



## Understanding and Managing Challenging Behavior

# ASSERT

Autism Support Services:  
Education, Research, and Training

Jessica S. Akers, M.A., BCBA  
Nina R. Gerencser, MA  
Thomas S. Higbee, Ph.D. BCBA-D

## Agenda

- Problems with “Cookie cutter” interventions for challenging behavior
- Definition
- Functions
  - Examples
  - How do I know the function?
- What to do?
  - Examples
- Larger picture and finer points

## “Cookie Cutter” Interventions

- “Cookie cutter” interventions are those that are not specific to each case and do not look at the specific antecedents and consequence of the behavior
- It is inappropriate to use “cookie cutter” interventions because
  - They do not take into consideration the function of the behavior
  - You may inadvertently be reinforcing an inappropriate behavior
- Examples of “cookie cutter” interventions
  - Ignore students who scream
  - Physically guide students who trash their environment to clean up their mess
  - Hug a student who cries
  - Correct/prompt a student who makes an error

## Challenging Behavior

- Also called problem behavior, negative behavior, inappropriate or aberrant behavior
  - “Challenging behavior” is a more sensitive term
- Generally considered to be any behavioral excess or deficit that falls outside the “typical” range for a given behavior
- More specifically, challenging behaviors are those that present a safety concern, prohibits learning, or reduces social opportunities
  - Aggressive behaviors
  - Non-compliant behaviors
  - Disruptive behaviors



## The Function of the Behavior

- In order to create an appropriate intervention to decrease the challenging behavior, we need to determine the function of the behavior.
  - In layman's terms, the function of the behavior is what is causing or maintaining the behavior.
- Before we cover the specific strategies we use to address challenging behavior, let us review some basic principles and general concepts....

## Identifying the Causes of Problem Behavior

- The environmental factors (antecedents and consequences) that contribute to the occurrence of problem behavior are called its "behavioral function"
- In other words, the "function" of a behavior is a description of the environmental events that are causing it to happen
- Determining the likely function of a problem behavior makes it possible to design an intervention that will have a high probability of success
- Interventions may be designed without knowledge of behavioral function but their success rates will be lower and they might inadvertently increase the problem behavior

## Functions of Behavior

- The possible functions of any behavior, including problem behavior are:
  - To gain something (positive reinforcement)
    - Gain access to attention or tangible stimulus following an undesirable behavior
  - To escape or avoid (negative reinforcement)
    - Escape, avoid, or delay aversive/non-preferred stimulus following an undesirable behavior
  - Automatic/sensory reinforcement
    - Sensory positive or negative reinforcement
  - Multiply maintained (combination of the above)

## Functions of Behavior

- Positive Reinforcement – tangible/social attention
  - Some thing is added contingent on a behavior that increases the future probability of that behavior recurring
- Negative Reinforcement – escape/avoidance
  - Some thing is removed contingent on a behavior that increases the future probability of that behavior recurring
- Automatic Reinforcement – stereotypic behaviors
  - Reinforcement contingency is not externally controlled
    - i.e. another person cannot directly manipulate the reinforcer
- Punishment (since we're on the topic of behavior)
  - A consequence that decreases the future probability of that behavior recurring

### Examples of Gaining Access (Positive Reinforcement)

- Consider a student is stealing food or toys
  - How could this be positively reinforced?
- A student is hitting other children
  - How could this be positively reinforced?
- Other examples where a student might access attention or tangibles contingent on challenging behavior?
  - The student is walking away from the table during lunch

### Examples of Escape or Avoidance (Negative Reinforcement)

- Consider a student hitting you when you say "sit down"
  - How could this be negatively reinforced?
- A child is sliding from his chair to the floor during lunch
  - How could this be negatively reinforced?
- Other examples where a student might escape or avoid something contingent on challenging behavior?

### Examples of Automatic/Sensory Reinforcement

- A child is spinning puzzle pieces or Mr. Potato Head pieces
  - How could this be automatically reinforced?
    - Do we know for sure?
- The student is standing and rocking from his front foot to his back foot repeatedly
  - How could this be automatically reinforced?
- Other examples where a student's behavior might not be maintained by social contingencies?

### How Do I Know the Function?

- As discussed in earlier trainings, behavior is a function of its consequences
  - Why is this important to revisit?
- To know the function, we have to know the conditions under which the behavior occurs.
- Could the earlier examples have different functions under different circumstances?

### 3 Steps to Decreasing Problem Behavior

- Determine the “function” or cause of behavior
- Place the problem behavior on “extinction”
- Teach a “replacement” behavior

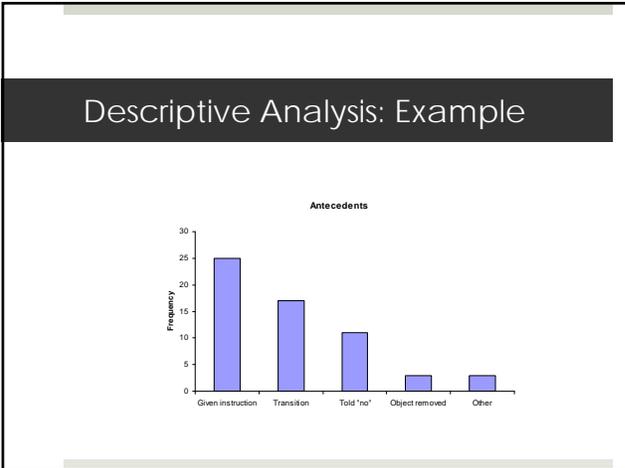
### Step 1: Identify the Function of the Problem Behavior

- Functional assessment is the method that we use to determine the function of problem behavior
- Functional assessment can involve interviews, direct observation of the student, and experimental manipulation of antecedents and consequences to evaluate their effects on behavior
- One tool that we often use is called the descriptive analysis card

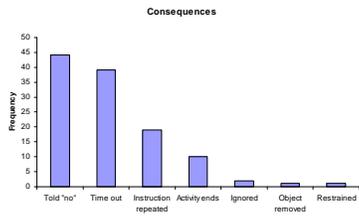
### Descriptive Analysis Card

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Staff Member: \_\_\_\_\_

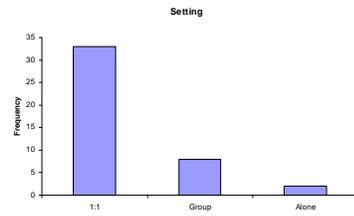
Antecedents	Behavior	Consequences
Check all that apply <input type="checkbox"/> student is asked to do something <input type="checkbox"/> student is asked not to do something <input type="checkbox"/> preferred activity ends <input type="checkbox"/> non-preferred activity begins <input type="checkbox"/> group instruction <input type="checkbox"/> one-on-one instruction <input type="checkbox"/> student is alone <input type="checkbox"/> preferred object is taken away <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____	Check all that apply <input type="checkbox"/> hits other student <input type="checkbox"/> hits staff <input type="checkbox"/> hits self <input type="checkbox"/> throws objects <input type="checkbox"/> at someone <input type="checkbox"/> at something <input type="checkbox"/> spitting <input type="checkbox"/> kicking <input type="checkbox"/> screams or makes other sound <input type="checkbox"/> property destruction what: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> runs away from staff <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____	Check all that apply <input type="checkbox"/> verbal reprimand (e.g., told “no” or “stop that”) <input type="checkbox"/> activity ends/demand is removed <input type="checkbox"/> request is repeated until student complies <input type="checkbox"/> behavior is ignored <input type="checkbox"/> preferred object is removed <input type="checkbox"/> preferred object is given <input type="checkbox"/> student is escorted outside to “cool-off” <input type="checkbox"/> length of time until student is calm: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> other: _____



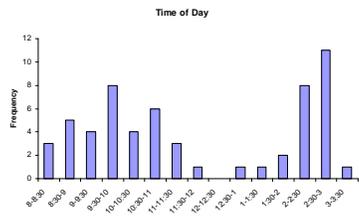
### Descriptive Analysis: Example



### Descriptive Analysis: Example



### Descriptive Analysis: Example



### What Is the Likely Function?

- What were the patterns that you saw in the graphs?
- Is there any more information that would be helpful?
- What would be your guess as to the likely function?
- Would you have formulated the same guess if you did not have data?

## Step 2: Place the Challenging Behavior on Extinction

- Extinction is the act of withholding the reinforcer that has previously maintained a response
- In order to implement an extinction procedure, we must know what the reinforcer is that is causing the problem behavior to occur
  - We get this info via a functional assessment
- Extinction is a critical component of most interventions designed to decrease problem behavior

## Forms of Extinction

- The procedural form of extinction depends on the function of the problem behavior
- **Reinforcement (Function)**                      **Extinction Procedure**
- Attention    Withhold attention
- Tangibles (toys, activities)                      Withhold tangibles
- Escape    Prevent escape
- Automatic positive                                      Block sensory stimulation

## Extinction

- Again, knowing the function of behavior before implementing an extinction procedure is *critical*
- If the function of behavior is not known beforehand, a well-intentioned “extinction” procedure might end up worsening the behavior problem
- Planned ignoring is *only* extinction if the behavior is maintained by social attention!

## Importance of Consistency

- If a behavior is reinforced only now and then, it is more likely to persist
- If tantrums are usually ignored, but sometimes you give in, tantrums will persist
- Not only will the negative behaviors persist, they may increase in intensity
- The student will keep engaging in the negative behavior because it periodically “pays off”

## What to Do?

- If a student has a specific behavior plan for the challenging behavior...
  - Make sure you are familiar with the procedures
    - Know what the target behavior is
    - Know what may “trigger” the target behavior
    - Know any antecedent interventions
    - Know what to do if the target behavior occurs
    - Know replacement behaviors
      - How to teach, prompt, and reinforce
  - Make sure you collect the appropriate data on the target behavior

## What to Do?

- Follow through with the request!
- Instructional work (demand placed)
  - Follow through! Prompt response (if possible)
  - Do not move on until they have engaged in the target response

## Prompting During Challenging Behavior

- Use the least intrusive prompt necessary to get compliance
- If the student is physically resisting (e.g., pulling their arms away)
  - Do not force the student to comply, you will only be teaching them you are bigger and stronger
  - If they do not readily follow the prompt, do not use your strength to force them
  - Continue representing the demand every 2-5 seconds

## Prompting During Challenging Behavior

- **Differential Reinforcement**
  - Progress from less to more enthusiastic praise for:
    - Prompted response if the student did not resist prompt (ONLY if they were previously resisting)
    - Prompted response if student is calm and quiet
    - Independent response (even if they are still crying)
    - Independent and correct responses!!!
  - After 1-3 independent, correct responses when calm, return to previous target in acquisition

## Severe Challenging Behavior

- Students may bite, scratch, pull hair, or hit their heads on hard surfaces
  - Duration last from 20, 30 or 90 min or more
- Long sleeve shirts
- Hair pulled back
- Shoes you can quickly walk in
- Move table, chairs, etc. out of the way
  - Priority keep student safe (Do not allow them to escape work, this will increase the intensity in the future)
  - Run compliance trials on floor (child may be sitting or laying), do not force in chair

## What to Do?

- Be sure to note what was happening before and after the behavior
- Rule out any medical causes
  - e.g. a student who never has any troubles with toileting suddenly exhibits problem behavior every time you take him to the bathroom (he may be constipated, have a bladder infection, etc.)

## What If You Don't Know the Function?

- When problem behavior occurs in the classroom, our natural inclination is often to start lecturing to the student about why he/she shouldn't be engaging in the problem behavior or to start a lengthy conversation about why they are engaging in the problem behavior
- The problem with this approach is that it interrupts the task that the student was supposed to be completing (escape) and provides them with your attention

## What to Do?

- Is there something I should do if I don't know the function and have to act now?
- While there is no single best intervention, generally speaking you should
  - Remain neutral – minimize comments to student
  - Stay on task – do not change or delay the activity for extended periods of time
  - Deliver brief praise for appropriate behaviors – only provide tangibles or escape from the activity for the correct response
  - Maintain a safe environment – remove any potentially dangerous items that could be thrown, be aware of the potential aggressive behaviors the student may engage in (pinching, scratching, biting)
  - Provide the student with the opportunity to appropriately communicate – and reinforce any appropriate communication, even if it is at a lower level than the student is capable of

## Examples

- Consider a student that is stealing food or toys
- The student hitting other children
- Consider a child hitting you when you say "sit down"
  - What else could be maintaining these behaviors?

## Larger Picture and Finer Points

- Larger Picture
  - From day to day, we need to be consistent in teaching and applying interventions for challenging behavior
    - More likely to see trends
    - Reduce likelihood that challenging behaviors will occur
      - Because students will know our response
    - Reduce likelihood that inconsistent responding could be inadvertently reinforcing the target behavior (intermittent reinforcement is very strong)
    - Allows us to see if the intervention that is being implemented is effective or needs to be changed

## Larger Picture and Finer Points

- Finer points
- Teachers must be aware of their *own* behavior at all times
  - Accidental positive/negative reinforcement may be enough to reinforce challenging behavior
 

•eye contact	•waiting
•sighing or annoyance	•pausing the activity
•laughing	•changing activities
•physical guidance	•presenting options or alternatives
  - Can all be very potent reinforcers for challenging behavior

## Larger Picture and Finer Points

- Sowing the seeds of challenging behavior = BAD
  - Presenting options when behavior is less than appropriate is a seed
    - This includes "reminders" of the reinforcers the student is working toward!
  - Not following through is a seed
  - Beginning trials when behavior is not appropriate is a seed (not including during shaping)
  - Delivering reinforcers when a student is not completely appropriate is a seed (not including during shaping)

## Review

- Challenging behavior may occur for many reasons
  - Functions of challenging behavior include:
    - Gain access to attention or tangibles - Positive reinforcement
    - Escape, avoid, delay - Negative reinforcement
    - Automatic reinforcement -
      - Can be + or - reinforcing
    - Multiple Functions
      - Any combination of the three listed above
  - Consistency is important for intervention success

## Final Point

- For our students to be as successful as possible,
  - We must always be aware of our own behavior and the consequences of our interactions with our students
    - This will allow us to see trends and not accidentally reinforce challenging behavior

The way we behave affects the behavior of our students