2006

Promoting Positive Behavior: What Works and What Doesn’t

Marilyn Likins
Utah State University

D. Andrews

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Recommended Citation
Behavior is a critical part of any educational setting involving children. Teachers and staff members spend an inordinate amount of time dealing with inappropriate behavior, and behavior problems have been cited as a major cause of educators' leaving the classroom and finding alternative careers (U.S. Office of Special Edu. Programs Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, 1999). As key members of instructional teams, paraeducators are well aware of the behavior and discipline challenges that can be found in today's classrooms. Not only are they hired to provide instructional services and effectively manage the learning environment, but also they are frequently asked to supervise learners during recess, in the halls, before and after school, at lunch, or while riding the bus to and from school. Paraeducators are therefore often the “first on the scene” when inappropriate behaviors occur. For this reason, promoting positive behaviors and managing inappropriate ones are critical skill targets for most paraeducators. Additionally, it is imperative to adhere to ethical and professional responsibilities when working with students who have behavioral challenges. These responsibilities include treating learners with dignity and respect when implementing behavior management strategies, exercising self-restraint when engaged in emotional situations, and respecting the learner's privacy.

Are learner behaviors becoming more difficult to handle or more frequent? Conflicting research states that learner misbehaviors may or may not be more intense or more prevalent in the classrooms today. Educators must become more efficient and effective at being behavior managers rather than focusing solely on learners' behaviors. When they are hired,
many paraeducators may ask, “What is my role when it comes to managing problem behaviors?” Commonly articulated roles for paraeducators include (a) using proactive management strategies to engage learners and (b) supporting the supervisor’s behavior management plan. The purpose of this chapter is to help paraeducators and their supervisors understand how supporting a positive learning environment translates into effective management practices in their educational setting.

**Learning Objectives**

After reading this chapter, paraeducators should be able to do the following:

1. Define *behavior* and discuss the relationship between the behavior and events that occur in the environment
2. Describe what we know about behavior
3. Describe the ABCs of behavior
4. Discuss the three basic functions that behavior typically serves
5. Discuss reasons why learners misbehave and possible solutions
6. Discuss “how” and “why” we measure behavior
7. Describe proactive management strategies for increasing behaviors
8. Describe proactive strategies for increasing compliance
9. Discuss the steps of a precision command
10. Define reinforcement and discuss types of reinforcement
11. Describe “planned ignoring” and “selective attention” and when to use such strategies

**Key Terms and Definitions**

The following key terms and definitions will be used throughout this chapter.

**Antecedent.** Events that predictably precede and trigger problem behavior (e.g., task demands, instruction, adult requests)

**Behavior management.** The implementation of positive and reductive behavior-based strategies to shape and direct student be-
behavior and ensure student success—both academically and behaviorally.

**Consequence.** Events that occur following or as a result of the behavior.

**Duration of a behavior.** A record of the exact starting and ending time of a behavior and the length of time the behavior occurred.

**Extinction.** Withholding reinforcement for a behavior that was previously reinforced for the purpose of reducing the occurrence of that behavior.

**Fading.** Gradually decreasing over time cues, prompts, reminders, and reinforcers that control a specific behavior.

**Frequency count.** A record of the number of times a specific behavior occurs within a time period.

**Functional behavioral assessment.** A process that includes using a variety of techniques and strategies to discover the causes of problem behavior and to identify interventions that will address those problem behaviors (functional behavioral assessment looks beyond the obvious dimensions of a behavior and focuses instead on identifying other related factors that set off, prolong, or stop the behavior).

**Modeling.** Demonstrating a new behavior so that a learner might acquire the skill by observing it.

**Negative reinforcement.** Removing or reducing the intensity of an environmental condition (usually something unpleasant) that increases a behavior's rate of occurrence.

**Positive behavior supports (PBS).** The application of positive behavioral interventions and systems to achieve socially important behavior change in students.

**Positive reinforcement.** Providing a consequence following a behavior that increases the behavior's rate of occurrence.

**Precision command (or precision request).** A precise verbal statement made by staff members to enhance learner compliance.

**Prompting.** The use of verbal, physical, and visual cues to encourage a particular response.

**Punishment.** A consequence that follows behavior and decreases the behavior's future rate of occurrence.
Rate. The ratio of the number of times a behavior occurs within a specific time period and the length of the time period

Replacement behavior. Behaviors taught to the learner that serve the same function as the inappropriate behaviors

Shaping. Systematically reinforcing a learner's approximations of the desired behavior until the learner can demonstrate the behavior successfully over time

Problem Behavior: A Case Example

Problem behaviors are day-to-day occurrences in our schools. Recognizing that you can be a part of the problem or part of the solution is the first step in knowing what to do. Consider the following scenario.

PAT

Pat, a paraeducator, is supervising a classroom of ninth-grade learners while the teacher leaves to make a quick call. The bell rings. The learners file into their seats and begin to slowly get out the assigned work. Pat notices that Charlene comes in excited and noisy. When she reaches her desk, she drops her backpack on the floor with a loud thud and then sits turned backward in her seat while continuing to talk to her peers. Pat says, “Charlene, get your work out and get started, okay?” Charlene takes several seconds to finish her conversation and then turns around in her seat, getting out her books and papers, and begins her assignment.

David, on the other hand, comes in quietly and sits at a desk in the back of the classroom. Immediately he lays his head on his desk and covers his face with his arms. Pat repeats the same type of request for David, “Hey David, it’s time to work on your assignment, okay? Don’t you want to get it finished? Won’t you need your book? Where is your book? Where is your paper? Did you bring a pencil?” David looks up at Pat, says, “@*&**^# you! I hate this stupid class!” He knocks the desk over and storms out of the classroom. Immediately overwhelmed with frustration and anger, Pat follows David into the hallway and yells at him to come back. “David, you did NOT have permission to leave the classroom! You’d better come back!” David continues down the hall. Pat
returns to the classroom, where the learners are laughing and talking loudly. It takes Pat another 7 to 8 minutes to get the learners back on task.

What happened? What did Pat do to deserve this kind of treatment? If David was having a bad day, why couldn't he just tell her? What should Pat have done instead?

The most common response to this kind of situation is anger and frustration—angry adults and angry kids. Typically in this type of situation the adult does not take the time or make the effort to try to figure out where the problem began and if he or she actually contributed to the outburst. However, without that kind of analysis we can ensure that similar problems will happen again, and again, and again.... So, what do we do? If paraeducators are likely to be in situations where they will have to effectively deal with problem behaviors, they must first understand behavior and why it occurs. In addition, paraeducators must have knowledge about effective interventions for managing difficult behaviors. Let's get started.

Many instructors, teachers, and paraeducators make common discipline mistakes, including engaging in verbal battles, yelling, warning learners with no follow-through, reprimanding learners in front of their peers, and using sarcasm or force. Rather than decreasing the problem behavior, such discipline mistakes frequently lead to an escalation of the problem behavior.

Typical problem behavior found in the majority of classrooms today falls into two categories: inconsequential and consequential. Latham (2000) defined "inconsequential" behavior as those problem behaviors that are annoying and frustrating. They include talkouts, out of seat, complaining, tattling, and so forth. On the other hand, "consequential" inappropriate behavior is behavior that hurts, damages, or destroys, such as physical aggression, destruction of property, sustained disruption of the learning environment, and so forth. A good classroom behavior management plan or schoolwide plan effectively addresses both of these types of behavior.

As a paraeducator, it is your role to become familiar with your supervisor's management plan or schoolwide plan and assist in implementing effective management strategies on a day-to-day basis. How does this happen? It happens through ongoing discussions, in-service training, and on-the-job coaching and feedback. Effective management practices work regardless of who is implementing them. Consequently, if all instructional
team members are trained to use the same proactive strategies to engage learners in the task at hand, learners’ behavior will change. The key is consistency across staff members.

As you work with learners and staff members, remember, “The only person’s behavior you can control is your own.” With this in mind, we will explore the basic principles of behavior and several proactive management strategies over which you have total control. For example, to increase appropriate behaviors, it is critical to maintain a high rate of positive consequences by “catching learners being good.” Learners should be taught classroom rules as well as procedures and expectations at the beginning of the school year; then it is everyone’s job to look for learners who are following those rules and working cooperatively and to acknowledge their behavior with positive gestures (e.g., head nod, wink, pat on the back) or praise statements. Behaviors increase with reinforcement, so be sure you focus attention on the behaviors you want to improve (e.g., staying in seat, working on the assigned task, following directions).

When inconsequential behaviors occur, strategies such as planned ignoring paired with frequent use of proximity praise keep other learners on task and engaged. Using planned ignoring or extinction is simple. When misbehavior occurs, break eye contact, turn and walk away from the misbehaving learner, and purposely continue with another activity. It is vital that you do not attend to, look at, or acknowledge the learner’s behavior in any way. Be aware that when you withhold your attention, the behavior may escalate or get worse before it gets better. Resist the urge to give in. Keep yourself occupied by praising others nearby who exhibit the behavior you want (i.e., proximity praise) and do not forget to praise the target learner when he or she exhibits the appropriate behavior.

Occasionally learners will do things that cannot be ignored because they interfere with learning, pose a danger to themselves or others, or seriously violate classroom or school rules. When consequential behavior occurs, it is important to intervene as soon as you observe the problem behavior; it will typically escalate and be harder to correct at a later point.

**What Is Behavior?**

To learn about behavior, it is important to first define *behavior*. Webster (Mish, 1998, p.103) defines *behavior* as “a way of behaving or conducting oneself.” For the purposes of investigation, something a little more specific
and descriptive is needed. The following is a basis from which we can go forward with our study of human behavior.

Behavior is any action that can be seen (observed) and can be counted (measured) (Baer, Wolf, & Risley, 1968). This is an important concept to understand. Many times when we describe what we think of as behavior, we make some minor mistakes. The common mistakes are (a) making assumptions about how someone feels or what he or she thinks, and (b) using descriptions for responses that we cannot see or count. Let's look at some examples:

1. Juan was frustrated about his work.
   a. What is the assumption?
      *The assumption is that he is feeling frustrated.*
   b. What can or cannot be seen or counted?
      *"Frustration" cannot be seen or counted.*
   c. What is a better way to describe the behavior? (What does his behavior look and sound like?)
      *Juan is not completing his work and he is ripping the papers by frequent erasing. He is talking loudly and saying things such as "I can't do this!" or "Nobody will help me and I don't know how to do this assignment!"

2. Melissa was angry when she didn't get to be the class representative for Learner Council.
   a. What is the assumption?
      *The assumption is that she is feeling angry.*
   b. What can or cannot be seen or counted?
      *"Anger" is assumed when we see the display of behaviors that we associate with anger; however, it cannot be counted.*
   c. What is a better way to describe the behavior?
      *When she was not elected to the Learner Council, Melissa stamped her foot, folded her arms, made faces, began to cry, and yelled, "That's not fair!"

Now complete this one on your own.

3. Yuriko is lazy and unmotivated in this classroom.
   a. What is the assumption?
   b. What can or cannot be seen or counted?
   c. What might be a better way to describe the behavior?
Still finding it difficult? Don’t worry. We’ll talk more about describing behavior later on. Just remember...a behavior is an event that can be seen and counted.

What Do We Know About Behavior?

Many years of research have taught us some important lessons about behavior. In this section, we will discuss the concepts and ideas concerning behavior that have been proven time and time again through observation and investigation.

Almost All Behavior Is Learned

When you visualize tiny newborn babies, you realize that they don’t have many behaviors in their repertoires. Initially, infants sleep, eat, eliminate, and cry. Within a matter or hours after birth, a baby learns that “crying” will quickly bring food, cuddling, and a diaper change. Within months, other behaviors are learned, and the baby uses these behaviors to get what he or she wants or needs. The child’s behavioral repertoire continues to grow larger and larger.

Once we realize that a child develops these behaviors early and continues to use the same actions as he or she gets older, we can see how skilled a child can become at using those behaviors that bring success. It is unfortunate that many times children will use inappropriate behaviors to get their wants and needs met. If using the inappropriate behaviors has proven successful, a child will use those same behaviors over and over again to continue to get what he or she wants.

Throughout our lifetimes, we as humans continue to learn and use behaviors that will assist us in obtaining what we need or desire. We continue to use those behaviors that give us success. We cease to use behaviors that are unproductive or inefficient. For the most part, we do this without thinking too much about it. Behavior is something that we engage in without much forethought or planning. When a child throws a tantrum in the grocery store because he or she wants a toy, it is probably because that same behavior resulted in success once or twice before. The child did not likely plan and predict what would happen at the store. Human behavior also communicates what we might be thinking or feeling. Remem-
ber, when a behavior occurs, don’t make assumptions about the emotion behind it—report only what is observed.

All Behavior Is Communication

Let’s get back to our infant. It is apparent that infants experience emotions at a very early age. Infants laugh, cry, and show signs of fear and anger. Unfortunately, language does not develop at the same rate as a child’s emotions or feelings. Have you ever heard an infant tell you that she is experiencing a great deal of frustration and anger because she cannot walk to the refrigerator to get a snack? Not likely. When a child (or anyone) does not have the capacity to verbalize or otherwise tell someone how he or she is feeling, behavior often serves as the most natural form of communication. This is also true of older children, adolescents, adults, and persons with disabilities who have communication difficulties. Understanding what a behavior is communicating is critical in determining why that behavior is occurring and how it might be changed (Carr & Durand, 1985).

More often than not, with the use of observation and experience, we can predict what a child is attempting to say through his or her behavior. Here are some sample behaviors that are communicating some type of need.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Possible Reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yawning</td>
<td>Fatigue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crying</td>
<td>Discomfort (hungry, fatigued, wet, etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All Behavior Serves a Function and Purpose

Even the most simple and basic behaviors serve a function for an individual. Blinking one’s eyes keeps them moist and clean. Closing the windows keeps the cold air and rain out of a home. Grabbing a toy and running results in a child’s being chased by a peer. Typically, we engage in behaviors that will result in getting something we need or want or will satisfy some type of physical or emotional need. When examining a behavior, ask “What is this individual gaining from this behavior?” Remember,
appearances can be deceiving. The learner may appear to get nothing or to receive only negative consequences from the behavior and yet persist in doing it. What may appear to be a negative consequence, however, may in fact be rewarding to the learner. To effectively analyze the functions of a particular behavior, we must remember that what may be punishing to one learner may be reinforcing to another, and vice versa.

Behavior Is 100%—100% of the Time

Human beings are constantly behaving. There is not a time, place, or situation when behavior is not occurring. Commonly, we attempt to “get rid of” the behaviors that we do not like or that cause problems for the learner, the instructors, or others in the class. When you punish these behaviors, you will probably see a change in the behavior right away. Unfortunately, this is a temporary solution to the problem. When using punishment to stop a behavior, the learner may indeed stop using that behavior for the moment but will likely return to that behavior or adopt another behavior to get the desired result. Keep in mind that when you take something away, it is best to add something in its place. If you “get rid of” a behavior, you must replace it with a more appropriate, acceptable, and efficient behavior that will get the learner what he or she desires.

For example, Michael frequently interrupts discussions in class. The team has decided to work on decreasing his “talking out” in the class discussions. They should also consider working on “quiet hand-raising” or “waiting to be called on by the instructor” before making a comment.

In another example, McKenzie is physically aggressive with her peers. She hits them when they do not give her the toy that she wants. The team has decided to punish her hitting behavior by requiring her to take a seat away from the play area when she hits. They will also work on increasing her skills to communicate her desire by saying “May I have a turn with that toy?” and on how to accept a “no” response from the peer. They will teach her to go to another area or look for another toy if the peer says no.

The ABCs of Behavior

A clear understanding of the context in which behaviors are displayed is required for effectively addressing the unique needs of learners. Identifying the events, situations, or people who may trigger or support inappro-
Promoting Positive Behavior

Appropriate behavior and then doing something about it proactively increases the likelihood of positive outcomes (O’Neill, Horner, Albin, Sprague, Storey, & Newton, 1997).

To understand behavior, we must first look at the relationship between the behavior and events that occur in the environment. We look for an observable pattern or relationship between a behavior and what occurs immediately before and after the behavior. The events that precede the behavior are referred to as the antecedents. The events that follow the behavior are referred to as the consequences (Skinner, 1953).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent</td>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Consequence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Antecedents can include
1. time of day;
2. a certain classroom or location;
3. the absence or presence of particular people;
4. specific statements, requests, or tasks; and
5. boredom or lack of stimulation.

Antecedents can include a combination of one or more of these conditions as well as other factors that are not listed. Consequences, the events or conditions that occur directly after a behavior, can be positive or negative. Although many things may occur following a behavior, consequences directly result from or are related to the behavior. Consequences may include
1. getting out of a task or situation,
2. having access to an item or object,
3. having access to a person or place,
4. getting attention from adults or peers,
5. receiving restrictions or extra work, and
6. being ignored by adults or peers.

Consequences may be either positive or negative. For many of us, a positive consequence for the behavior “going to work” is receiving a paycheck at the end of the month. A positive consequence of the behavior “studying for an exam” is getting a passing grade. Negative consequences
include being criticized by the instructor for giving an incorrect answer in class or being ignored by peers after teasing them in the lunchroom. **Caution:** Negative consequences may result in a behavior happening more often. Remember, appearances can be deceiving—what might look like a negative consequence might actually act as a reinforcer for an individual. For example, Jonah likes to play the class clown by joking and making funny comments and gestures during instruction. The instructor stops the lesson and reprimands Jonah for his behavior. Over the next few days, the instructor notices an increase rather than a decrease in Jonah's disruptive behavior. After talking with colleagues, the instructor realizes that the reprimands actually served to give Jonah her undivided attention as well as that of all the others in the classroom. What initially appeared to be a punishment was actually reinforcing his disruptive behavior.

The key to understanding a learner's behavior is to observe it over time and begin to see patterns and relationships between behavior and those events or conditions that occur just prior to or immediately following the behavior. The only way to know for sure if an event or condition acts as a positive or negative consequence is to observe its effect on the behavior. If the behavior increases, it is a positive or motivating consequence. Likewise, if the behavior decreases, it is likely perceived by the learner as a negative consequence or punisher.

**Functions of Behavior**

As mentioned before, all behavior serves a function or purpose. To understand the basic ideas behind these functions, the majority of them can be categorized into the following three main areas (O'Neill et al., 1997; Skinner, 1953):

1. Gaining attention or accessing a desired object, activity, or individual
2. Escaping or avoiding a task, activity, or individual
3. Accessing sensory stimulation

**Gaining Attention or Access**

Gaining attention is a common reason for learners to demonstrate specific behaviors, whether that attention is from peers, instructors, or other
adults. Many gain attention by using behaviors that are appropriate and socially acceptable, such as raising a hand to ask a question or to make a comment in class. Others use inappropriate behaviors to gain attention, such as making comments in class that are unsuitable or disruptive. The attention gained may be considered positive or negative; the perception of the learner determines the type of attention that is received. Typically, a learner who is being reprimanded for misbehavior will perceive the attention as negative. Keep in mind, however, that a learner who is actively seeking attention when there is little or none available (the instructor is ignoring or paying attention to others) is easily reinforced. The type of attention he or she receives is irrelevant or less important than receiving any attention. Negative attention is more reinforcing than no attention at all. Attention seeking can be an attempt to communicate needs and desires or an attempt to solicit positive reinforcement using a learned pattern of behavior resulting in a means to access people, objects, or events.

Instructor attention (positive reinforcement) is usually inconsistently given. An instructor might attend to a learner's behavior some times and ignore that same behavior at other times. This inconsistent pattern of giving attention reinforces or strengthens the use of inappropriate behavior. An example of "gaining access to objects, activities, or individuals" is a child who wants to play with a group of learners playing Four Square at recess and who interrupts the game by grabbing the ball. Asking to be included in the game is a more appropriate way of gaining access to the activity.

Means of Escape or Avoidance (Negative Reinforcement)

Behavior may also provide a learner with a way to escape or avoid an unpleasant situation or task. For example, Bubba does not like long-division problems; he finds them frustrating and difficult to solve. As the teacher asks learners to solve problems at the board, Bubba disrupts the class by talking out, making noises, teasing other learners, and throwing papers. After giving him numerous verbal warnings, the teacher sends Bubba out of the class and to the administrator's office, and so Bubba successfully avoids having to demonstrate his inability to do the math problems in front of his peers. Bubba might feel that getting in trouble is more
acceptable than being perceived as "dumb" by his peers and the teacher. Escape or avoidance can be

1. an attempt to escape or avoid something external (external stimuli), for example, adult or peer attention, a difficult task, change in routine, a specific setting, some type of physical or environmental discomfort, or social embarrassment; or
2. an attempt to escape or avoid something internal (internal stimuli), for example, pain, hunger, and fatigue.

**Sensory Feedback or Stimulation**
*(Automatic Reinforcement)*

Numerous behaviors may gain sensory stimulation, feedback, or both. For example, a learner who uses illegal substances gains automatic sensory stimulation. He receives reinforcement that will increase the likelihood the learner will engage in this behavior a second time. The subsequent stimulation (reinforcement) from using the drug will most likely result in the individual's engaging in this behavior again and again. Similarly, a learner who gains positive sensory stimulation as a result of any behavior will probably demonstrate the behavior again to gain that same stimulation.

Another example is a child with autism spectrum disorder who persistently spins a reflective top on the floor. The child appears excited and enthralled with the flickering light and rotating top. It is difficult to engage her in another task or activity while the top is spinning. To pull the child away, the instructor must redirect her to another activity and put the top in a place where it is not visible to the child. When given a chance, the child will consistently choose to spin the top. Sensory stimulation may be used to (a) obtain reinforcement from internal stimulation or (b) obtain reinforcement from external stimulation. The following are examples of gaining sensory stimulation:

1. Johnny constantly hums while working on academic assignments.
2. Nikko chews on the tips of her pens or pencils while working on independent seatwork.
3. Sherrie twirls her hair and wraps it around her fingers while she is working on assignments; she twists and pulls it tighter and tighter until she pulls it out.

4. When Billy is left alone, he bites his knuckle until it bleeds and continues to bite his hand until a staff member interrupts him.

Effectively addressing the unique needs of learners with challenging behaviors requires a clear understanding of the basic concepts of behavior as well as the circumstances in which the challenging behaviors occur. Identifying those events, situations, or people that trigger inappropriate behavior, and proactively doing something about it, increases the likelihood of positive outcomes.

**Understanding Why Learners Misbehave**

Learners with challenging behaviors continue to misbehave for various reasons. We will concentrate on some of the more important reasons—or triggers—for these behaviors, and look at what school personnel can do to change the situation. The first step is to thoroughly understand the relationship between learner behavior and setting conditions.

**Settings and Antecedent Events That Might Influence Problem Behavior**

Multiple factors may impact or influence a learner's behavior, and many are related to the instructional setting (classroom, tasks, staff, schedule, peers, etc.). These factors are easy to change or manipulate. Other factors (sickness, medications, home problems, etc.) are more difficult or sometimes impossible to control. It is, however, critical to be aware of these factors and to understand the impact they may have on the learner's behavior.

The following is a short list of those factors that might influence the relationship between the learner's behavior and the environment.

- **Physiological factors.** Examples include sickness, allergies, side effects of medication, fatigue, hunger or thirst, increased arousal due to a fight, or a disruptive routine.
• **Home environment.** Examples include lack of supervision, inconsistent or insufficient home routine, highly punitive parenting style, insufficient resources to support learning, or an overly controlling parenting style.

Additional factors that might influence a learner's behavior might be more manageable and easier to control within the instructional setting; educators can provide accommodations and modifications to address the behavioral concerns. The following list provides some of the possible causes that may be considered when difficult behaviors occur.

• **Classroom environment.** Examples include high noise level, uncomfortable temperature, poor lighting, over- or understimulation, poor seating arrangement, frequent disruptions, lack of sufficient positive reinforcement, punitive or inconsistent discipline procedures, inappropriate or inadequate classroom rules and expectations, ineffective home-school communication, lack of predictability in the schedule, or inconsistent monitoring of progress.

• **Curriculum and instruction.** Examples include few opportunities for making choices, few opportunities for successful practice of skills, poor instructional pacing (too fast or too slow), inadequate level of assistance provided to the learner, unclear directions provided for activity completion, few opportunities for the learner to communicate, activities that are too difficult, activities that take a long time to complete, activities that the learner dislikes, activities for which the completion criterion is unclear, or activities that may not be perceived as being relevant or useful by the learner (Alberto & Troutman, 2006; Kazdin, 2001).

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**Measuring Learner Behavior**

Data collection and behavior observation are important components of a special education program for two reasons. First, data collection and behavior observation provide an objective basis for making decisions and documenting learner behaviors and performance, and they make instructors' decisions more accurate and reliable. Second, when completed systematically, data collection can also provide consistent information on learner progress.

Although teams would prefer to have a “quick fix” in dealing with difficult behaviors, it is more efficient and effective in the long run to first understand and agree on the targeted behaviors prior to implementing
any type of intervention plans. Specific descriptions of the behavior allow us to

1. have better communication among the instructional team, other colleagues, and families;
2. ensure that we are consistently observing and counting the exact same behaviors prior to and during intervention;
3. determine the most effective interventions to use in developing behavior plans;
4. more accurately measure learner progress;
5. have better access to important information and to the research literature; and
6. provide feedback and reinforcement to learners.

**Why Do We Measure Behavior?**

When examining the seriousness of a learner's inappropriate behaviors, it is important to accurately picture the actions. Equally important is to assess the appropriate behaviors related to the inappropriate behaviors that are causing difficulties for the learner and instructional team. It is also critical to understand the methods for collecting the data needed to obtain the relevant information. This will help to clarify the details of the situation prior to developing an intervention plan. Without an accurate picture of the learner's behavior, we cannot choose the correct tools and most effective interventions to address the situation.

In order to be *measurable*, a behavior must first be *observable* (Baer et al., 1968). In addition, the observer must be able to clearly determine when a specific behavior is occurring and count the occurrences of the behavior or time the duration of the behavior. Behaviors that have a distinct beginning and ending are the easiest to measure.

**Why Do We Describe Behavior?**

We describe behavior, using specific language, so that we can measure it accurately. To accurately measure and assess behaviors, we must first develop an *operational definition*, which includes a label and a specific description of the exact behavior that we have targeted. It is important to describe only what we can *see* and *count*. When developing an operational
definition, it is essential to disregard any assumptions or biases about what the learner is feeling or why the learner is demonstrating the particular behavior (e.g., not doing homework because he is lazy, does not care, or is irresponsible; being disruptive because she is angry or dislikes the instructor; Skinner, 1953). The use of terms that are broad and vague in their definitions (e.g., disrespectful, uncooperative, disruptive) may also cause confusion or disagreement about whether the behavior is occurring. All team members, and others working with the learner, must agree on a label and a specific description of the behaviors. The information collected must be as accurate as possible. To obtain accurate data, the observation procedure must remain consistent from one observation to another and from one observer to another, and it must decrease the chance for errors. The following considerations are important in implementing a data-collection system and behavior observations. To be effective, a data-collection system must include

1. a clear definition of the behaviors to be observed and measured;
2. a clear description of the data-collection procedure, including a well-organized recording system; and
3. an opportunity for the observer to learn and practice the observation technique.

A data-recording system must provide enough information to make the observation useful but easy enough to not interfere with the observation. This is a critical consideration when selecting the tools for measuring learner behavior.

Selecting Measurement Tools and Observation Techniques

In determining the data-collection technique to use, we must take into consideration the specific behavior and the information we are attempting to gain from the observation. It is the supervisor's responsibility to determine which data-collection technique to use; however, as a paraeducator, you will need to understand these techniques and have a chance to practice them before using them in an observation. The following are brief descriptions of various data-collection methods.
**Frequency Count**

When using a frequency count, the observer records the number of times a specific behavior occurs within a specific time period. Frequency counts are useful for recording behaviors that have a clear beginning and ending, are of relatively short duration, and occur fairly frequently during a specified time period. In order to use the frequency count method, the following are necessary:

1. An available specific time period
2. A well-defined behavior
3. A recording method for tracking the number of occurrences of the behavior
4. A recording or tally sheet to record the frequency with which or the number of times that the specific behavior occurs

Following are examples of how the frequency of a behavior might be recorded:

1. The number of times a learner raises his or her hand during a 15-minute group lesson
2. The number of multiplication problems completed on a worksheet within 5 minutes
3. The number of times a learner leaves his or her seat during history class

A frequency count should **not** be used for behaviors that occur at a high rate or many, many times, such as tapping a pencil on a desk or rocking a chair. Also, it should **not** be used when the behavior occurs over an extended period of time, such as when a learner cries.

**Rate**

Calculating a rate is similar to tallying frequency of events. Calculating a behavioral rate takes into account both data on the frequency of the observed behavior and the length of the observation time. Rate is the ratio of the number of times a behavior occurs within a specific time period and the length of the time period. The rate is computed by dividing the
number of events or frequency by the number of minutes, hours, or days over which the observation occurred. For example, if a learner was out of his seat five times in a 20-minute reading session, you would divide 5 by 20 (5/20) to determine his rate per minute. In this case, the learner’s rate of out-of-seat behavior is .25 per minute. A learner’s average rate of behavioral occurrences over time can be determined from a series of observations by adding the rates for each observation (e.g., \( .25 + .33 + .20 + 1.0 = 1.78 \)) and dividing by the total number of observations (4). In this example the learner’s average rate of out-of-seat behavior over time is .45 per minute.

**Duration**

The duration of a behavior is found by recording the exact starting and ending time of a behavior and then computing the length of time the behavior occurs. This technique is usually used to observe behaviors that occur less frequently and continue over a substantial period of time.

An example of duration recording is when a learner has incidences of crying in class. Each time the learner cries in class, the observer records the beginning and ending times and then calculates the duration of the crying incident. Additional examples of behaviors appropriate for duration recording are the length of time a learner stays on task, the length of time a learner takes to transition to a new activity, or the length of time a learner continuously taps his or her pencil on the desk.

**Interval Recording**

Interval recording is a technique that measures whether a behavior occurs within a specific time interval. The observation time is divided into small intervals, and the observer records whether the behavior occurs within that short interval. By using the interval recording technique, an estimate of both the frequency and duration of the behavior can be obtained. If the specific behavior occurs at any time within the interval, the observer records the behavior only once. Because the observation is continuous for a set period of time, interval recording demands the observer’s complete attention.

An example of a behavior for which interval recording could be used is talking to peers during independent work time. If the work time lasts
for 15 minutes, that time can be broken into five 3-minute intervals. If in the first interval the learner talks to her neighbor, the interval is marked (possibly using a plus sign). If the learner is working quietly during the next interval, the interval is not marked. If in the third interval the child talks to three different learners, the interval is marked again, only once. At the end of the data-collection period, the data are summarized by counting the number of intervals in which the behavior occurred and placing it over the total number of intervals (e.g., talk-outs occurred for three out of the five intervals, or 3/5).

**Anecdotal Records**

Anecdotal records are a written description of events or incidents. The purpose of an anecdotal record is to document an event as clearly and precisely as possible. If a paraeducator is working with the learner at the time of a specific incident, she or he may be asked to assist in completing an anecdotal record of the event. Anecdotal records are often used to document (a) a significant event that occurs infrequently or unexpectedly, (b) the settings or conditions in which a specific behavior occurred, and (c) the antecedents to (what happens before) and the consequences of (what happens after) a problem behavior.

The following guidelines are helpful when writing an anecdotal record:

1. Record descriptions of the incident as soon as possible after the behavior is observed.
2. Have a standardized anecdotal record form to record the information and to help ensure that (a) all relevant information is included, and (b) you record what is actually observed rather than your feelings about the incident.

**A Model for Describing and Pinpointing Behaviors**

It is important to practice labeling and defining behaviors, observing behaviors, and using various recording techniques to increase accuracy of observation and recording. Use of observation and data-collection
techniques gets easier over time. Keeping it simple will help to ensure that a data-collection system will be implemented consistently to gain necessary information about learners. The following is a summary and model for developing a system of data collection.

1. Determine an appropriate label for the behavior (e.g., aggression, off-task, poor work completion).
   - Must be representative of the behavior
   - Must be short and concise (the description will be more lengthy and specific)
2. Develop an operational definition (i.e., ask yourself, “What does the behavior look like or sound like?”).
3. Determine the best method for measuring the behavior.
   - How many times does it occur (i.e., Frequency = #TIMES or Rate = #TIMES per TIME PERIOD)?
   - How long (i.e., Duration = HOW LONG does the behavior LAST)?
   - Is it important to gain information about both the frequency and the duration of the behavior (i.e., Interval Recording = Does the behavior occur at any point during a short interval)?
   - Is there additional important information about the behavior that must be gathered (i.e., Anecdotal Records = Specific description of an event)?

The following are additional considerations for implementing a data-collection system.

1. Data-collection procedures should not cause a distraction from instruction.
2. Data-collection procedures should not take excessive amounts of time away from instruction.
3. Results of data collection should lead to modifications and improvements in instructional programming.
4. The observer should respect the privacy and dignity of learners.

The Paraeducator’s Role in Data Collection

The paraeducator plays an important role in gathering and organizing information about learner behavior. When a paraeducator’s data collection
is systematic and well organized, the teacher can make important instruc-
tional and programmatic decisions concerning a learner's behavior. When
a paraeducator is knowledgeable about the process of collecting data, has
been trained in the observation techniques, and has a clear understand-
ing of the behavior being observed, he or she can easily perform behav-
ioral observations.

Positive Behavior Supports: Setting Up
the Learning Environment for Success

Your instructional team must take time to develop a thoughtful plan to
maximize the learner's potential for success. Most learners come to a set-
ting anticipating direction on the classroom limits, rules, consequences,
and expectations. Successful educators take this opportunity to lay out a
clear and specific plan that will guide the learners and make the class-
room predictable and the system thoroughly understood. Several factors
are critical to ensure that your preparations are complete. The following
are some of the important components of an effective positive behavior
support plan (Madsen & Thomas, 1986).

Rules and Expectations

You must first ask the question, "What do I expect from learners—both
behaviorally and academically?" If you waiver in your expectations, hour
to hour or day to day, your learners will be constantly confused and un-
settled; on the other hand, if the expectations are clear, the learner comes
into the situation knowing exactly what will happen. The primary issue is
to determine classroom expectations and, in addition, write down those
expectations and post them for all to see.

Activity: Write down five expectations for behavior and five expectations for
academic performance that you expect to see from learners. Remember to
write them in terms that are observable and measurable (those that you can
see and count). For example, "I expect the learners to come to class on time
(in their seats when the bell rings) and to be prepared with materials (paper,
pencil, and book)."
Rules are an essential component of a winning classroom. Developing rules is much easier when personal expectations are clarified for the learners. Now, prioritize the expectations that you wrote in the activity. Use the most important expectations to begin to develop your rules. Keep in mind that the rules must reflect your expectations. For example, if it is not important to you to have learners raise their hands to speak or if you are not willing to follow through with the consequences consistently, do not include that behavior in your rules. Having rules that are inconsistently enforced gives learners the idea that rules are not important or that there will not be a consequence. This leads to increased rates of inappropriate behavior.

Rhode, Jenson, and Reavis (1992) have developed a set of guidelines for developing classroom rules that help to ensure that the rules are stated in the most effective and efficient way possible.

1. *Keep it positive. Rules should be stated using positive language.* Make sure that the rules are telling the learners what they should DO, not what they should NOT DO. For example,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do not talk!</td>
<td>Listen to the instructor with a quiet mouth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t run in the halls!</td>
<td>Walk in the halls at all times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No fighting!</td>
<td>Keep your hands, feet, and objects to yourself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t talk out!</td>
<td>Raise your hand quietly and wait to be called on to speak.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. *Keep it short and simple.* Having a lot of rules does not necessarily mean that learners will be better behaved. In fact, it may have the opposite effect. Having five to six rules assists learners in knowing and understanding the rules clearly.

3. *Keep it clear. Write the rules using language that describes observable and measurable behaviors.* It is important that the behaviors referred to in your rules are clearly stated. When writing your rules, it is best to refrain from using terms that are unclear or vague; words like respect, responsibility, or appropriate can be problematic. These words are difficult to define, have meanings that vary from individual to individual, and are often misinterpreted. It is best to avoid using terms like these and, instead, think about what respect looks and sounds like. If you find that you must use a word that may not have a clear meaning, be sure to clarify in
the learners’ minds by thoroughly explaining the meaning of the rule. For example, if you have followed the first guideline and...

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instead of</th>
<th>You Choose to Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| No cursing!                      | Use only positive and acceptable language.

you must first teach the learners exactly what positive and acceptable language is and is not.

4. Include a compliance rule. Having a compliance or following-directions rule is critical. Developing compliance in learners will help to get rid of many unwanted behaviors before they have a chance to get going. Many behaviors stem from learners’ ignoring or delaying a request given by an adult and then arguing or throwing a tantrum. If the learner causes too much of a fuss, the adult will often give in, just to get the learner to stop. A coercive behavior chain looks like the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Child</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you ready to get to work?</td>
<td>(learner ignores)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Come on! Let’s get your math done, okay?</td>
<td>I need to finish my reading first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times do I need to tell you? If I tell you again, you will stay in for recess!</td>
<td>This work is too hard. You won’t help me! I hate school!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That’s it! You’ve lost your recesses today!</td>
<td>(learner tantrums)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Okay, I’ve had it! Go sit in the hallway!</td>
<td>(learner stops the tantrum and leaves)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We all get caught up in this type of interaction at some time, whether at school or at home with our own kids. If the teacher had had a compliance rule in place, there would have been an automatic consequence for not following the rules the first time, and the situation may not have escalated to a point of no return. Having a compliance rule also gives the instructor an opportunity to provide learners with positive reinforcement for
following directions, which in turn encourages them to follow directions in order to gain some type of reward or praise. In the long run, learners will see the benefits and success that following directions brings. Compliance is essential in ensuring success in and outside of a classroom.

5. Teach the rules, using examples and nonexamples (and review often). In the first few weeks of school, it is important for the instructional team to devote a portion of the school day to teaching and reviewing the rules. Teaching the rules includes providing

- clear explanations and descriptions of what the rule means;
- a rationale for the rule (why is it important?);
- lots of examples (what does it look like?) and nonexamples (what does it not look like?)—this is best done with modeling;
- opportunities for role-playing scenarios to practice the rules; and
- positive feedback and reinforcement for following the rules.

The initial investment in taking the time and energy to teach the rules will pay off. After the first couple of weeks, the learners will know the rules well, and they will be fully aware of making the choice to either follow or not follow the rules.

6. Clearly state consequences, both positive and negative. The learners must know what will happen when they do or do not follow the rules. The consequences should reflect the events that will occur and, when appropriate, the time and place in which the consequence will take effect.

7. Rules and consequences should be posted for all to see. Have you ever been in a situation in which you see a policeman and are unsure of the speed limit in the area? What is the first thing you do? First, you check your speed (your behavior) and then you look for a posted sign. The same applies to learners. Posted rules and consequences remind learners of the limits and also bring about a “check your own behavior” response. This step prompts not only learners but also teachers and staff to remember the rules and expectations.

Activity: An instructor has the following five rules posted on the wall:

1. Follow directions given by adults within 10 seconds.
2. Raise your hand and wait to be called on to speak.
3. Come to class prepared with book, papers, pencil, and homework.
4. Be in your seat when the bell rings.
5. Use positive and appropriate language.
Both positive and negative consequences are also posted. The instructor taught the meaning of the rules and used role-plays and coaching in the first weeks of the school year. Every learner in the class can repeat all five rules. Consequences are consistently implemented for most of the rules, most of the time. However, the teacher finds that the learners often make comments or call out answers without raising their hands during a class discussion. This is becoming a problem.

Discuss the following:
- Are the teacher's rules effective? Do they follow the stated guidelines?
- What is going wrong? What are some reasons that the teacher is having a problem with learners talking out without raising their hands?
- What could the teacher do to change the situation?

Instructional Considerations

Often, when a learner engages in behavioral problems, we take the behavior personally. In other words, we see the behavior as a statement about how the learner feels about us. It is important to take into consideration other factors that may significantly affect the learner's daily life. Much of the behavior we see in school stems from academic difficulties. When problems arise, answering these questions might help to pinpoint factors that could be contributing to a problem situation, in regard to one particular learner or to an entire group. Considering the answers to these questions will also assist teams in designing effective behavior intervention plans (Munk & Repp, 1994).

Choice of tasks
- Does the learner or the instructor select most of the activities?
- Does the learner have identifiable preferences for tasks or activities?
- Does problem behavior occur more often when the instructor assigns tasks?
- Does the learner express a preference for alternative tasks when the instructor presents a task?
- Does the problem behavior result in a change in tasks or activities? Is the learner allowed to select an alternative task?
- If allowed to select tasks, does the learner select one or two tasks, or several tasks?
Task variation

- How many tasks are available within 5, 10, 15, 30, and 60 minutes of instruction?
- Does problem behavior increase as time on a single task increases?
- Does the learner stop the assigned task and begin other activities during an instructional period?
- Does the learner display fewer problem behaviors during brief tasks?

Pace of instruction

- Does problem behavior occur while the instructor is providing instruction (i.e., during a lesson) or between lessons?
- What is the average number of instructional commands presented in 1 minute?
- Does the learner engage in off-task behavior such as gazing, leaving seat, or other inappropriate behaviors during instruction?

Reduced task difficulty

- Does problem behavior occur more often after correct responding or after incorrect responding?
- Does the learner require frequent prompts to respond?
- How often does the instructor reinforce learner responses, whether correct or incorrect?
- Does the learner spend more time performing easy activities?
- Can the instructor predict which tasks will produce increased inappropriate behavior?

Answering these questions can prove helpful when behaviors are occurring consistently and becoming more frequent or more intense. Overall, remembering the ABCs, looking for patterns in behaviors, and considering that the instruction or tasks may be a contributing factor will help to keep problems in check.
Teaching Replacement Behaviors

A replacement behavior is an alternative to the problem behavior—the behavior we want the learner to use in place of the inappropriate behavior. Identifying replacement or alternative behaviors is one of the most important components of a positive behavior support plan. When you observe and understand why a problem behavior is occurring, you must also pinpoint the new behavior you want the person to perform. The most effective way to identify replacement behaviors is to meet as a team with individuals who are familiar with the learner and brainstorm possible ideas for the replacement behavior. The more ideas you get, the better the chance that you will find one that will be successful. It is important to identify a behavior that is the opposite of the problem behavior; that way, the learner will not likely be able to exhibit both behaviors at the same time. For example, the learner cannot have a quiet hand-raise and talk out at the same time, or the learner cannot have hands in pockets and hit another learner at the same time. Remember, you cannot extinguish a difficult behavior without teaching the learner a more appropriate behavior with which to replace it.

The following are several general guidelines for successfully teaching replacement behaviors:

- The replacement behavior must have the same outcome as the problem behavior. If the learner is using an inappropriate behavior to gain attention, the new behavior must also get him or her attention.
- The replacement behavior must receive positive reinforcement as soon as, or sooner than, the problem behavior.
- The replacement behavior must receive at least as much reinforcement as the problem behavior.
- The replacement behavior must be as fluent as the problem behavior (i.e., the replacement behavior must be rehearsed over and over to make sure the learner is able to perform the behavior when necessary).

These skills must be taught systematically and effectively, providing learners with ample opportunities to practice and rehearse the skills both inside and outside of the classroom. Systematic instruction involves using effective skill instruction, breaking down tasks into smaller and easier
portions, using appropriate teaching methods, and rewarding and correcting behaviors consistently.

A few of the most effective teaching strategies are modeling, prompting, shaping, and fading. When teaching a learner a new skill, such as making polite comments, it is important to model the behavior first. Modeling is demonstrating a new behavior so that a learner might acquire the skill by observing it. Typically you provide several examples of what the behavior looks and sounds like to help the learner easily identify the skill when he or she hears it named in conversation. Modeling is essential, whether teaching an academic skill or classroom behavior.

Next the learner must practice the behavior. A skilled instructor uses prompting to encourage a student to try out a new behavior. Prompting comes in many forms and may be carried out visually, verbally, physically, or via a combination of all three. For example, if you are teaching the learner to make a polite comment on the playground, you might verbally prompt him to approach another child who has fallen by pointing to the fallen child and asking “What can you say or do to help?” Once the learner thinks of what to say, prompt him to talk to the child. Do not forget to praise him, and keep in mind that the polite comment does not have to be perfect. It’s a beginning.

Another teaching strategy that goes hand in hand with prompting is shaping. Shaping consists of systematically reinforcing a learner’s approximations of the desired behavior until the learner can demonstrate the behavior successfully over time. You may think about it as baby steps to reach the target behavior. For example, if you are encouraging a student to interact with her peers at recess, you might first reinforce her for playing next to students on the playground, then for watching the students play, and finally for asking if she can join the group. Asking others to play can be difficult for a child who is shy or withdrawn, so remember to support the learner’s efforts using prompts and plenty of reinforcement. Once the learner is successfully asking others to play, withdraw the prompts and gradually fade or decrease your reinforcement over time until the child is engaging others on the playground without your assistance.

When an Individual Knows How To Perform a Skill but Does Not

There may be several reasons why a person does not use the appropriate skill when the situation calls for it. First, the individual may not recognize
the social or environmental cues that should prompt the use of the skill. Second, the skill may not be as efficient or effective as the problem behavior (e.g., problem behavior gets reinforced more immediately or consistently or requires less effort), and the learner may rely on old habits to get the desired outcome. Additionally, there may be other variables that are influencing behavior in certain situations (e.g., distractions, discomfort).

**Positive Reinforcement**

Researchers have long identified reinforcement as an effective strategy in improving the conduct of children and youth. To understand how positive reinforcement works, we must first understand what it is. Positive reinforcement involves the *contingent* presentation of a consequence that increases the likelihood of a behavior occurring again (Skinner, 1953). For it to act as a reinforcer, the consequence must immediately follow the behavior and be something that is valued or desired by the learner. For example, when Larry completed his work, his teacher immediately gave him 5 points and some extra free time with a friend. Thereafter, Larry continued to complete his work on time so that he could earn extra time with his best friend. In this case, the extra free time acted as a reinforcer. How do we know? By looking at Larry's behavior. Did it increase or decrease? Reinforcement has occurred only if the target behavior (i.e., Larry's task completion) increases or stays the same.

Positive reinforcement comes in many forms but primarily includes

- verbal praise,
- social praise,
- access to preferred activities,
- access to material items, and
- access to people.

**How Do You Select Reinforcement?**

Selecting reinforcement is easy. Learners typically give us many clues if we just take the time to observe or listen to them. The following are some excellent ideas for determining possible reinforcement:

- What does the learner like to do in his or her free time?
- What does the learner do most often?
• What does the learner talk about?
• What would the learner like to earn?

For learners who are unable to express their preferences by using verbal communication, reinforcer-sampling procedures can be used:

• Let the learner sample some possible reinforcers to determine his or her preference.
• Let the learner pick from a list or menu of reinforcers.
• Review what has worked in the past.

Keep in mind the Golden Rule for selecting reinforcers: "the cheaper, the faster, the better." That is, when your teacher and you are selecting reinforcement, make sure it is inexpensive, easy to provide (i.e., does not take a lot of staff time), and natural whenever possible (Hall & Hall, 1980).

When To Provide Positive Reinforcement

To increase the effectiveness of reinforcement, the following are a few simple rules—frequently referred to as the IFEEDAV rules—to remember (Rhode et al., 1992):

I immediate
F frequent
E enthusiastic
E eye contact
D describe
A anticipation
V variety

Let's briefly talk about each:

**Deliver reinforcement immediately**

Reinforcement must occur immediately following the target behavior. The longer the delay between the occurrence of the desired behavior and the reinforcer, the greater the likelihood that another, less desirable behavior may be reinforced and the less effective the reinforcer will be.
Deliver reinforcement frequently
Reinforce often. This is particularly important when you are teaching a new behavior or skill to a learner. Experts recommend maintaining a ratio of four positive reinforcers for every negative consequence. That might sound high, but giving reinforcement is as simple as winking at a learner or thanking him or her for raising a hand quietly.

Be enthusiastic
When you give a reinforcer, it is critical that you are enthusiastic and sincere. Learners can immediately detect if you are less than interested in what they are doing by what you say and how you say it. Although it takes more effort on your part, it is generally worth it.

Make eye contact
When giving a reinforcer, it is important to look the learner directly in the eyes. This conveys the message to the learner that he or she is important and that your reinforcer is sincere.

Describe the behavior
It is commonly said that “we get more of what we reinforce.” If we specifically describe or tell the learner what we like about his or her behavior, it will increase the likelihood that the desired behavior will happen again. For example, the statement “Thanks for taking your seat quietly” conveys to the learner much more about the specific looked-for behavior when he or she enters the classroom than the statement “Good job.” Do not assume that learners know what they have done well. Tell them.

Create anticipation
Build anticipation about your reinforcers. The more excitement you can generate about the reinforcers, the more motivated your learners will be to earn them.

Use a variety of reinforcers
Just because you are using a high rate of reinforcers does not mean that they all have to look and sound alike. All adults and learners get bored with the same reinforcer over time (e.g., a pop or a candy bar). The greater the variety, the higher the learner’s interest level and motivation, so rotate your reinforcers often or provide the learner with a menu of
reinforcers from which to choose. Plan ahead. Develop a "bank" of reinforcer options with your supervisor to have on hand during instruction or free time, and do not forget to pair a positive praise statement with each tangible or material reinforcer that you provide.

Types of Reinforcers

There are several types of reinforcement, including material, edible, social, and natural (Rhode et al., 1992). A brief description of these types of reinforcement follows.

Material reinforcement

Material reinforcement consists of some tangible item that a learner can earn for practicing a preferred behavior. Tangible items may include stickers, jewelry, pencils, art supplies, and so forth. As you and your supervisor generate ideas for tangible reinforcers, remember to keep the items affordable.

Edible reinforcers

Edible reinforcers are just that—something you prefer to eat. Common forms of edible reinforcers include ice cream, pop, fruit, pretzels, gummy bears, popcorn, carrot sticks, french fries, and M & M's. When selecting edible reinforcers, you must pay attention to a learner's specific dietary needs. Check with the learner's parents and your team prior to using any edible reinforcers.

Social reinforcement

Any verbal statement, positive attention, or action made by the instructor that increases or maintains a learner's desired behavior such as a smile, a wink, a pat on the back, or telling a learner, "That was so awesome. You did just what I asked, and quickly too!" is an example of social reinforcement. Pairing social reinforcement with other forms of reinforcement, such as edibles, helps to build the value of the social reinforcement, especially for those learners who initially may not find praise motivating.

Natural positive reinforcers

Natural reinforcers are everywhere in our schools; we just need to know how to recognize and use them to our advantage. Such activities as
Promoting Positive Behavior

"being the instructor's helper," "tutoring another learner," "erasing the board," "running a note to the office," "being in charge of the class hamster," or "helping the custodian" are powerful motivators for most learners. Too often we give these activities away without recognizing their potential to change a learner's behavior. Better yet, all of the activities listed are free and require only a little forethought on the part of you and your supervisor.

Things To Remember

There are a few things to consider when using reinforcement with your learners. First, the reinforcers should be age appropriate. Be sure to discuss the reinforcement ideas with your supervisor and inform the learner's parents prior to using a specific reinforcer. Also, do not forget Grandma's Law, or the Premack Principle (Premack, 1959): Grandmothers have always known best. For example, grandmothers always say, "First do your homework, then you can go out and play." For reinforcement to truly work, it must follow the desired behavior, not precede it.

Teaching Strategies for Increasing Compliance

In today's schools, learners are expected to follow multiple directions given to them throughout the day. How you make a request can make a huge difference in how often your learners comply with it. Research has shown that if requests are given correctly, you can increase compliance by 30% (Forehand, 1977).

The following are ways to increase the effectiveness of your directions. If used correctly, you will have fewer problems, less arguing, and more compliance in your classroom.

- Don't ask if it isn't a question. Using a direct request increases the possibility that the learner will follow through. For example, "I need you to sit in your chair" is more effective than asking, "Will you sit in this seat, please?"
- Get up close. If you want compliance, it is far better to give a request up close than from a distance. Three feet or the length of your arm is
Typically recommended. Being closer to a learner when making a request increases the chance that he or she will follow directions.

- Use eye contact. Look the learner in the eye as you give an instruction. Be sure to say his or her name and request that the learner look you in the eye before you give the request.
- Give one request at a time. Avoid asking a learner to do multiple tasks all at once. Give only one request at a time, wait for the learner to follow through, and then give another request.
- Use a quiet, calm voice. Don't yell.
- Get close and stay cool. When giving a direction, get up close and use a calm, nonemotional voice when stating the request. Raising your voice or threatening the learner will only increase his or her noncompliance.
- Don't nag. Make a request only twice. State the request once, wait 3 to 5 seconds, and then restate the same request. If the learner does not follow through, put a mild consequence in place.
- Give the learner time. After making a request, allow 5 seconds for the learner to comply before repeating the request or giving a new request.
- Be specific and descriptive. It helps to give specific requests rather than global requests. Descriptive requests increase the likelihood that learners will understand exactly what you want them to do and increases the chance of their success. For example, "Get your work done" is vague. "Please complete all of the problems at the bottom of page 2" pinpoints the exact actions you want the learner to take.
- Verbally reinforce compliance. Don't forget to praise the learner when he or she follows through with your request. Remember, you get more of what you reinforce.
- Use precision commands. One strategy that has been found to significantly increase learner compliance is precision commands. A precision command (see Figure 4.1), sometimes referred to as a "precision request," is a precise verbal statement made by staff members to enhance learner compliance (Hamlet, Axelrod, & Kuerschner, 1984; Rhode et al., 1992; Utah State Office of Education, 2001).

A precision command consists of a two-step format. When giving a precision command, directions are stated positively and given to a learner in a clear and concise manner each time. The first step consists of making a polite request such as, "Deb, please pick up your toys and put them in the box." Because descriptive commands are more effective than ambiguous or general commands, it is important to describe the specific behavior...
I. Promoting Positive Behavior

It is important to use the same wording in the same order with ALL directions (e.g., "come here," "sit down," etc.).

1. **"PLEASE"**
   - (Name) (Direction) please.
   - wait 5 seconds
   - Compliance
   - Reinforce!

2. **"NEED"**
   - (Name) you need to (Direction)
   - wait 5 seconds
   - Compliance
   - Reinforce!
   - Follow Through!

**Figure 4.1.** Two-step precision command format.

using a soft but firm, nonemotional voice. Do not yell. After giving the precision command, allow the learner 3 to 5 seconds to comply. Frequently, instructors unnecessarily repeat the command or give a new command before the learner has had time to comply with the original command. If the learner complies, praise him or her. However, if the learner fails to comply, give a second command.

The second command is more effective if warning words such as need and now are used to signal to the learner that, unless he or she complies, an unpleasant consequence will follow. For example, "Deb, you need to place all of the toys in the box now." Again, following the second command, allow the learner 3 to 5 seconds to comply. If the learner has not started to respond after the second command, follow through with a preplanned, unpleasant consequence, such as a loss of recess time or free time. As a team, discuss a hierarchy of possible unpleasant consequences to use if a learner fails to comply with the second command. Following
the unpleasant consequence, restate the second command and praise the learner when he or she complies with your request.

Keep in mind it is important to use the same wording in the same order with all directions that you give. Another key to increasing compliance is to give the learner an appropriate amount of time to respond to the request. The general guidelines are to allow 3 to 5 seconds for learners who do not have language difficulties to respond, and allow 7 to 10 seconds for learners who do have language difficulties or auditory processing problems. Also, praise learners for following directions. Positive attention should always be given when learners comply with requests.

Summary

This chapter examined the paraeducator's role in the effective management of learner behavior and discussed a few of the proven management practices that work. Understanding why behavior occurs within a particular setting is key to designing effective management programs for all learners. As a paraeducator, it is your role to become familiar with your supervisor's management plan or schoolwide plan and assist in implementing effective, proactive management strategies on a day-to-day basis.

ACTIVITIES

1. Make a list of your classroom rules and expectations. Evaluate your rules according to the seven guidelines for establishing effective rules. Ask yourself if they are positively stated. If they are not, rewrite the rules based on what you know is best practice.

2. List one or two replacement behaviors for each behavior listed. Keep in mind the likely reasons for the behavior.
   - Problem behavior: Hitting
     Reasons for hitting: Gets angry and does not know what else to do when others tease him or her
     Replacement Behavior(s):

   - Problem behavior: Noncompliance
     Reasons for noncompliance: Gets out of doing work; receives
instructor's attention
Replacement behavior(s):

- Problem behavior: Off-task behavior
  Reasons for off-task behavior: Lacks skills to do two-digit addition
  Replacement behavior(s):

- Problem behavior: Teasing others
  Reasons for teasing others: Wants peer attention
  Replacement behavior(s):

**Discussion Questions**

1. Why is it important to use positive behavior management strategies?
2. Describe the components of an effective behavior management plan.
3. Discuss the paraeducator's role in implementing a classroom behavior management plan.
4. List and describe three strategies that paraeducators can use to decrease inappropriate behavior.
5. List and describe three strategies that paraeducators can use to increase appropriate behavior.
6. A learner is repeatedly teasing another child at recess. What might you do?
7. List the ways to increase the effectiveness of positive verbal praise.
8. List and describe the essential components for observing and understanding difficult behaviors.

**References**


