

ACR Podcast Episode 6.mp3

📅 Thu, 9/19 7:49PM ⌚ 20:32

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

student, behavior, challenging behavior, function, classroom, deficit, reinforcer, reinforcing, understand, problem, screams, number, conditions, situation, communication, principles, peer, research, consistently, teachers

SPEAKERS

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00:00

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

00:34

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm so glad that you decided to spend this time with us. I am Chris Reeve, and today I want to talk about challenging behavior. One of the most frequent questions that I get through the blog, the academy and social media is how to handle challenging behavior. Probably one of the biggest hurdles that teachers face in their classroom and the one that may contribute the most to burnout. And a good part of my career has been spent focusing on assessing, addressing and researching challenging behavior. So I thought it would be good to start off early in the podcast episodes talking about the principles and the research that underlie my approach to behavior, and some ideas about what works and what doesn't work to get us started. And let me add that these underlying principles are research based, they are applicable to all students, not just students with autism or severe disabilities. The same principles are applicable to students who are gifted students, who have mental health issues, students who have severe cognitive delays, and students who supposedly

appear typical. So everything we're going to talk about will apply to all of your students, regardless of what kind of classroom you work in. So let's get started.

02:03

Number 1, appropriate behavior must be taught. Just expecting appropriate behavior when a student shows up in your class is not an effective strategy. Now, for typical students, when they come to school, they probably have a frame of reference that allows you to expect some level of appropriate behavior, but they don't necessarily know what's appropriate for this setting. So all of us need some level of expectations set and explained for us. We need to make sure that we're teaching appropriate behavior, and teaching the behaviors that match our expectations. Just telling some students what they are is not going to be sufficient.

02:50

We need to think about behavior the same way that we think about academic skills. Expecting a student to act appropriately without instruction is really no different expecting him to do calculus, but he hasn't been taught how to do it. Many of our students in special education, regardless of their identified disability, have a lot of challenges in communication and socialization skills. They often have difficulty with problem solving and reading other people's social expectations. So when we simply expect them to behave, we're setting them, and therefore ourselves, up for failure. So our classroom management and our behavior management systems always need to be set up to make clear and teach those expectations that we want to see and reinforce the behaviors that we want to see more of. And we have a good deal of research that shows us that we can teach appropriate behavior. And we can teach it to replace challenging behavior, which we'll talk about later on in this series.

03:54

Number 2, we really need to separate the behavior problem from the student, the behavior is bad or challenging or problem, not the student. There is no diagnosis or function of behavior called B-A-D. Often I've heard teachers say, "well, the function of his behavior is just the he is B-A-D." But that is really neither a function nor really that helpful. When I hear teachers or others say this, it makes me realize that what they're really saying is that they failed to figure out what the real function or underlying purpose of the behavior is. And they're done trying.

04:33

Because here's the problem, we need to reduce the challenging behavior. But I'm not going to get rid of the student. So you know, our old classic discipline policies, really focused on getting rid of

the students and sending them out into the office. Now we recognize that sometimes that reinforces that behavior, which I'll talk a little bit more about in later in this episode. But it's really important to recognize that we're not trying to eradicate the student, we're trying to change the behavior. In addition, by saying that the student is bad or a problem, we personalize the challenging behavior. So the student may have learned over time that making the behavior seem more personal, gets a bigger reaction. And that may mean getting a bigger emotional reaction from someone or be more effective at getting the behavior to get them out of a situation. Challenging behavior is only personal, though, if the receiver makes it personal. So the way that the receiver interprets the behavior makes a difference in how they react. Once you've interpreted the behavior as being a personal attack, you've lost the student. So even if you think that this is a personal attack, and everything about you, in your fiber of your being tells you that that is what the student is doing. Ask yourself, Why do I think that? What is he doing, that's getting under my skin, that's setting off my buttons. That whatever it is, because we can't get good problem solving from just saying he hates me, or he, you know, is nasty to me or he's a bad student. We can get useful information from "How am I reacting to this behavior that might be contributing to it?"

06:26

And that leads me to number 3, which is that challenging behavior doesn't occur in a vacuum. There are conditions that make behaviors increase and conditions that make behaviors decrease. Sometimes those conditions are external, like an adult, who responds like clockwork, every single challenging behavior with a verbal interaction, because I have to tell him that he better not do that, or he's not going to understand. Or the peer who screams and reacts by yelling for the teacher every single time this other student pulls on her hair ribbon. Those conditions are obviously external; we can also have internal conditions. So there may be an underlying medical issue, if you have a student that suddenly you see a huge change in behavior. Look for something medical, that's going on for the student. Things like zinc deficits could lead a student to be eating in edible objects, a stomach ache, a migraine, or any of those other things that many of our students either can't tell us about, or don't tell us about. It could be a medication that was started or stopped. Or maybe there were no changes, but suddenly, he's having adverse effects from it. And sometimes the reinforcement for the behavior may come internally where we can't actually observe it. So some students will bang their head because it release it relieves the pressure in their ears. It's a very typical behavior that we see in infants with ear infections, and sometimes it carries on over time. Regardless of where the triggers and the reinforcer is come from, it's the conditions that trigger and maintain the behaviors, not the person. So in order to change the behaviors, we have to change the conditions, which means we have to change the context. And let's face it, we only have control over our own behavior; we really don't have control over anyone else's. The good part is that by changing our own behavior, we can often change the student's behavior.

08:33

And that leads us to number 4, which is that the behavior has a function, or a purpose; it's happening for a reason. And that reason or function is not to deliberately be a bad kid, being bad is not a function or purpose of behavior. Functions are to get something or to get away from or stop something. Those things might not always be easily apparent to us, especially when we first start looking, but functions are why behavior happens. Or in other words, what the student gets out of it. I guarantee there is a payoff, we just may not always be able to see it easily. To be clear, it's not a simple, "This happens and then this happens." Human behavior is one of the most complex entities in the world. And we really don't understand, but a micro piece of it, or why people do the things we do. But we do have some established functions, and some research that shows us what common functions are for an individual. And the situations about them and your functional assessment, which we'll talk about in future episodes is what should give you good information about the conditions in which the behavior occurs. So you can change the conditions.

09:59

And that leads us to directly into number 5, challenging behavior functions are directly related to skill deficits. Sometimes, again, just like the functions, the skill deficits may be really apparent. Like a student who is nonverbal, we may say that there's a communication function. Sometimes they're better hidden. And that's especially true of our students who are very verbal, but have a history of challenging behaviors that maybe removed them from a situation faster than he's able to do it in an appropriate way. So he screams and people let him out. When he raises his hand, people don't respond as quickly. Many of our students with emotional behavior disorders fall into that latter category.

10:41

We forget sometimes that the challenging behavior comes from a skill deficit in those students who are very verbal. It's one of the reasons that I often don't reiterate the statement that challenging behavior always functions as communication, because sometimes the communication piece isn't as evident as maybe the social skills deficits, the sensory deficits, and the deficits and self regulation. So it's important to recognize that if this person had a more effective way of getting their needs met, and if that way had worked in the past, for them consistently, they'd be using it. We have really good research that shows that two year olds who don't have great communication skills are more likely to ask a kid to play by bopping them over the head with a toy, then by using language. But as the language improves as they turned 3, then we start seeing less of the hitting with the toy and more of the language. I'll talk in future episodes about the role of efficiency, and how quickly easily and consistently a behavior gets the reinforcer is going to govern which one wins out. But if a student has a skill deficit, like a social skills deficit, and the way that he gains attention from his peers is by acting up in class and getting in trouble,

which then his peers go, "Oh, nice, cool, he got in trouble with the teacher," then that's going to maintain that behavior. So it isn't all necessarily communication, but there is definitely a function, and it is related to not being able to get their needs met in a more appropriate way in a consistent manner.

12:27

So given that the behavior serves a function, number 6 is that we need to base our treatments on that function. And here's what that means. It means that the blanket interventions or consequences that we use in schools are unlikely to be effective unless we match them to the function of the behavior. Here's an example, the students acting out in class and we send the student to the office. We perceive that as punishing; but it's only punishing if you are concerned and understand that it impacts how adults view you and perceive you. If that's not a big reinforcer for you, or your skill deficit is that you don't understand other people's perspectives, then we could be reinforcing the behavior instead. If the behavior is she's giving a test, I always fail, I'm going to the office.

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And it doesn't even have to be something that you do that the students doing cognitively, without much thought, it just becomes a habit and reaction. Much like when we're driving a car, I put my foot on the brake when the light turns yellow, because that means I'm going to have to stop, I don't think about it, I just do it. Same thing with these kinds of behaviors. Another example is the students engaging in challenging behavior to gain attention. Well, by sending him to the office, then he just got an audience with the principal, and probably the rest of the office staff who engaged with him while he waited. We may think that attention is negative, but the control over the attention and getting the attention, the ability to get the attention consistently and more effectively, maybe more reinforcing than the good attention that happens occasionally. Or maybe it got him out of the classroom and the activities there. So it might have reinforced it by escape.

14:22

Our traditional consequences to challenging behavior often depend on two primary principles that may not hold true for our students. They are, we assume if we're following those, that our students are reinforced or punished by the good or bad impression that others have of them. For some of our students, they have difficulty understanding what these impressions are, because they have difficulty thinking about others' perspectives of them. For others, the peer acceptance or the escaping from work may override how much they care about what the adults think. So it may be a situation where we think that our approval is important and reinforcing for them. But it

actually isn't.

15:08

The second principle that our traditional consequences are based on is that the student can problem solve what ended up ending him up in that situation in the principal's office or being suspended. And what he should have done instead, to avoid that. Many of our students are really not good problem solvers. And while they may understand, even if they understand what behavior got them to the punishment, they may not know what to do. Instead, they may not know what the appropriate behavior is, which goes back to number 1 that we have to teach that. Very similar to if you've ever driven somewhere and you got lost, and you found your way to where you needed to go. You realize that you didn't really know how to get to the end result without going through your little, what my aunt used to call, the scenic route.

16:03

And number 7, is that function trumps form. Given that we need to make sure that we're finding the function of the behavior and crafting our interventions based on those functions, we need to be less concerned about the form of the behavior like spitting, than we are about the function or the purpose of the behavior to get a reaction to escape from something. There's no answer for the question, What do I do about biting? or What should I do about spitting? There are answers to the question, What do I do about a student whose behavior functions to get a huge reaction from the people around him? Or how do I address the behavior that results in a student getting out of the task or situation that he is in at the time? That's why when anybody asks me, "What do I do about biting?" My question always has to be, "I don't know, why is he doing it?"

16:59

So a lot of information for one podcast episode. So let's just review what those seven things were. Number 1, appropriate behavior must be taught. Number 2, we need to separate the behavior from the student; the student isn't bad, we need to change their behavior. Number 3, challenging behavior doesn't occur in a vacuum. And the changes that we're going to make to the student's behavior is going to happen from changing his environment. Number 4, behavior has a function or purpose for the student. So just getting rid of the behavior doesn't solve our problem, because the function is still there. And I guarantee you that another behavior will pop up in its place to serve that function if we don't address that underlying problem. Very much like if I throw penicillin at a virus, it's not going to help. Challenging, number 5, challenging behavior functions are directly related to skill deficits. Challenging behavior functions happen because the behavior gets what that person needs more quickly, more easily, and more consistently, also known as more efficiently. Number 6, given that behavior serves a function, we should base our treatments

on that function, not just a blanket treatment.

18:24

And finally, number 7, function trumps form. We need to know the function more than we need to know the form of behavior. Multiple forms of behavior might serve the same function. I may scream, fall on the ground and bite people all to get people to attend to me. So I might respond to those behaviors in the same way, even though there are three different forms of behavior.

18:49

So when we can do all of those things, then we start really looking at what are we doing with a functional behavior assessment, and developing our behavior plans. We'll talk over the next few episodes about ways that we can do that and ways that we can change these behaviors in our classrooms in a way that makes sense, that takes a team approach, and that we can do it in a way that is doable for our students.

19:17

Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to today's episode on challenging behavior. I'll be back next week, talking some more about challenging behavior, and specifically how we figure out what some of those functions are. In the meantime, if you want to get a jump on addressing challenging behavior, check out the free webinar on preventing challenging behavior in the classroom. It will help you find ways to set up successful systems for promoting positive behavior in your classroom. And there's even a free bonus at the end of the video too with tools to help you. I'll put a link in the show notes or you can go to autismclassroomresources.com/episode6 and they'll be a great big visual that you can click on and sign up for the free resource library as well as the webinar itself. Thank you again for taking time to listen. I would love for you to subscribe and leave a review on iTunes if you are enjoying the podcast or if you have suggestions. I hope to see you again next week.