Behavior Needs & PBIS

Planning for a school meeting about your child's behavior needs

Supporting your child's behavior needs at school can be challenging. For a child with a disability or mental health diagnosis with behavioral needs it can be even more challenging. As a parent, you may find yourself among competing approaches to handling behavior concerns. Planning ahead for an individualized meeting about your child's behavior needs will help you explain your own ideas about the best way to help your child in addition to listening to the ideas of others.

View behavior as an opportunity to learn about your child. As you prepare for the meeting, consider why your child may have challenging behaviors. Is your child responding to something in their environment that isn't working for them? Is your child behaving this way because of an unmet need? Is this an automatic or involuntary response related to their disability? When negative behaviors persist, it's important to ask these questions to learn more about your child.

Adults usually react to children's behavior out of their own personal experiences, training, and beliefs. Be sure to give careful thought to what might be impacting your child's actions. Take time to think about your child's strengths, specific needs, medical or mental health diagnoses, and any additional information that might be helpful to share and consider when meeting with school professionals about your child's behavior needs. Recognize that your own self care needs or current and ongoing stressors can also influence how you view your child's behavior challenges and needs.

It takes practice to view a child's negative behaviors as an opportunity. If we are used to viewing our child's actions as misbehavior, then we likely limit our response to a quick fix, such as punishment. For example, one child's inappropriate language during reading class is problematic, and as a consequence the child is repeatedly removed from class. Since the troubling behavior continues, the parent decides to use this an opportunity to learn more. The parent asks questions of the teacher and learns that the inappropriate language happens when the class is taking turns reading out loud. The parent knows that the child struggles with reading and discovers that each student in class is called on to read out loud. From speaking with the child, the parent knows she would rather be removed from the class than be embarrassed in front of her peers who might laugh at her if she struggles to read out loud. It is essential that parents and professionals search for the meaning behind the behavior rather than only responding to the behavior.

Punishment limits learning. Historically, we have viewed challenging behavior as disobedience, and punishment has often been the response. Behaviors are a way to get needs met. By proactively learning more about a child's needs, we may be able to move beyond trying to "consequence" the child into behaving. For example, a child with developmental delay may hit others in order to be noticed. If the adults do not identify an alternative plan for helping the child learn how to get attention appropriately, his or her hitting will likely continue.

Teaching positive behavior skills is a process. One of the best ways to help your child learn new behavior skills is to adopt a team approach with the school professionals. Together, consider your child's needs and develop a program based on them. After you agree to a program, your responsibility is to support the teacher and the program and to monitor the effectiveness of services in meeting your child's needs. If you do not see progress in your child's behavior challenges, inform your child's educational team of your concerns.

Questions to consider in a team meeting. You may want to consider the following questions as you look for ways to understand your child's behavior needs.

1. What is the challenging behavior?

2. When and where does it occur? How often? Who is around when it happens?

3. Is there a relationship between my child's disability and his or her behavior?

4. What has been tried so far? What has worked? What has not worked?

5. What do I think the behavior might mean? What need does it meet?

6. What are my child's strengths, and can we use them to build a plan?

7. What plan would I like to suggest trying next?

8. When will we meet again to talk about the progress and needs of my child?

Come prepared. Find out who will be attending the meeting and what roles they fill. Ask for an agenda and that it includes time for you to discuss your concerns. Bring your concerns and ideas to the meeting in writing. Behavior and discipline are often emotionally charged topics and it is easy to get off track. Ask for an action plan in writing at the end of the meeting.

Consider additional supports. In a school meeting you could ask if your child would benefit from a 504 Plan or evaluation for special education. If your child already has a 504 Plan or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), ask how the information from this meeting could be included in that plan. You could also ask for information about additional resources that may be available in your community. Learn about functional behavioral assessments (FBA). A FBA is a problem solving process for addressing problem behavior of individual students. Lots of materials and resources exist on FBAs.

Work together. As the parent of a child with a disability or mental health diagnosis and a behavior concern, your role is important. By working together with your child and the school, you can increase your child's chance for behavioral success. Consider the information and suggestions made by the school staff. It may be best to make decisions or develop an action plan at a later meeting.

Examples of Positive Behavioral Intervention Strategies

A child with challenging behavior who has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), should have positive behavioral interventions included to help reduce challenging behaviors and support the new behavioral skills to be learned through the IEP goals. These interventions should be specific strategies that are positive and proactive, and are not reactive and consequence-based. The following list suggests some different kinds of positive behavioral interventions that could be useful:

1. **Clear routines and expectations** that are posted and frequently reviewed help children know class rules, and what comes next in their school day, reducing anxiety or fear.

2. **Stop, Relax, and Think** strategy teaches children how to think about a problem and find a solution. Children learn the following steps:
   a. Define the problem.
   b. Decide who "owns" the problem.
   c. Think of as many solutions as possible to solve the problem.
   d. Select a solution to try.
   e. Use the solution.
   f. Evaluate its success.

   After children understand the steps, role-play and practice can help the process become habit. Helping children to recognize their own response to stress (clenched hands, voice tone, etc.) may become part of the instruction needed to use this strategy effectively. Practicing and being successful with these steps can take time for children. Therefore, it is important to consider what kind of support a child may need that will help reinforce progress.

3. **Pre-arranged signals** can be used to let a child know when he or she is doing something that is not acceptable. A hand motion, a shake of the head or a colored card placed on a desk as the teacher moves through the room could alert the child without drawing attention to the child or the behavior. It is important to develop a signal that the child and teacher agree on using and for what purpose.

4. **Proximity control** means that a teacher or adult moves closer to the child in a gentle way. If the teacher does not get the child's attention by using cues, then he or she may move closer to the student or give the lesson while standing near the child's desk.

5. **Planned response method** is useful in stopping non-serious behaviors that are bothersome to other children or adults nearby.

   For example, students who interrupt the class to attract the teacher's attention usually are successful in getting the teachers to respond. Planned response method acknowledges that children's challenging behaviors serve a purpose. If the purpose of that behavior is to gain adult attention, then not providing attention means that the behavior does not work. The behavior lessens over time and eventually disappears. Ignoring non-serious behavior is especially useful for parents when their child is having a tantrum for attention. Many adults find it difficult to ignore behaviors, especially if the behaviors interrupt what the adult is doing. Also, attention-seeking behaviors often get worse before they eventually go away.
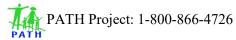
   Planned response method is not suitable for behaviors that are extremely disruptive. This method also may not work if other children laugh at the problem behaviors the adult is trying to ignore. Some behaviors, including those that are unsafe or that include peer issues such as arguing, can grow quickly into more serious behaviors. It may not be possible to ignore these kinds of behaviors. The process of ignoring the behavior should never be used for unsafe behaviors. As children grow older and want attention more from their friends than from adults, the planned response method is less useful.

6. **Discipline privately**. Many children see it as a challenge when teachers attempt to discipline them in front of their peers. Children rarely lose these challenges, even when adults use negative consequences. Young people can gain stature from peers by publicly refusing to obey a teacher. A child is more likely to accept discipline if his or her peers are not watching the process.

7. **Find opportunities for the child** to help others. For example, a child who is using negative behaviors as a way to get out of class could be given the task of running an errand for the teacher to the front office. Peer involvement is another motivator for appropriate behavior. Finding times for the child who uses disruptive behavior to get attention from his classmates to help another student positively engages attention and can build rapport.

8. **Positive phrasing** lets children know the positive results for using appropriate behaviors. As simple as it sounds, this can be difficult. Teachers and parents are used to focusing on misbehavior. Warning children about a negative response to problem behaviors often seems easier than describing the positive impact of positive behaviors. Compare the difference between positive phrasing and negative phrasing:

   Positive phrasing: "If you finish your reading by recess, we can all go outside together and play a game."

   Negative phrasing: "If you do not finish your reading by recess, you will have to stay inside until it's done."

9. **State the behavior you want to see**. For example, say "I like seeing how everyone lines up so quickly and quietly", instead of "Stop bothering the other students in line."

10. **Behavior shaping** acknowledges that not all children can do everything at 100 percent. If a child does not turn in papers daily, expecting that papers will be turned in 100 percent of the time is not realistic. By rewarding small gains and reinforcing these gains as they occur, children learn how to stick with a task and to improve the skill.

11. **Tangible, token, and activity reinforcers** are also effective ways to encourage and support appropriate behavior. Tangible reinforcers can be awards, edibles or objects. Token reinforcers are tokens or points given for appropriate behavior that can be exchanged for something of value. Activity reinforcers are probably the most effective and positive as they allow students to participate in preferred activities, usually with other students, which also builds in social reinforcement.
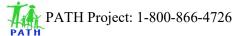
Resources:

- PACER Center: *www.pacer.org*
- Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: *www.pbis.org*
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning: *http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu*
- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI): *http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.us.edu*
- Texas Behavior Support: *http://www.txbehaviorsupport.org*
- IRIS Center: *Identifying the Reasons for Problem Behavior and Developing a Behavior Plan*: *http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/fba*
- Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice: *http://cecp.air.org/fba/*

PATH Project: 1-800-866-4726   PEN Project: 1-877-762-1435   TEAM Project: 1-877-832-8945

www.partnerstx.org