Education Spotlight

Designing Successful Educational Programs for Students with Challenging Behaviors

We teach students to read, write, calculate math problems and behave in school. When students fail to accomplish these tasks, we assess, remediate, try new strategies and reward accomplishments. Why is it when students fail to behave, we typically punish them? When punishment fails to improve the behavior, we often look for more serious punishment. If this fails, we may encourage the student's removal from the classroom, instruction or even school. Where do we think we'll put them if they're not in school? Who will teach them? When students have challenging behaviors, we must try new strategies and reward accomplishments for behavior just as we do for academics.

In order for students with severe behavioral and/or learning difficulties to be successful, it is important to design effective interventions based upon a multi-modal treatment approach. These interventions depend upon the interrelationship of several integral components. The cornerstone of the planning process for this complete educational program is the Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA). An FBA is a clearly organized process that examines challenging behaviors. The circumstances under which the behaviors occur are scrutinized in order to determine the function or purpose of the behavior. This analysis provides understanding of the behaviors that may be detrimental for development of a positive Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP) sufficient to meet the needs of the student exhibiting the targeted or challenging behaviors.

Why is it Necessary to Conduct FBAs?

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students who show a consistent pattern of challenging behavior should have an FBA conducted and a BIP in place prior to the removal from school for more than 10 days. If the local educational agency hasn't conducted an FBA and implemented a BIP for the child before the behavior that resulted in his/her removal, it must convene an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meeting to develop an assessment plan to address that particular behavior. If the child already has a BIP in place, then the IEP team should review the plan and modify it to address the behavior.

What Information will the FBA Provide?

The FBA provides information necessary for completing the BIP and designing an effective educational program. Fox, Conroy and Heckaman (1998) describe some possible outcomes:

- 1. A clear description of the challenging behavior.
- 2. Identification of the events, times and situations that predict when the challenging behavior will and will not occur.
- 3. Identification of the consequences maintaining the challenging behaviors.
- 4. One or more summary statements about the functions of the challenging behavior.
- 5. Recommendations to change the targeted behavior.

Consider a team approach when conducting an FBA. A team approach relies upon collective brainstorming and input from all members as opposed to an individual expert model. It is important that the team have a leader (an individual expert trained to conduct an FBA) appointed to guide the team and responsible for the FBA's completion. The following individuals may be responsible for conducting the FBA or be a member of the FBA team: special education teachers (case manager or others with necessary training), school psychologists, special education consultants and behavior specialists. Other individuals who can provide input in the FBA are:

Teachers (both general and special education)
Support personnel
Administrators
Parents or guardians
Medical professionals, and
Mental health professionals.

Consider the objectivity of the person or team conducting the FBA. If a teacher's relationship with a student has become problematic due to a student's behavior, it is unwise to have that teacher conduct the FBA. Make sure the team leader can be objective in analyzing the collected data.

What are the Procedures for Conducting an FBA?

- 1. Gather historical information by examining student records and conduct observations across settings. Interviews with everyone involved with the student are detrimental in collecting reliable information. Individuals interacting with the student who have the potential to impact his/her behavior should be interviewed regardless of whether the student demonstrates the targeted or challenging behaviors in their presence. It is just as important to know where the child is demonstrating good behavior (that is commensurate with peers) in order to identify reinforcers and human or environmental antagonists.
- 2. Next, create an observable and measurable definition of the targeted or challenging behavior based upon this information. Identify predictable antecedent-behavior-consequence patterns and consider events prior to the onset and after the behavior occurs.
- 3. From the patterns identified above, develop a hypothesis (educated estimate) of what supports the challenging behavior. Make certain that the hypothesis is observable and measurable. Carr and Durand (1987) state that the function of a behavior is not necessarily related to its form. A student's behavior continues because it works. Behavior is 'learned, purposeful and communicative.' When analyzed and interpreted carefully, behavior can give us answers for designing a BIP. We must understand the meaning of the behavior in order to treat it successfully.'
- 4. Determine and describe the conditions under which the behavior does and does not occur. Remember, you will need to develop data collection instruments that adequately address the most relevant questions. This will help you collect data on your hypothesis to support your findings.
- 5. Confirm your hypothesis. The occurrence of the target behavior taking place under

the hypothesized conditions should be related and predictable. Revise the hypothesis, if necessary.

6. Determine the target behavior's function. Ask the question, 'What does the target behavior help the student to access or avoid?' All behaviors typically serve two purposes. One is to get something: attention, objects, power, self-stimulation, or tangible rewards. Another is to escape or avoid something or someone: tasks, embarrassment, situations, environment, people. The first step is to determine whether a behavior is an effort to receive attention or to escape an unpleasant situation.

For example, this may be accomplished by instructing the child with the challenging behavior and a same-age peer, concurrently. At first, the teacher interacts exclusively with the child with the challenging behavior and, a few moments later, begins directing attention to the peer. If the targeted behavior suddenly increases, it may indicate that the child with the challenging behavior is seeking attention.

If it is suspected that the targeted behavior is a way of objecting to frustrating demands, then the child with the challenging behavior may be asked to perform a series of tasks. The first requested task should be one that the child views as realistic for him/her to complete. The next task should be more difficult, at least at the child's instructional level. If the targeted behavior appears or suddenly increases, then the child may be expressing signs that the task is too difficult, indicating that the function of the behavior is to escape or to avoid the task at hand. Use the FBA to begin the BIP.

7. Begin a blueprint of the behavior intervention plan. This blueprint will contain both an instructional component and a management component. The instructional component will include strategies to teach replacement behaviors. The management component will include proactive and reactive strategies to address the identified, target behaviors. Behavior implementation plans, when implemented early, can prevent a downward spiral.

- 8. Identify replacement behaviors that access the same function as the target behaviors. Plan to teach the replacement behaviors in an environment designed for success. Once the message in the behavior is understood, attempt to teach the child better ways of communicating (replacement behaviors). Although students are responsible for their own behavior, teachers are responsible for teaching replacement behaviors that are functionally equivalent to the targeted, undesirable behavior. On occasion, adults may be required to modify their own behavior due to its impact upon the student's target behavior.
- 9. Teachers have the ability and responsibility to teach, reinforce behaviors and ensure that the replacement behavior, not target, accesses the reinforcement. Plan to provide correction and practice as the consequence for errors, while reinforcing demonstrations of replacement behaviors. Students must receive feedback at a greater frequency for engaging in desired behavior to obtain success.
- 10. Begin the instructional and management components of the behavioral intervention plan as they have been designed. 'Follow the game plan.' Set reachable performance criteria within a realistic timeframe. Collect relevant data and chart progress toward goals. Continue monitoring and adapting goals and interventions based on data. If it's not documented, it didn't happen! Non-existent data cannot be analyzed.

11. Continue successful interventions to achieve goals and then set new goals when these have been reached. It may take 21 to 26 days to determine if an intervention is effective. Steps may be needed to withdraw contingencies as the student reaches agreed upon criterion. The committee may begin fading strategies in an effort to have the student become more self-sufficient. However, if the data determines that the interventions are not successful, adapt goals or interventions. Continue monitoring and adapting goals and interventions based on data.

The Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA), Individual Transition Plan (ITP), Present Levels of Performance (PLOP) in the Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals and objectives, and Behavior Implementation Plan (BIP) are essential in planning a student's educational program, since each builds upon the other.

The success of an FBA is contingent upon the team's proactive use of behavioral management strategies rather than continuing to react in a typical punitive fashion toward the undesired behaviors. In addition, success will be premised on the team's ability to continue with monitoring progress and altering interventions accordingly.

In order to achieve success, a multi-modal treatment* approach is imperative. This means collaborative efforts with parents, educational and support staff, and medical and mental health professionals working on the same team for the benefit of the child. All members of the team must be willing to communicate, and to explore all resources and possibilities in order to develop a practical educational plan.

* A multi-modal approach utilizes a combination of treatments such as behavior modification in addition to medication or other strategies.

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