when the child engages in the behavior, which means it is a communication method for the child.

Dr. Megan Boyle: I always prepare caregivers or teachers or whoever I'm working with that this is going to take a while. Because for this individual, this behavior has been effective probably four years, at the minimum of a year. But I mean, if we're dealing with someone who's eight years old, that could be a learning history of that long. So initially, we want to strengthen an appropriate communication response typically. And so once we get that shift in behavior, so now the individual's no longer engaging in aggression maybe or elopement, but they're now requesting appropriately what they want, the next step in treatment is teaching them how to tolerate periods of time during which that reinforcer might not be available.

Often, looking at our typical kids, they could ask for something appropriately but it's not available right now. Sorry, we have to work on homework instead or sorry, the iPad is not charged so we can't watch our movie. The next step is then slowly building up this tolerance to when a reinforcer is not available and that term is called schedule thinning. And there are a variety of ways that you can go about doing that and one of our research interests is how to do that most efficiently, how to teach caregivers how to do it, figuring out maybe which way might be most preferred for the individual that we're working with.

Nicki Donnelson: Boyle says that this leads to the child being more content and caregivers and teachers being more empowered.

Dr. Megan Boyle: Often, the children that we see, the families that we see have seen a variety of other providers by the time they get to us. So they've seen speech and language pathologists, they've seen occupational therapists, counselors, psychologists. And so, by the time they get to us, they're tired and they're in crisis. And it's up to us to look at a situation and see how can we use the science of behavior to help you to make your lives better? The world doesn't make sense to some of our kids. They're struggling. Often when they're engaging in these problem behaviors, we see that they're not happy. They're not enjoying it. They're upset. They're crying. And so, one of the things I try to instill in my students is it's up to us to figure out what they're wanting and then giving them an alternative way of accessing whatever it is.

Nicki Donnelson: Once you see headway in suppressing severe behaviors, Boyle points out that they can still creep up, especially in new environments or ones where the skills haven't been practice

Dr. Megan Boyle: Individuals with autism, they struggle with generalization. So if you work with a child, maybe in a clinical setting or even in a special ed classroom, you should not assume that the gains or skills that they learn there will spontaneously occur in other settings. So one thing that's really important in service delivery is making sure that everybody that the child has routine contact with is on the same page.

Nicki Donnelson: That was Dr. Megan Boyle and the second of a two part series on autism. I'm Nicki Donnelson for the Missouri state journal

Speaker 1: For more information, contact the Office of University Communications at (417) 836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.