

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.

Welcome back to episode 11 of the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. I'm your host Chris Reeve and today I want to talk about setting events as a factor we need to assess for in our functional assessment. If you've been following along then you know we've been doing a series on functional assessments and we'll be moving into behavioral support, but before we get into what do we do with the data we took in episode 10? I want to just make you aware of one more element that's kind of sneaky but can powerfully impact our students' behavior and that is that of setting events. This episode is brought to you by the Special Educator Academy. As this episode was pulled in part from one of our biweekly Academy show podcasts. One of the great things about the Academy is that when I do a podcast like this, I can link them directly to online resources for assessing behavior and learning about doing FBAs and addressing behaviors in our behavioral problem solving courses, workshop videos and resources, and if they want more information or feedback about how to apply this in their classroom, I'm in the community multiple times a day to answer questions and support them. It's really an amazing place with some amazing special educators. Try it out for free for seven days on us and see if it's a good fit for you. Find out more@specialeducatoracademy.com

So let me start our discussion about setting events with a story. I worked in high school with a high school student with a number of medical issues as well as autism and she had really significant behavior that the FBA showed as being almost totally escape related. One of demand was placed on her. She would react by pulling hair, punching and scratching. And she was in high school so she was big enough and strong enough to cause some really significant injuries and she had done so. I spent a good bit of time with the student and when we started she was exhibiting challenging behavior for almost every 15 minutes segment of her day except lunch. Now, that didn't mean she was engaging in challenging behavior constantly, but she was exhibiting at least one episode of challenging behavior within each 15 minute interval. We worked with her over a number of weeks with a variety of strategies and the challenging behaviors significantly reduced.

After a few months, we'd actually reduced it to occurring in only five or fewer intervals of the day and in those same number of intervals, she was taking a three minute break from

work and then going back to work. And of course as is the want of behavior. Just when everything was going well. I went up to visit and the teacher was upset because the student's behavior had flared up again. And she was back to having challenging behavior and asking for a break repeatedly throughout the day. But mostly it was the increase in the challenging behavior that was concerning. This was a really sudden shift and of course her staff was feeling really frustrated and felt like they had to push through the problems and there was this real desire to, you know, just let's just push through. We can get it. We had her, we had it going.

So I went into her classroom to see her. And immediately when I looked at her, I knew there was something wrong with her, physically wrong with her. She just didn't look right. Her eyes were glassy. She was hitting herself more than she was hitting other people. And it probably would have been really hard for the classroom staff to see that, not just because they felt like she was making such progress, but also because they saw her every day. And I only saw her periodically so I had more of a distance. That made it a little bit easier to see that there was something else going on here other than the behavior and then realizing that that there seemed to be something physically wrong with her. I told the staff that we were going to back off for the day and talk to mom at our meeting that we typically have when I was in the school for a variety of reasons.

The staff was really concerned about that but it turned out to be no reason for concern because mom walked into the meeting and said, "I think there's something wrong with her. I think she may have an ulcer or something like that." And mom took her to the doctor and it turned out that every single one of her medicines and she had quite a few, was at the wrong level in her blood. And so as a team we talked and we decided to back off. We gave her more breaks and then we got her medicine straight down and she went back to being back on track. Her medicine being out of whack, which is my very medical, technical, behavioral term for it. For this purpose was the setting event. It didn't mean that the trigger would definitely set the behavior off. They didn't set the behavior off on its own, but it did mean that it was a whole lot more likely that the trigger being asked to do work or any kind of demand was going to set it off.

And so it explains why she had been doing so well in the behavior and suddenly it just deteriorated. She no longer was using the skills and asking her to work with setting her off in a way it hadn't in the past month or so, there was something physically wrong with her and she was nonverbal. So I still don't know exactly what it was that she was feeling or experiencing, made it more likely that she would respond to demands with aggression rather than asking for a break and accepting, doing a little bit of work before she got it. And she

was able to do that before medication got all messed up and yes, in episode 10, I did tell you to just take data on the things that you can see and I recognize that some setting events are not things that you can actually observe, but when you see sudden changes in an individual, one of the first things that you want to think about is is there an illness involved?

Is there a medical issue going on? And setting events, even though we can't often see them in the moment that the behavior occurs, they are usually still something that we can observe and test for their relationship to challenging behavior. So we can collect data on a sleep log or take their temperature or give them Tylenol and see if it gets better. They're just not always apparent at the time that the behavior is happening. Now, sometimes setting events are the things that make the behavior happen sometimes, but not others when they have an antecedent. So for instance, I have a headache. I'm much more likely to refuse a work task that somebody gives me than if I feel fine. Days with a headache. Somebody asked me to do something, I might have problem behavior of refusing to do my work. Days that I don't have a headache and someone asked me to do something.

I do it with no problem. So they don't make the behavior happen, they just make it more likely when the trigger is presented. And it's important to recognize that we've got some literature in the research about setting events that include looking at things like there's a research study that looked at women's menstrual cycles and its impact on challenging behavior and found that that the uncomfortableness and, and the things going on could be a setting event. And when they treated it with different types of pain relievers and different kinds of things, they could actually change the the likelihood of the behavior. We've also looked at things like there's some research on mood not being a good mood not working with the preferred person that you like. Those are the kinds of things that can also serve as setting events. And we've been able to show reliably that they occur.

So I often run into situations where teachers tell me that there's no innocent to the behavior because it doesn't trigger the challenging behavior reliably. So the thought is what can't be that because it hasn't done it every time. Setting events are actually one of the reasons for that inconsistency. Have you ever had a student who exhibited challenging behavior during work time some days, but would then do the exact same work another day with no problem? Or have you ever had a student who gets off the bus and you look at his face and you realize it's going to be a really rough day? Setting events are probably the reason for some of the inconsistencies that we see with our students' behavior. So what are setting events? Setting events are simply events that typically occur in the more distant past than the antecedent that you saw just before the behavior.

They are usually more global types of events, like lack of sleep, illness, pain. They could also be something like, I had a fight with somebody that day before I came to school. I'm missing my favorite toy medication, those kinds of things. And they make the antecedent more likely to trigger the challenging behavior that it might be if the setting event hadn't been there that day. They don't cause the challenging behavior, but they make it more likely. I tend to think of them like a cloud that rains on the connection between the immediate antecedent and the challenging behavior. They're just kind of this rain cloud that hangs over the whole interaction. So let's take a couple of examples. This morning my coffee maker was broken and I didn't get to drink my coffee before working on the computer. When I started working on the computer, it started doing really weird things like freezing when I was working on a video.

Now on most days I just reboot the computer and try again and I just keep doing this until it gets done. But today I was really irritated with it. I didn't feel like waiting for it to reboot and I kept trying to make it work and there may have been some cursing involved. I didn't actually hurt the computers, so there was no aggression. On most days, I accept that if I want my old computer to do video, I'm going to have to reboot it. But without having my coffee, it just wasn't going to happen without some challenging behavior. A classroom example wouldn't be a student I worked with a number of years ago and in a true collaboration of his behavioral team, we discovered that if he had a good morning, he had a good afternoon. But if we saw some minor problems in the morning, like whining and crying, we saw much more severe behaviors in the afternoon and we began to run some days to try to figure out how to make his morning better.

So once we discovered this connection, we really brainstormed on some ways that we could make it more palatable for him. And this was a kid who, who really liked to be in control of situations and tell people what to do. He wanted to be the one his, his behavior would drive the behavior of those around him. So we set up his morning so that he had lots of choices in the morning routine and the teacher decided it didn't matter whether he signed in, did his journal or did table tasks first as long as he got all three done. And if we had a great morning, we didn't have any severe self-injury in the afternoon. And through collaboration with the team and some really careful analysis, we realized that connection, having a rough morning, even though we didn't necessarily know what caused it was an indicator of a rough afternoon, but if we made the morning better, it made it better in the long run, it made it a better afternoon.

Another example is a student who had difficulty sleeping through the night when he sleeps through the night and he's rested. We realized we had very few problem behaviors when we

asked him to do work. When he got up in the middle of the night, we got a good bit of aggression and self-injury at school when we placed demands on him. In order to figure this out, we had his mom keep a sleep log for us. So this is one of the ways that you can get your data to correlate with your behavior or see if there's a correlation. We actually found it was a bit more subtle and that the behaviors were actually more likely to happen in the second or third day after he hadn't slept through the night rather than the first. So in order to address it, we continued to have his mom keep asleep log so that we would know where he was in his sleep cycle.

And then we did a combination of modifying his day by giving him maintenance demands, not new material, on poor sleep days and an opportunity to nap for a little while during the day. And we referred his parents to a sleep specialist to try to get his sleep more consistent because let there be no misunderstanding. If parents could get their kids to sleep better, they would've done it already. It's not fun for them either. So sometimes we need the help of a sleep specialist to help us get the student back on a regular schedule. And I don't advocate for having naps in the classroom for long periods of time, but for short, time-limited periods where we know that we're going to get onboard with his sleep schedule. I think it was a way to address and prevent the behaviors from happening. So this in combination with some other strategies like teaching him to ask for a break when demands were placed on him work to reduce his challenges.

Let's talk for a minute about what setting events are not. Setting events, first of all, have nothing to do with the setting. We call them setting events because they set the occasion for challenging behavior to be a response to an antecedent. They make it more likely and they often happen in a setting outside of the place where the challenging behavior occurs. So when I say setting events, people tend to think it's something about the setting. It's not, it's setting the occasion for more problems. So it's setting him up. Think of it as setting him up to have more issues to setting events or not antecedents to behavior. That is, they don't occur just before the challenging behavior occurs and they don't set it off. Those are antecedents. Those might be called triggers, but setting events do increase the likelihood that an antecedent will trigger a challenging behavior.

Three setting events are not a reason to blame other settings or people for behaviors. Just because Dontel has more problems at school when he has a rough morning at home is not a reason to determine that the cause of the problem behavior is his family or his home life. Sleep as a setting event is a good example. We have many of our students in special education have difficulty with sleep and it affects their behavior. And again, if parents could fix that, they would've done it. A getting help to reset the sleep schedule and making

modifications to decrease the impact of that lack of sleep is going to be much more productive than playing a blame game. So the blame game isn't gonna help you. It's not going to be something you're going to be able to change. So you've got to figure out a way around it.

That's, that's my whole concept in problem solving, which we'll talk about when we get to behavior plans, is that there's more than one solution for every problem. We just have to find it. Setting events next are typically not something that you can eliminate. Now sleep, if you go to a sleep clinic and get back on a regular schedule, maybe illness, I can't control it. Maybe we can address it. Allergies, I can give a medication that'll make it better, but I can't cure their allergies. So we can't eliminate them many times and so we have to find a way to accommodate for them to lessen their impact on the behavior. So how do we assess for them? Setting events are usually pretty global factors and we can't always really pinpoint them like we did for the sleep above. But there are some common ones to look for and some ways to try to gather information that might indicate a relationship.

If you see inconsistent behavior over time. First on the data sheet that I shared in the last episode. If you haven't gotten it already, go to autismclassroomresources.com/episode10 I included a section in that worksheet, in that data sheet for staff to indicate that there was anything going on in the day that might affect their behavior and I listed some common setting events that allows you to track the behavior in relation to those things. Some of them may be things that you've observed, some of them may be things that you have observed from his behavior. Next, if you suspect a setting event might be involved in a behavior, take a log of it or have the family or the classroom take a log that you can then compare with your ABC data frequency to see if there's relationship.

You can also ask people what the setting events might be. Often you will get this kind of information in interviews and it is one of the pros of doing interviews with staff and with families, but there are also some setting event checklists and some indirect assessment tools that can get at some of those more pervasive and global types of issues. And I will link to them on the blog post with this episode. So check them out at autismclassroomresources.com/episode11 only data will really tell you if there's a relationship between setting events and challenging behavior. When I talk about developing behavioral support plans, I will address how we can accommodate them to lessen their impact on behavior if we can't eliminate them in much more detail. But until then if you have questions or comments or setting events that you've observed, hop over to the free Facebook group at [specialeducatorsconnection.com](https://www.facebook.com/specialeducatorsconnection) and share those with us. We would love to hear them. And if you enjoyed learning more about setting events, you may want to give the special educator

Academy a try with our seven day free trial and you can find more information about the special educator academy at specialeducatoracademy.com so I hope to see you in our Facebook group and possibly in the Academy. Thank you so much for spending this time with me. I hope to see you again in our next episode.