


Challenging Behavior of Students with Autism: Proactive Skills and Reactive Strategies

Monica Fisher, M.Ed, BCBA, COBA
Director of Behavior Department at
Monarch Center for Autism



Outcomes

- Understand what Applied Behavior Analysis is
- Understand the A-B-C contingency and how motivating operations can alter value
- Understand what challenging behavior is and when it is considered a problem
- Understand behavioral functions
- Understand proactive strategies for early intervention
- Understand reactive strategies for students who already exhibit challenging behaviors

Applied Behavior Analysis – What is it?

- “A scientific method, a technology, and a professional approach. It is a system designed to analyze and change behavior in a precisely measurable and accountable manner. ABA is an evidence-base method of examining and changing what people (and other living creatures) say and do.”

(Mayer, Sulzer-Azaroff, & Wallace, 2014)

How does ABA work?

- It uses the scientific method!
 - Problem is identified
 - Relevant data is gathered
 - Hypothesis is formulated
 - Hypothesis is empirically tested
- Behavior analysis... “breaks complex behavior down into its functional parts. A successful analysis should allow the behavior to be synthesized by putting the parts back together.” (Catania, 2006).
- This leads us to the A-B-C’s of behavior analysis

Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence

3 Term Contingency

- Antecedent – the events, actions, or circumstances that occur immediately before a behavior
- Behavior – what the organism does
- Consequence – the actions or responses that immediately follow the behavior

Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence

3 Term Contingency

- A teacher presents a student with a worksheet to complete in class. The student crumples up the worksheet and throws it. The teacher tells the student to take a break.
 - What was the antecedent?
 - Behavior?
 - Consequence?
- You take your dogs for a walk outside in the rain. You get back home and realize your boots are all muddy. You wipe them on the mat before walking in the house and your house stays clean.
 - What was the antecedent?
 - Behavior?
 - Consequence?

Motivating Operations

- A motivating operation is a class of antecedent events that exerts control by altering the potency or value of a particular consequence.
 - Imagine you have been up 24 straight hours...
 - Think of a time when you were STARVING...
 - What about if you are late to a meeting...
 - You just finished a huge meal...
- Motivating Operations are important for us to understand because they alters the value of the reinforcement we are using.
 - A person can only sit for so long until we seek some type of movement
 - We can only go so long without food
 - We can only eat so much before food isn't desirable to us anymore

Reinforcement

Positive Reinforcement

- Increases future frequency by addition of a stimulus:
 - Praise
 - Edible
 - Token

Negative Reinforcement

- Increases future frequency by removal of an aversive stimulus:
 - Extra work
 - Screaming
 - Crying
 - Alarm

Punishment

Positive Punishment

- Decreases future frequency by addition of a stimulus
 - Reprimand
 - Pain (hot stove)

Negative Punishment

- Decreases future frequency by removal of a stimulus
 - A token
 - Time-out from reinforcement
 - Fine

What is Challenging Behavior? Is the behavior a problem?

Note:

- If the behavior is serious or harmful, consult with a **Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA)** before implementing an intervention for behavior reduction.
- Go to www.bacb.com to find a behavior analyst.

Behavior can be considered a problem if:

- It limits the person's access to reinforcers, or the things the person enjoys
- It interferes with learning new things
- It limits the person's interaction with peers or family
- It limits the family from enjoying things together

How do Challenging Behaviors form?

- Many typical children exhibit challenging behaviors in the form of:
 - Hitting
 - Kicking
 - Biting
 - Head-banging
 - Throwing objects
 - Tantrums

How do Challenging Behaviors form?

- Challenging behaviors often occur in young children due to their inability to:
 - Utilize vocal language to express their wants and needs
 - Wait for items
 - Accept “no”
 - Manage frustration or cope with feelings

Examples of Challenging Behavior in Students with Autism

- Physical aggression
- Verbal aggression
- Self-Injury
- Elopement
- Property Destruction
- Tantrums
- “Non-compliance”

Why do Challenging Behaviors Persist?

- Behaviors will persist if they are meeting a need for an individual.
- At least some of the time, these behaviors are reinforced.
- It is important to remember that all behavior serves a **FUNCTION** for an individual.

Functions of Behavior

- There are 4 main functions of behavior in Applied Behavior Analysis literature:
 - Attention
 - Escape
 - Access to tangibles
 - Automatic/Sensory

Functions of Behavior: Attention

- When an individual engages in problem behavior, they often receive attention
 - Direct Attention: verbal reprimand, attempts to soothe or distract, etc.
 - Indirect Attention: a startle response, a quick glance, etc.
- When the individual receives attention after a problem behavior, it may increase the likelihood that the problem behavior occurs in the future under similar circumstances.

Functions of Behavior: Attention

Example:

- There are a large number of students in one classroom with one teacher. The teacher is not able to give students a lot of 1:1 attention. When Tim throws something across the room, his peers laugh and the teacher walks over to his desk and reprimands him. Tim likes this attention. Next time when the teacher is occupied, he may throw something across the room again because in the past his peers laughed and the teacher came to his desk and spoke with him.

Functions of Behavior: Escape

- Sometimes when an individual engages in challenging behavior, it postpones or terminates an aversive event.

Example:

- An individual hits the teacher when work is placed in front of him. This results in the teacher removing the work and giving the student a break. Now, when the student is presented with a task he or she may not want to complete, the student will be more likely to hit the teacher because in the past, the teacher removed the work.

Functions of Behavior: Tangibles

- When an individual engages in challenging behavior, he or she may receive access to reinforcing objects.

Example:

- Upon arriving to school, Sue asks her teacher if she can play on the computer. Her teacher replies, “not until you finish your math problems”. Sue then begins to hit and kick her teacher. Her teacher allows Sue to play on the computer after completing just one more math problem. Next time her teacher tells her she cannot play on the computer until all her work is finished, she may be more likely to hit and kick her teacher because in the past, the teacher lowered the demand and let her on the computer.

Functions of Behavior: Automatic

- Some behaviors are reinforcing on their own. These behaviors do not depend on the actions or presence of others.

Examples:

- Joe is sitting at the work table by himself. The teacher is not paying attention to Joe nor has the teacher given Joe anything to do. Joe starts rocking, scripting, and hand-flapping at this desk. This movement feels good to Joe. Next time he doesn't have anything to do, he may be more likely to engage in these behaviors.
- Having an itch and scratching your skin. Scratching your skin rids you of the itch. Therefore, the next time you have an itch, you will be more likely to scratch to rid yourself of the itch.

Early Intervention

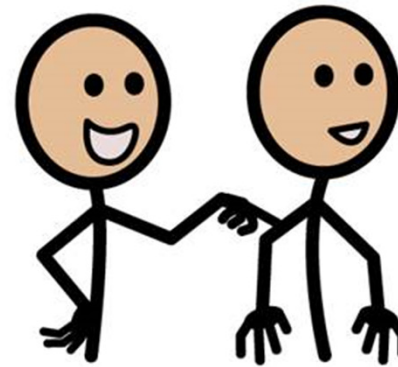
- There are important skills to teach when children are young, to decrease the chances that challenging behaviors will develop to meet a need.
- These skills all relate to...Functions of behavior.
 - Attention
 - Escape
 - Tangibles
 - Automatic/Sensory

Teaching Proactively - Attention

- Does your student know how to appropriately seek out attention...
 - To obtain help
 - To obtain an item
 - To interact with others socially
 - From his or her desk
 - While completing work
- For our students with more intense needs, adult attention is required for almost everything.

Teaching Proactively - Attention

- Teach and reinforce a generalized request for attention:
 - “Excuse me”
- Teach and reinforce appropriate approach behavior
- Teach hand-raising if appropriate
- Utilize Speech Generating Devices if recommended by an AAC specialist

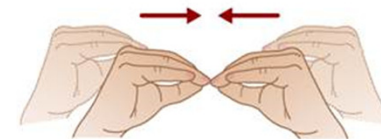


Teaching Proactively - Escape

- Does your student know how to appropriately escape...
 - To avoid unwanted demands
 - To protest non-preferred items
 - By asking for more time with preferred items
- We all avoid and escape unwanted people, places, and things.

Teaching Proactively - Escape

- Teach and reinforce a generalized request for a break
 - “I need a break”
- Teach and reinforce a “no” response
- Teach and reinforce a generalize request for more time
 - “Another minute?”
 - “More”



Teaching Proactively - Tangibles

- Does your student know how to appropriately request
 - Items that they want
 - Food
 - Activities
 - Toys
 - Things that they need
 - Drinks
 - Food
 - Bathroom
 - Help

Teaching Proactively - Tangibles

- Teach and reinforce requests for preferred items.
- Teach and reinforce requests for preferred activities.
- Teach and reinforce requests for preferred places.
- Teach and reinforce requests for preferred people.



Teaching Proactively – Automatic/Sensory

- Does your student know how independently apply sensory input or ask for
 - A movement break
 - Weighted blanket
 - Headphones or a break if it is too loud
 - A fidget

Teaching Proactively – Automatic/Sensory

- Teach and reinforce requests for items that meet a sensory need.
- If possible, teach the student to independently apply sensory input.



Determining Function

- Sometimes challenging behavior has a long history of reinforcement
- First step is to figure out “why” (the function) of the problem behavior [attention, escape, tangible, automatic]
- Look for common antecedents and consequences by taking A-B-C data
- Determine a reasonable hypothesis based on data or ask a BCBA to complete a functional behavior assessment or a functional analysis

Replacement Behaviors

- A replacement behavior is a new behavior that you will teach the student to REPLACE the challenging behavior
- The replacement behavior needs to serve the same function for the student
 - Attention, escape, access to tangibles, automatic/sensory
- The replacement behavior needs to low effort for the student
- This new behavior will need to be taught and reinforced every time the child engages in it
 - Reinforcement has to “match” the effort the alternative behavior requires.

Antecedent Interventions - Attention

- It is possible to decrease motivation to engage in problem behaviors by *non-contingently* providing attention on a fixed or variable schedule
- Increase the proximity of the instructor to the student – change seating arrangement so that teacher is close by
- Give student a preferred activity to engage with if the teacher is unavailable to provide attention

Antecedent Interventions - Escape

- It is possible to decrease motivation to engage in problem behaviors by *non-contingently* providing escape on a fixed or variable time schedule
- Adjust difficulty of the task
- Adjust length of the task
- Offer choices regarding sequence of tasks or mode of completion (writing, typing, etc.)

Antecedent Interventions - Tangible

- It is possible to decrease motivation to engage in problem behaviors by *non-contingently* providing tangible items on a fixed or variable time schedule
- Use a transition activity when transitioning from a preferred activity to work

Antecedent Interventions - Automatic

- Enrich the environment – ensure that the student has items they find stimulating and interesting to decrease motivation to engage in stereotypy
- If challenging behavior is occurring to meet a sensory need – find another alternative activity that can match the same sensory need
 - Resistance bands for pushing/pulling
 - Kaleidoscope

Consequence Interventions

- Token Systems: Behavior is reinforced with a token that has become reinforcing through pairing, or presenting it at the same time with a reinforcing item.
 - Tokens are exchanged later for a reinforcing item
 - Advantages: don't have to supply a reinforcing item immediately, less interference during instruction
- Differential Reinforcement of Alternative Behaviors (DRA)
- Differential Reinforcement of Incompatible Behaviors (DRI)
- Different Reinforcement of Zero Rates of Behaviors (DRO)

Important to Remember

- Challenging behaviors can have a long history of reinforcement, making them resistant to change
 - Changes will take time and effort.
- Do not personalize a student's challenging behavior
 - The problem behavior has worked in the past to get the individual what they want or need
- When initially teaching a replacement behavior, the new skill needs to be low-effort and reinforced every time with a potent reinforcer

References

- Cooper, J.O., Heron, T.E., & Heward, W.L. (2007). *Applied behavior analysis*. (2nd ed.) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, Merrill Prentice Hall
- Cipani, E., Schock, K. (2011). *Functional Behavior Assessment, Diagnosis, and Treatment*. New York: Springer Publishing Company
- Mayer, G.R., Suzer-Azaroff, B., & Wallace, M. (2014). *Behavior analysis for lasting change* (3rd ed., with BACB TL4 updates). Cornwall-Hudson, NY: Sloan Publishing

Question & Answer



Monarch Center for Autism

- ❖ **Preschool**
- ❖ **Day School**
- ❖ **Transition Education Program**
- ❖ **Extended School Year Program**
- ❖ **Boarding Academy**
- ❖ **Adult Autism Program**
- ❖ **Adult Support Living Residences**
- ❖ **Free Webinar & e-newsletter Series**
- ❖ **Online Resource Center**
- ❖ **Welcoming Spaces Program**

- ✦ **Web:** www.monarchcenterforautism.org
- ✦ **Telephone:** 216.320.8945 or 1-800-879-2522
- ✦ **Address:** 22001 Fairmount Boulevard,
Shaker Heights, Ohio 44118
- ✦ **Join our e-newsletter mailing list:**
<http://www.monarchcenterforautism.org/Newsletters/NewsletterSignUp>
- ✦ **Facebook:**
www.facebook.com/monarchcenterforautism
- ✦ **Twitter:** www.twitter.com/monarchohio

