



Identifying the Big Ideas That Guide Effective Behavior Management

Teachers skilled in classroom management are able to respond appropriately to just about any behavior that a student brings through the classroom door. While having a toolkit of specific behavioral strategies is important, the real secret of educators who maintain smoothly running classrooms with minimal behavioral disruptions is that they are able to view problem student behaviors through the lens of these 'big ideas' in behavior management:

- ❑ *Check for academic problems.* The correlation between classroom misbehavior and deficient academic skills is high (Witt, Daly, & Noell, 2000). Teachers should, therefore, routinely assess a student's academic skills as a first step when attempting to explain why a particular behavior is occurring. And it logically follows that, when poor academics appear to drive problem behaviors, the intervention that the teacher selects should address the student's academic deficit.
- ❑ *Identify the underlying function of the behavior.* Problem behaviors occur for a reason. Such behaviors serve a *function* for the student (Witt, Daly, & Noell, 2000). The most commonly observed behavioral functions in classrooms are escape/avoidance and peer or adult attention (Packenham, Shute, & Reid, 2004). When an educator can identify the probable function sustaining a particular set of behaviors, the teacher has confidence that interventions selected to match the function will be correctly targeted and therefore likely to be effective. For example, if a teacher decides that a student's call-outs in class are sustained by the function of adult attention, that instructor may respond by shifting the flow of that attention-e.g., interacting minimally with the student during call-outs but boosting adult attention during times when the student shows appropriate behavior.
- ❑ *Eliminate behavioral triggers.* Problem behaviors are often set off by events or conditions within the instructional setting (Kern, Choutka, & Sokol, 2002). Sitting next to a distracting classmate or being handed an academic task that is too difficult to complete are two examples of events that might trigger student misbehavior. When the instructor is able to identify and eliminate triggers of negative conduct, such actions tend to work quickly and--by preventing class disruptions--result in more time available for instruction (Kern & Clemens, 2007).
- ❑ *Redefine the behavioral goal as a replacement behavior.* When a student displays challenging behaviors, it can be easy to fall into the trap of simply wishing that those misbehaviors would go away. The point of a behavioral intervention, however, should be to expand the student's repertoire of pro-social, pro-academic behaviors--rather than just extinguishing aberrant 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 (Batsche, Castillo, Dixon, & Forde, 2008). For example, an instructor who is concerned that a student is talking with peers about non-instructional topics during independent seatwork might select as a replacement behavior that the student will engage in "active, accurate academic responding".
- ❑ *Focus on factors within the school's control.* Teachers recognize that students often face significant factors outside of the school setting--e.g., limited parental support -- that can place them at heightened risk for academic failure and problem behaviors. However, focusing solely on those student risks beyond the school's ability to change can be counter-productive, sapping resolve and undermining intervention efforts. Instead, schools can best counteract the influence of negative outside factors and promote student resilience by providing supports *within* the educational setting such as skills instruction, tutoring, mentoring, and use of positive behavior management strategies (Hosp, 2008).
- ❑ *Be flexible in responding to misbehavior.* Teachers have greater success in managing the full spectrum of student misbehaviors when they respond flexibly--evaluating each individual case and applying strategies that logically address the likely cause(s) of that student's problem conduct (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003). An instructor may choose to respond to a non-compliant student with a warning and additional disciplinary



consequences, for example, if evidence suggests that the misbehavior stems from his seeking peer attention and approval. However, that same teacher may respond to non-compliance with a behavioral conference and use of defusing strategies if the misbehavior appears to have been triggered by a negative peer comment.

References

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Problem Behaviors: Common 'Functions'	
Hypothesis	Considerations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SKILL DEFICIT. The student lacks the skills necessary to display the desired behavior (Gable et al., 2009). 	If the student has never explicitly been taught the desired behaviors, there is a strong likelihood that behavior-skill deficit is a contributing factor.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PERFORMANCE DEFICIT. The student possesses the skills necessary to display the desired behavior but lacks sufficient incentive/motivation to do so (Gable et al., 2009). 	Poor motivation is a real and frequent cause of behavior problems. However, schools should first carefully rule out other explanations (e.g., skill deficit; escape/avoidance) before selecting this explanation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ACCESS TO TANGIBLES/EDIBLES/ACTIVITIES. The student seeks access to preferred objects ('tangibles'), food, or activities (Kazdin, 2001). 	The student may use behavior as a means to gain access to reinforcing experiences, such as food treats, desirable objects to play with, or high-preference activities (e.g., computer games, texting).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PEER ATTENTION. The student is seeking the attention of other students (Packenham, Shute & Reid, 2004). 	The student may be motivated by general attention from the entire classroom or may only seek the attention of select peers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ADULT ATTENTION. The student is seeking the attention of adults (Packenham, Shute & Reid, 2004). 	The student may be motivated by general attention from all adults or may only seek the attention of select educators.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESCAPE/AVOIDANCE. The student is seeking to escape or avoid a task or situation (Witt, Daly & Noell, 2000). 	If the student demonstrates academic ability (e.g., via grades or observed work) close to or at grade level, behavior problems may be tied to motivation issues or attention-seeking. Students with delayed academic abilities are more likely to be driven by escape/avoidance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EMOTIONAL OR ATTENTIONAL BLOCKERS. The student possesses the skills to display the desired behavior "but is unable to deal with competing forces—anger, frustration, fatigue." (Gable et al., 2009; p. 197). (This category can also include symptoms associated with anxiety or ADHD.) 	Students fitting this profile typically have difficulty managing their emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger) across settings and situations. However, if evidence suggests that emotional outbursts are linked to <i>specific</i> settings, situations, or tasks, the student may instead be attempting to escape or avoid those particular situations--suggesting poor academic skills or interpersonal difficulties.