Autism Classroom Resources Podcast
Episode 15 Transcript
November 24, 2019

Welcome to Episode 15 of the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I am Chris Reeve and today we are talking about replacement behaviors for challenging behavior. If you tuned in to Episode 13, we talked about developing behavior support plans that address the behavior. Throughout this whole series of the 5 Steps of Behavioral Problem Solving, we've been talking about the function of the challenging behavior and how we develop that. And in this episode I'll be talking specifically about adding in the appropriate replacement behaviors. I'm going to talk about what replacement behaviors are….because interestingly they aren't just the opposite of the challenging behavior you assessed.

Step 4 of the 5 Steps of Behavioral Problem Solving focuses on the behavior plan. And in the second focus of strategies, we are looking at skills we need to teach. Now that section is specifically divided up into 2 parts. One is the replacement behaviors and one are other skills we need to teach.

That's an important distinction because replacement behaviors are very specific behaviors we choose because they are appropriate and serve the same function as the challenging behavior. Other skills we need to teach might include behaviors that are incompatible with the challenging behavior (e.g., staying in your seat instead of wandering). They might include increasing positive behaviors in general to reduce challenging behaviors.

I'll talk about the other behaviors in our next episode. In this episode I'm going to talk specifically about the replacement behaviors that we need to teach as part of every behavior plan. I'll outline specifically what "replacement" mans and then I'll give you some examples based on results from FBAs.

In this episode I'm talking about what the replacement behaviors are and how they relate to your FBA. If you are looking for ideas on HOW to teach the replacement behaviors or more information about functional communication training, I encourage you to check out the Special Educator Academy. We have a workshop with demonstrations to walk you through the steps of teaching students

appropriate communication strategies that will replace challenging behaviors like the ones I describe in this episode. In addition, we have a whole course on Behavioral Problem Solving with more information about how to actually implement it in your classroom and I'm there in the community to answer questions and problem solve as well. Just go to Specialeducatoracademy.com to get a 7-day free trial to find out more.

What Are Replacement Behaviors?

A replacement behavior is an appropriate skill that is maintained by the same consequences as the challenging behavior. The point is that by serving the same function as the challenging behavior, the appropriate skill can be used to get the same need met in a more appropriate way. An example would be teaching a student whose behavior is determined by the FBA to serve to gain reaction or attention from his peers to tell jokes to get that same reaction.

Why Are Replacement Skills Important?

Research indicates that replacement behaviors are the way to create sustainable changes in behavior that generalize across settings. Remember in episode 8 where I talked about the functions of behavior. Those functions are an indication of something the individual wants or needs. Replacement behaviors are important because they help the individual meet that need in a more appropriate way.

Can we decrease the behavior without a replacement behavior? Sure, many times we can. However, it's likely that the behavior will return unless we've met the need of the underlying function. For example, if a student engages in picking at his skin on his hand when he is faced with difficult situations, the function of the behavior may have been determined by the FBA to be negative automatic reinforcement through relieving anxiety. We can block the behavior and punish it by removing tokens from his token board or some other response cost to decrease the behavior. However, while that behavior may decrease, another behavior may pop up that provides the automatic reinforcement of relieving the anxiety if we don't address the need for that reinforcement. So, we need to think about a relaxation strategy or a way to access that automatic reinforcement in order to truly make a difference for the

individual.

What Characteristic Is The Most Important In Choosing A Replacement Behavior?

Real estate has the mantra: Location. Location. Location. Behavioral support has the mantra: Function. Function. Function. The most important element when choosing a replacement skill is that it serves the same function that the challenging behavior serves based on the results of the FBA. That's one of the reasons that the more details you have in your hypotheses statements, the easier it will be to choose effective replacement skills. We have research that indicates that teaching a communication skills that is not related to challenging behaviors does not reduce the behavior. For instance, teaching students to ask call someone's name to gain their attention when hitting the adult serves to escape from a situation does not reduce the hitting because it doesn't serve the same function (Carr & Durand, 1985). So, whether our replacement behaviors results in a reduction of challenging behavior is truly our verify phase of the functional assessment that I talked about in episode 8.

What Else Do We Need To Think About?

Research indicates that the other element that is important in choosing a replacement behavior is efficiency. The replacement behavior needs to be more efficient than the challenging behavior at accessing the reinforcer.

There are generally 3 elements that make up efficiency. The replacement behavior has to get the reinforcer (e.g., attention, escape, automatic reinforcement) faster, easier, and more reliably. We can accomplish efficiency of the replacement behavior through the choices we make about the form of behavior we decide to teach as well as about differentiating our response to them (e.g., delay reinforcement for the challenging behavior while reinforcing each instance of the replacement behavior immediately and every time). We can change the efficiency by changing the characteristics of the behavior itself as well as our responses to the challenging behavior and the replacement behavior.

Faster: it has to get help, escape, attention, internal reinforcement more quickly than the challenging behavior. So, if hitting the teacher gets the student out of work immediately but asking for a break requires the student to do 2 more problems, then it is less efficient than the behavior and won't replace it.

Easier: The replacement behavior needs to be easier for the individual to implement than the challenging behavior. If it's easier to hit you than to find a communication device, look through it to find the right vocabulary, and then hit the button to tell you I want to talk to you, then hitting is going to prevail. Whatever the replacement behavior is, it has to be over learned, within the individual's repertoire, and easy to access. Consequently when we get to teaching the replacement behavior we need to make sure that we are setting aside time to explicitly teach the skill. This isn't typically a skill that the student can do easily without lots and lots of practice.

More Reliable: The replacement behavior has to get reinforcement more frequently and more consistently than the challenging behavior. We can accomplish this in two ways. To do this, we need to make sure that the replacement behavior form we choose is something that is easily understood and will get the needed response in most situations. If I'm teaching sign language to ask for attention and the student's sign is idiosyncratic and not easily understood by others, then it's not going to be terribly reliable because it won't be understood and reinforced across environments. And consequently it will fail at changing the behavior.

Replacement Behaviors By Function Of Behavior

So, let's talk for a minute about examples of what replacement behaviors might look like for specific functions of behavior.

Attention: We'll start with behavior that gains attention from adults. Let's say our hypothesis statement tells us that when this student has starts throwing materials when an adult is attending to another student and stops when the adult attends to him. Our replacement behavior would need to be something that gets the adult to attend to him quickly and easily. It might be raising his hand--or something even more efficient, having him call her name. Once he's mastered that

and the behavior has reduced, then we can start teaching him how to wait.

Escape: What about a student whose behavior serves to escape from whole group activities. When he sits down in a whole group he falls out of his chair and eventually runs away. A replacement behavior would need to serve the same function--so remember that the replacement behavior has to teach him to get out of the whole group appropriately. In this case, we might teach him to ask for a break. Or we could have him say, "Excuse me." and remove himself. This often seems counterintuitive in a classroom because our purpose is to keep students engaged in instruction. However, sometimes it's beneficial to step back and get a handle on the behavior and then start to slowly increase or embed demands that he stay in the group longer. This way you are teaching him to get his need met in a more appropriate way (and really he's missing most of whole group anyway because he keeps running away).

Tangible: Finally, if our function of behavior is to get a tangible item or activity, we could teach the student how to ask for the item. If he is already able to ask for the item, then we might need to teach him to wait. While waiting isn't really a replacement behavior (it's incompatible with the function) but we might start by reinforcing him with the item each time he asks for it and gradually fade waiting in.

When Might You Not Have A Replacement Skill In A Behavior Support Plan?

Finally, there will be times when we can't figure out what a good replacement behavior would be. One of the primary times for this is when there is an automatic reinforcer that we can't easily identify what the actual reinforcer is. For instance, if you work with a student who pulls out her hair and the FBA indicates that it functions to gain automatic reinforcement, our replacement behavior would need to elicit that same reinforcement. If that reinforcement seems to be related to anxiety, we might be able to teach some relaxation strategies to reduce the anxiety. However, if it isn't that type of behavior and appears to be reinforced by the sensation of pulling out her hair, then figuring out a replacement for that is much more difficult. In that case, we might have to increase other behaviors to keep her hands busy and engaged which might compete with the hair pulling. It doesn't replace it, it just substitutes for it and requires making sure that the

environment is always set up to keep her hands engaged.