

Autism Classroom Resources Podcast

Episode 8 functions of behavior and steps in FBAs

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

behavior, functions, challenging behavior, students, avoid, escape, reinforced, gain, important, teacher, serve, classroom, reaction, scream, sensory stimulation, attention, situation, talk, hypotheses, observe

SPEAKERS

Christine Reeve

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

And welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. This is Chris Reeve. And we have been talking about challenging behavior and behavioral support in the last couple weeks. And so I really want to move us forward to talking about what do we do when we have challenging behaviors that are not addressed through our general classroom management strategies. So today, we're going to start getting into some of the nitty gritty about the functions of behavior, and the steps of doing a functional behavior assessment. So let's get started.

01:18

I've talked in the past couple episodes about the importance of function over form, that knowing

why the behavior happens is more important than what the behavior is. So let's start by talking about what those functions of behavior are.

01:31

The easiest way to talk about the functions of behavior are that they happen to get or attain something, or they happen to avoid or escape from something. I think that's one of the easiest ways to look at it. And the most comprehensive way is to really describe what are they trying to obtain? What are they trying to escape from, and be more specific. A one word function like attention or attention seeking probably isn't as specific as saying, Jim Pope Joe, because it got a big reaction from his environment, which is how we described Joe screamed and ran to the teacher, the teacher came over and reprimanded Jim, the whole classroom stopped what they were doing to watch what was going on. So rather than just saying, well, I got attention, that doesn't really describe that.

02:29

And sometimes the same form of behavior may serve to both get something and get away from something. So for instance, I may engage in some kind of challenging behavior to get you to stop giving me work, while also getting to you to attend to me by reprimanding me for not doing my work. So knowing what's being gained or escaped will be the most helpful. And we'll talk a lot about this when I talk about developing your hypotheses about why the behavior is occurring.

03:03

But you can gain or escape from lots of different situations, you can get attention or reaction. So sometimes it is positive reaction attention. Sometimes it's just wow, that had a big effect on my environment. So don't think that gaining attention means getting somebody praising you; it could be getting somebody yelling at you. It could be getting an item like a cookie, or candy or a particular activity that I really like. It could be getting some kind of reinforcement. If you've ever heard of a runner's high, the serotonin that is released, I think it's serotonin, in the bloodstream based on exercise sometimes serves, is hypothesized to serve as an automatic reinforcer that maintains that running behavior. It may also be to gain sensory stimulation. So I want to be colder or hotter. I used to have a kid who took off his clothes. Guess why? His room was really hot. So he was gaining some kind of sensory stimulation called I want to be cooler.

04:09

And similarly, we can avoid /escape things. We can avoid and escape work, which I think is the most common thing we think of. But we might also do something to avoid sensory overload, or a

social situation. I don't like to talk to people and therefore, I engage in this behavior right before recess, or lunchtime when we have lunch bunch, and I'm supposed to talk to other people, so that I don't have to go.

04:34

It can be avoiding a transition. Change is sometimes hard for some of our students. It could also be avoiding some kind of sensory stimulation. I really don't like to eat coconut. I like the taste of coconut; I don't like the texture of coconut. Consequently, I will avoid things that have coconut in them. Now, I generally don't have a tantrum if you try to make me eat them. But I'm generally not going to eat them either. I'm going to avoid them in a socially appropriate way.

05:04

So it's also important to recognize that things don't always serve just one function. Many of our students have a long history of behavior. And that often results in behaviors serving multiple functions, and having multiple things going on. One of the things that we know most from all of our research on challenging behavior is that human behavior is not simplistic. So keep that in mind. As we talk about it, I'm going to simplify some concepts. And it's going to make it sound more simple than it really is. It is very important to recognize that the functions are serving the same thing that appropriate behavior serve for us, for the rest of us; many times it is communication. So many times it is asking for something instead of tantrumming; or saying I don't want to do this, instead of having an escape related behavior.

05:57

These functions are not things like he did it to get back at someone, or he did it because he was mad. I can't observe mad and I can't observe revenge, because they're in somebody's head. They're not observable behaviors. But I can observe engaging in negative behavior that results in a big reaction from the environment.

06:19

Now, I am not in any way saying that emotions and thoughts don't play a role in behavior. They certainly do. But we don't know what they are. Unless our person, our student, tells us and even then, they may not be an accurate reporter, or they may not be telling us the truth. And so similarly, we want to make sure that we are sticking to focusing on just the things that we observe. Oftentimes, our students don't know the function either. The last time you asked a student why he did something, chances are pretty good, he said, I don't know. And it's not that he's being evasive, he actually may not know. If he did know the answer he gives us may or may not be accurate. So

we base the functions about what's being gained or what's being avoided or escaped from based on the data that we take.

07:16

Now, we often talk about the four functions of challenging behavior, but they all fall into the I get something or I get something away from something. We get attention. Attention seeking behavior serves to gain attention of a person or reaction from the environment. It's important to recognize that even though we are usually reinforced by somebody praising you, or giving us positive attention, for student whose challenging behavior gains attention, the attention may not be what we think of as being positive, which is why I sometimes refer to it as a reaction. Because it may mean that somebody reprimanded them or someone scolded them. The key is that behavior is more consistent getting any kind of attention positive or negative than more appropriate behaviors, so the person has more control over it.

08:09

So some examples, Bill steals Sally's books; Sally screams and yells for the teacher to come over. And the teacher then reprimands Bill and makes him give them back. That gets a big reaction from the environment.

08:23

When Darnell hits the teacher when she's talking to the principal in the doorway, and she turns around and tells him to stop, or punishes him by holding him up as an example to the class, the type of attention is not as relevant as understanding the common reaction of the environment to the behavior.

08:42

And that's going to become very important. And it really feeds into this idea that there is no one-word function that tells us what we need to know. The more descriptive we can be about the situations, the better we're going to be able to come up with solutions. Because if it was just attention, it would be like well, I praise them all the time why am I having these behaviors? Well, because having it be reliably reinforced is what's important. And we'll talk more about that in the future as well.

09:10

Next up in our functions, our students can engage in challenging behavior, because they're

reinforced by getting a desired activity or item. And that might occur when the items are in sight, but it's not available, or it might be something that's already been denied to him. So a teenager wants to go to the mall and mom says no. And you might see challenging behavior, like sulking, refusing to do his chores, until sometimes his mom just get so frustrated with him that she lets him go to the mall. And so over time, this behavior just increases and continues.

09:46

It might be a situation where I'm standing in the kitchen and I start to scream. Mom gets stuff out of the cabinet and starts offering it to me. And when she gives me a cookie, I stop screaming. So in the future when I'm in the kitchen, and I scream, mom's more likely to give me the cookie, because it got me to stop screaming. So it actually served as an escape for her. And we'll talk about that as well.

10:10

Leslie's music class ends and she falls on the floor and starts to scream. The teacher tries to move her but she gets more and more upset. And the teacher then allows her to stay in music for the next class because it calms her. But in reality, what it is, is that that behavior is followed by being able to remain in the activity that she likes. So keep in mind as well, that when we're looking at these things, and we'll talk more about this, when we talk about data collection, the consequence of getting the item or escaping from the them, doesn't have to be consistent. It doesn't have to have to happen every single time, it just has to happen enough that it out ways the times that it doesn't.

10:56

Another function of behavior is escaping or avoiding things. That means that the reinforcement is coming from something going away, I buckle my seatbelt in the car because it keeps that nasty buzzer from going off, which I find really irritating. So in this case, my appropriate behavior is being reinforced by escaping a sensory situation. I don't like that noise.

11:22

A student falls on the ground and tantrums before morning meeting and the tantrum continues until morning meeting is over. So essentially, he avoided the morning meeting. So it actually started before the activity he wanted to escape from happen because he learned, Oh, I can avoid the whole thing by starting this behavior earlier.

11:43

And another example would be Sally sitting in a general ed classroom during music and she starts to scream at her behavior becomes so disruptive that the teacher removes her from class. Now are the situations in which you may have to remove the student? Absolutely. Are there ways that we can put the odds in our favor so that we don't reinforce the behavior as much as we do as replacement behaviors. Yes. And we will talk about that later in the series.

12:12

Now, it's important to recognize that again, behavior is not simple. It is pretty complex. So what that means is that these examples are simple, but rarely does it look that way in our actual classrooms. And so the more information that we have, the better.

12:35

So the third area that we often think of with reinforcement is called automatic reinforcement. And this is often referred to as sensory reinforcement. But I avoid calling it that because I find it confusing. It doesn't imply that the behavior involves sensory input. So one of the things that would happen whenever I would ask trainees or graduate students about behaviors, if the behavior involves putting fingers in their mouth, they would say there's a sensory component. Instead, it means that the students behavior is reinforced by a reaction in his or her own body. So this is the one area where it's really harder to see what's being gained or avoided. Because they're getting or avoiding some sort of internal stimulation. We generally will make this determination because the behavior is occurring when they're left alone. And there's nothing else in their environment or no one else to interact with.

13:33

For many students with autism, in particular, the behaviors may serve to get or avoid some kind of internal stimulation. So for instance, if I have an ear infection, there is some research that indicates that hitting my head may provide a temporary relief from ear pain. And there's some evidence that toddlers will engage in this behavior when they have ear infections. And that if they do gain the communication skills to let somebody know about that, then they'll continue that behavior.

14:07

I may start to tap my pencil in a difficult situation, because it may have a calming effect on me. Or when we leave Bobby alone with nothing to do, he sits in the corner and rocks. So it's

important to remember that automatic reinforcement is determined by observing that the behavior happens when no one else is around. There's no materials or nothing to do. We don't decide that it's an internal automatic function, just because we don't see any other functions. Just because we can't find a function does not necessarily mean it's automatic. So we do need to test that out. And we'll talk more about that, because I'll break all of these down in terms of what we're looking for in data as we go through this series.

14:55

So you can see from these types of functions, that the biggest issue in a functional assessment is going to be trying to figure out what that function is. And so when I do training in behavioral what I call Behavioral ProblemSolving, where we're trying to figure out what's going on and how to address it. I generally refer to five steps, and I'm going to go through them briefly here. And then we're going to start in on step number 2 next time.

15:24

Step number 1 is defining and prioritizing our behaviors. Not shockingly, many of our students show more than one challenging behavior. And so we need to figure out which ones were going to focus on more. Is it more important to focus on the aggression, or that he keeps taking his shoes off? Now, I'm going to say aggression, that would be me. So once we've defined the behavior, we have to make sure that we're defining it well enough, that when we're assessing it and taking data on it, we're all talking about the same thing. So our first step is to define and prioritize which behaviors we're going to address first.

16:03

Step 2 is to gather that information. That's our data collection; it's the heart and soul of what we're trying to do. And how accurate the information is that you gather determines whether or not your behavior support plan is going to be effective. Because if you start with bad information, we don't get a good result. So it's a huge, huge piece of what we're trying to do. And there are many different ways that we can gather information from the environment. I'm going to focus primarily on taking antecedent behavior, consequence data. But we will also talk a little bit about using interviews and checklists that shouldn't be used by themselves, but could be part of the process. And we also need to think about having background information, what do we know about the student from before he came to us, maybe we find things. So many times I go into a situation and find out that, oh, he used to have a schedule, but we took it away from him because we didn't think you needed it anymore. And amazingly, when I put the schedule back in place, we stopped seeing as many problems. So knowing what's worked in the past can be a big piece of that as well. So we'll talk about the methods for gathering information in our next episode.

17:16

Once we have our information gathered, we're going to develop our hypotheses. And these are our best guesses about the function of the behavior, we don't really know if they're the function until we test them out. But we want to make sure that we are being very clear in why we think that behavior is happening. This is where we start to put together the supposed function of the behavior based on our data. And that then leads us to develop our behavior support plan. And I will share a system with you that I use to create my hypotheses in Step 3, that lead directly into developing your behavioral support plan in Step 4, because those two things must be aligned.

18:02

And then once we have the behavior plan in place, we need to make sure that we are implementing it with fidelity, because we want to make sure the behavior plan that we've written is actually being implemented, or it doesn't do us any good. And that we're monitoring it to see if it's effective. And that's particularly important with behavior. Because so many times we put a plan in place, and suddenly the behavior doesn't seem that bad anymore. So many times I'll ask a teacher after I've written a behavior plan with the team, and I'll say How's it going, Oh, it's so much better. And I'll go in and I'll take some data. And the behavior will be exactly where it was before or maybe gotten worse. The difference is that the teacher's perception of it is less problematic, because she has a plan in place for what she's going to do. So it's not as disturbing to the staff as it used to be because now they know what to do. It had no effect on the actual behavior at all. So then we have to go back to the drawing board, look at our functions and look at our plan and see what's working and what's not.

19:13

That lays out our next number of episodes. Over the next month or so, we will continue talking about challenging behavior. We will continue talking about the importance of the functions and how we figure that out. And hopefully by the end, you will have the tools you need to be able to start thinking about classroom behaviors in a way that leads you to making good decisions about addressing them.

19:37

Thank you so much for listening. I appreciate you being here and taking the time. I hope that this has given you some things to think about in terms of some of the behaviors you're seeing in your classroom. I'd love to hear more about them if you want to hop over to our free Facebook group at [specialeducatorsconnection.com](https://www.facebook.com/specialeducatorsconnection).

19:57

You can also find a wide variety of resources courses for dealing with behavior and looking at functions, as well as the link to the Facebook group at autismclassroomresources.com/episode8. Thank you so much and I hope you'll be back again next week.