How To: Write Behavior Statements to Identify Causes of Child Behavior Problems

When a teacher is confronted with a misbehaving or non-compliant student, the challenging behavior presents a puzzle to be solved. Instructors skilled in resolving behavior problems know that effective behavior management is built upon 3 assumptions (Packenham, Shute, & Reid, 2004). First, students engage in specific behaviors for a purpose (e.g., to seek peer attention; to avoid academic work). Second, events in the school environment play a central role in shaping student conduct, whether as behavioral triggers or reinforcers. Third, the teacher who can accurately identify both the purpose (function) of a student's problem behavior and events in the environment that sustain that behavior will be able to select appropriate intervention strategies to replace or eliminate it.

A classroom teacher has access to a great deal of information that could potentially be helpful in analyzing a student's behavior: direct observation, interviews with the student, interviews with past teachers and parents; work products, school records, and more. In fact, as Hosp (2008) notes, a problem that teachers frequently face is not that they *lack* sufficient data to understand a student, but rather that they are saturated with *too much* global information to easily analyze.

Behavioral statement: Template for analysis. What is needed is a simple template that helps teachers to narrow their problem-solving focus, productively tap into their reservoir of knowledge about a student, and --hopefully-- solve the behavioral puzzle. Such a template exists in the form of the 'behavioral statement' (Moreno & Bullock, 2011). The behavioral statement--also known as the 'ABC' (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence) statement-- describes (a) *antecedents*: events that precede and trigger the problem behavior; (b) *behavior*: the problem behavior itself; and (c) *consequences*: events occurring as a result of the behavior that reinforce it in the future.

Sample Behavioral (ABC) Statements		
Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
During large-group lectures in social studies	*Brian talks with peers about non-instructional topics*	*and receives positive peer attention.*
During independent seatwork assignments involving writing tasks	*Angela verbally refuses to comply with teacher requests to start work*	*and is sent to the office with a disciplinary referral.*

The behavioral statement neatly encapsulates the behavior and its context and places the student's behavior on a timeline (trigger, behavior, outcome). The statement's format allows the teacher to examine what antecedent events or conditions may precipitate a problem behavior and think about how to reengineer aspects of the learning activity to prevent the problem behavior. In the same manner, the statement prompts the instructor to look at the current consequences that accompany the problem behavior, consider whether they are actually supporting misbehavior, and perhaps seek to replace them with alternative consequences to extinguish undesired behaviors.

Classroom Behavioral Statement Organizer. While teachers can certainly draw upon their knowledge of students to write their own behavior statements, the process does require time and reflection. Yet time is a scarce commodity in busy classrooms. Teachers need access to streamlined tools to speed their understanding of mild problem behaviors and make behavior analysis feasible in general-education classrooms (Packenham, Shute, & Reid, 2004).

The *Classroom Behavioral Statement Organizer*, which appears later in this document, is just such a tool, created to help instructors in a classroom setting to quickly draft behavior statements in ABC format and use those statements

to link student behaviors to their underlying purpose or function. The chart is a table divided into four columns: (1) *Antecedent/Activity*; (2) *Student Behavior*; (3) *Consequence/ Outcome*; and (4) *Behavior Function*. The teacher browses the elements in the first 3 columns to assemble a behavior/ABC statement that describes a student's problem behavior and its context. Based on this statement and the teacher's comprehensive knowledge of the student, the instructor then selects the underlying behavioral 'function' or purpose, a hypothesis that best explains why the problem behavioral is occurring.

A brief explanation of the sections of the *Classroom Behavioral Statement Organizer* follows:

- *Antecedent/Activity.* The chart lists a range of classroom activities (e.g., student work-pairs; reading activities; independent seat work) typically taking place when the student problem behavior occurs. If a teacher finds that a student behavior is displayed across *multiple* classroom settings/activities, it is recommended that the instructor make the analysis more manageable by choosing only the one or two most important settings/activities where the student's behavior is most problematic. Also, while this antecedent/activity list covers the majority of common classroom activities, the teacher is encouraged to write out his or her own description of any antecedents or activities not listed here.

- *Student Behavior.* A listing of the more common types of student misbehavior (e.g., talks to other students about non-instructional topics; fails to comply with routine teacher requests) appear in this section of the chart. The instructor identifies those problem behaviors that the student most often displays during the 'antecedent/activity' previously selected. It is recommended that teachers select no more than 2-3 behaviors to keep the behavior statement (and classroom intervention) manageable. If the teacher does not see a particular behavior listed, the instructor can use the examples from the chart as models to craft his or her own behavior definition.

- *Consequence/Outcome.* The teacher chooses outcomes/consequences that typically follow the problem behavior (e.g., student fails to complete work; student is sent from the classroom to the office or to in-school suspension). The instructor should try to limit the number of consequences/outcomes selected to 3. If, in the teacher's opinion, several consequences (e.g., positive peer attention; student fails to finish work) occur with the same frequency, each selected consequence can simply be indicated with a check mark. However, if several consequences are linked to the behavior but one consequence (e.g., student fails to complete work) clearly occurs more often than another (e.g., student is sent to the office with a disciplinary referral), the teacher should number the relevant consequences in descending (i.e., 1, 2, 3) order of frequency. The value of rank-ordering when consequences happen with differing frequencies is that such ranking can provide insight into what 'pay-off' is actually sustaining the problem student behavior. For example, the instructor may note that the number-one consequence for a misbehaving student is that she reliably gets positive attention from her classmates but that a more sporadic disciplinary consequence such as teacher reprimand or office referral ranks a distant third. From this differential rate of consequences, the teacher may conclude that the more frequent peer attention is driving the behavior and that the sparser disciplinary consequence is not sufficient to change that pattern.

- *Behavior Function.* Having reviewed the behavior statement, the teacher chooses a behavior function that appears to be the most likely driver or cause of the student problem behavior(s). Seven possible functions are listed in this column (Witt, Daly, & Noell, 2000). The most commonly observed behavioral functions in classrooms are escape/avoidance and peer or adult attention (Packenham, Shute, & Reid, 2004), but other functions can be identified as well. If the teacher is unsure of the function sustaining the behavior but has 2-3 candidates (e.g., peer attention; escape or avoidance of a situation or activity), that instructor should continue to

observe the target student's behaviors and note accompanying antecedents and consequences in an effort to rule out all but one of the competing hypotheses.

References

Hosp, J. L. (2008). Best practices in aligning academic assessment with instruction. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp.363-376). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Moreno, G., & Bullock, L. M. (2011). Principles of positive behaviour supports: Using the FBA as a problem-solving approach to address challenging behaviours beyond special populations. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, 16*(2), 117-127.

Packenham, M., Shute, R., & Reid, R. (2004). A truncated functional behavioral assessment procedure for children with disruptive classroom behaviors. *Education and Treatment of Children, 27*(1), 9-25.

Witt, J. C., Daly, E. M., & Noell, G. (2000). *Functional assessments: A step-by-step guide to solving academic and behavior problems.* Longmont, CO: Sopris West..

Classroom Behavioral Statement Organizer

Antecedent/Activity	Student Behavior	Consequence/ Outcome	Behavior Function
☐ Start of class/bell-ringer activities ☐ Large-group lecture ☐ Large group teacher-led discussion ☐ Large-group: when called on by the teacher ☐ Student work-pairs ☐ Student groups: cooperative learning ☐ Reading activities ☐ Writing activities ☐ Math activities ☐ Independent seat work ☐ Independent computer work ☐ Transitions between academic activities ☐ Homework collection ☐ In-class homework review ☐ Tests and/or quizzes ☐ Class dismissal ☐ Other: _____	☐ Sits inactive ☐ Puts head on desk ☐ Is inattentive (e.g., staring into space, looking out the window) ☐ Leaves seat without permission ☐ Requests bathroom or water breaks ☐ Uses cell phone, music player, or other digital device against class rules ☐ Whispers/talks/mutters to self ☐ Makes loud or distracting noises ☐ Calls out with non-instructional comments ☐ Calls out with instructionally relevant comments ☐ Plays with/taps objects ☐ Throws objects ☐ Destroys work materials or instructional materials (e.g., ripping up a worksheet, breaking a pencil) ☐ Whispers/talks to other students about non-instructional topics ☐ Whispers/talks to other students about instructional/academic topics: e.g., seeking answers or help with directions ☐ Makes verbal threats toward peers ☐ Uses inappropriate language (e.g., obscenities) with peers ☐ Taunts/teases/makes fun of peers ☐ Makes comments to encourage or 'egg on' other students to misbehave ☐ Fails to begin in-class assignments (verbal refusal)	— Student fails to complete work. — Teacher ignores the behavior ('planned ignoring'). — Teacher redirects the student. — Teacher reprimands the student. — Teacher conferences w/ the student. — Student receives positive peer attention — Student receives negative peer attention. — Student is briefly timed-out within the classroom. — Student is briefly timed-out outside of the classroom. — Student is sent from the classroom to the office or to in-school suspension (disciplinary referral). — Student receives a disciplinary consequence outside of class time (e.g., afterschool detention). — Student receives a 'respite' break away from peers to calm down before rejoining class. — Student is sent from the classroom to talk with a counselor/ psychologist/social worker. — Student receives a snack, nap, or other support. — Other: _____	☐ Peer attention ☐ Acceptance/ affiliation with individuals or peer group(s) ☐ Power/control in interactions with peer(s) ☐ Adult attention ☐ Power/control in interactions with adult(s) ☐ Escape or avoidance of a situation or activity (e.g., because the student lacks the skills to do the academic work) ☐ Fulfillment of physical needs: e.g., sleep ☐ Other: _____

	☐ Fails to begin in-class assignments (silent refusal) ☐ Fails to comply with routine teacher requests (verbal refusal) ☐ Fails to comply with routine teacher requests (silent refusal) ☐ Makes verbal threats toward adult ☐ Uses inappropriate language (e.g., obscenities) with adult ☐ Taunts/teases/makes fun of adult ☐ Seeks academic help from adult when not needed ☐ Perseverates with previous academic activity after the class/group has transitioned to a new activity ☐ Other: _____		

Sample Behavioral (ABC) Statements		
Antecedent	**Behavior**	**Consequence**
During large-group lectures in social studies	Brian talks with peers about non-instructional topics	and receives positive peer attention.
During independent seatwork assignments involving writing tasks	Angela verbally refuses to comply with teacher requests to start work	and is sent to the office with a disciplinary referral.

Behavioral (ABC) Statement: Use the organizer below to write a behavioral statement, based on your selections from the Classroom Behavior Chart.		
Antecedent	**Behavior**	**Consequence**