Defining Problem Student Behaviors and Matching to Appropriate Interventions: A 5-Step Process

Teachers can select effective interventions for student behavior problems only if they first clearly define the problem behavior(s) and the reason(s) that a behavior is occurring. By following the five steps below, the teacher is more likely to describe a student's problem behavior(s) with clarity and to identify effective interventions to address them.

1. Define the problem behavior in clear, observable, measurable terms (Batsche et al., 2008; Upah, 2008). Write a clear description of the problem behavior. Avoid vague problem identification statements such as "The student is disruptive."

   A good method to judge whether the problem has been adequately defined is to apply the "stranger test": Can a stranger read the problem definition statement, then observe the student, and be able to judge reliably when the behavior occurs and when it does not? A useful self-prompt to come up with a more detailed description of the problem is to ask, "What does <problem behavior> look like in the classroom?"

   A well-written problem definition should include three parts:
   - Conditions. The condition(s) under which the problem is likely to occur
   - Problem Description. A specific description of the problem behavior
   - Contextual information. Information about the frequency, intensity, duration, or other dimension(s) of the behavior that provide a context for estimating the degree to which the behavior presents a problem in the setting(s) in which it occurs.

Sample Problem Behavior Definitions		
Conditions. The condition(s) under which the problem is likely to occur	*Problem Description. A specific description of the problem behavior*	*Contextual Information. Information about the frequency, intensity, duration, or other dimension(s) of the behavior*
During 20-minute independent seatwork literacy tasks,…	…John talks with peers about non-instructional topics…	…an average of three times.
In school settings such as the playground or gymnasium, when unsupervised by adults,…	…Angela is reported by peers to use physically threatening language…	…at least once per week.
When given a verbal teacher request…	…Jay fails to comply with that request within 3 minutes…	… an average of 50% of the time.

2. Develop examples and non-examples of the problem behavior (Upah, 2008). Writing both examples and non-examples of the problem behavior helps to resolve uncertainty about when the student's conduct should be classified as a problem behavior. Examples should include the

most frequent or typical instances of the student problem behavior. Non-examples should include any behaviors that are acceptable conduct but might possibly be confused with the problem behavior.

Examples and Non-Examples of Problem Behavior		
Problem Behavior	Examples	Non-Examples
During 20-minute independent seatwork literacy tasks, John talks with peers about non-instructional topics	• John chats with another student that he encounters at the pencil sharpener. • John whispers to a neighboring student about a comic book in his desk.	• At the direction of the teacher, John pairs up with another student to complete an assignment.. • John verbally interacts with students in an appropriate manner while handing out work materials as requested by the teacher.
When given a verbal teacher request, Jay fails to comply with that request within 3 minutes.	• Jay does not comply when directed by the teacher to open his math book and begin work. • Jay is verbally defiant and uncooperative when requested by an adult to stop running in the hall.	• Jay does not comply with a teacher request because he does not hear that request. • Jay asks the teacher to explain directions that he does not understand.

3. Write a behavior hypothesis statement (Batsche et al., 2008; Upah, 2008). The next step in problem-solving is to develop a hypothesis about why the student is engaging in an undesirable behavior or not engaging in a desired behavior. Teachers can gain information to develop a hypothesis through direct observation, student interview, review of student work products, and other sources. The behavior hypothesis statement is important because (a) it can be tested, and (b) it provides guidance on the type(s) of interventions that might benefit the student.

Behavior Hypothesis Statements		
Problem Behavior	<Because>	Hypothesis
During 20-minute independent seatwork literacy tasks, John talks with peers about non-instructional topics…	…because…	…he is avoiding academic work.
When given a verbal teacher request, Jay fails to comply with that request…	…because…	…he is reinforced by the negative adult attention that results from his noncompliance.

4. Select a replacement behavior (Batsche et al., 2008). Behavioral interventions should be focused on increasing student skills and capacities, not simply on suppressing problem behaviors. By selecting a positive behavioral goal that is an appropriate replacement for the student's original problem behavior, the teacher reframes the student concern in a manner that allows for more effective intervention planning.

Selection of Replacement Behavior	
Problem Behavior	Replacement Behavior
During 20-minute independent seatwork literacy tasks, John talks with peers about non-instructional topics.	During 20-minute independent seatwork literacy tasks, John is engaged in active accurate academic responding.
When given a verbal teacher request, Jay fails to comply with that request.	When given a verbal teacher request, Jay carries out the request without argument or complaint within 3 minutes.

5. Write a prediction statement (Batsche et al., 2008; Upah, 2008). The prediction statement proposes a strategy (intervention) that is predicted to improve the problem behavior. The importance of the prediction statement is that it spells out specifically the expected outcome if the strategy is successful. The formula for writing a prediction statement is to state that *if* the proposed strategy ('Specific Action') is adopted, then the *rate* of problem behavior is expected to *decrease* or *increase* in the desired direction.

Prediction Statement		
Specific Action	Problem Behavior	Rate of Behavior
If prior to independent seatwork, John meets with a tutor to review key vocabulary terms and rehearse the assigned reading,..	…the amount of time that John spends talking with peers about non-instructional topics during independent work…	…will decrease.
If adults avoid engaging Jay in long exchanges when he fails to comply with their requests and instead impose appropriate pre-selected consequences…	…the frequency of Jay's timely compliance with adult requests…	…will increase.

References

Batsche, G. M., Castillo, J. M., Dixon, D. N., & Forde, S. (2008). Best practices in designing, implementing, and evaluating quality interventions. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 177-193). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Upah, K. R. F. (2008). Best practices in designing, implementing, and evaluating quality interventions. In A. Thomas & J. Grimes (Eds.), *Best practices in school psychology V* (pp. 209-223). Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Finding the Right Behavioral Intervention: Five Steps to Defining Student Problem Behaviors

Teachers can select effective interventions for student behavior problems only if they first clearly define the problem behavior(s) and the reason(s) that a behavior is occurring.

The process of defining student problem behaviors goes more smoothly if the teacher has first collected relevant information about the student's problem behavior (e.g., examples of seatwork, anecdotal notes of student behavior, frequency counts of behavior, student interview, etc.).

By following the five steps below, the teacher is more likely to describe a student's problem behavior(s) with clarity and to identify effective interventions to address them.

1. Define the problem behavior in clear, observable, measurable terms.

Sample Problem Behavior Definitions		
Conditions. The condition(s) under which the problem is likely to occur	*Problem Description. A specific description of the problem behavior*	*Contextual Information. Information about the frequency, intensity, duration, or other dimension(s) of the behavior*

2. Develop examples and non-examples of the problem behavior.

Examples and Non-Examples of Problem Behavior	
Examples	Non-Examples

3. Write a behavior hypothesis statement.

Behavior Hypothesis Statements		
Problem Behavior	<Because>	Hypothesis
	…because…	

4. Select a replacement behavior.

Selection of Replacement Behavior
Replacement Behavior

5. Create a prediction statement.

Prediction Statement		
Specific Action	Problem Behavior	Rate of Behavior