

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

Christine Reeve: 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 the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I'm Christine Reeve and I'm your host. We are talking about challenging behavior because, well, it's always a good time to talk about challenging behavior, I guess. In this episode, I'm going to talk about how we respond to challenging behavior. I've written a number of posts about this in the past and I did a pretty extensive podcast episode on it in Episode 18. You can find that at autismclassroomresources.com/episode18. But in today's episode, I want to focus more generally on how we think about our responsive strategies in behavioral support in a real life context. I've been in a lot of situations where the theoretical ABA response that the data may say is appropriate is just not what is going to work in the classroom or in real life. The context of where the behavior is occurring is just as important as the science of the behavior. Let me just share a story to start us off.

Let's talk about Jeremy who is a middle school student, whose teacher requested behavioral support to address his running out of the classroom and out of the building and into the road. When the team completed the FBA, it became really apparent that Jeremy's running away was functioning to get the reaction of people chasing him, calling to him, and physically intervening with him to keep him out of the road, you know, to keep him safe. Jeremy didn't have great skills getting attention appropriately like calling the teacher's name or raising his hand. But even more importantly, none of his appropriate skills came close to the level of reaction that he gets when he took off running and two or three staff started chasing him.

A simplistic behavioral approach to that kind of behavioral assessment would be you just need to ignore Jeremy's running behavior, because clearly, it's gaining attention, to extinguish the attention that it receives and the behavior will eventually disappear, except, no. I don't think that's going to work in this case because you know, safety. You can't just let Jeremy run away out into the street because that's ridiculous. Jeremy's behavior is a classic example of a behavior that you can't just ignore. If we only used consequence-based approaches—which we shouldn't—then we'd be stuck. Luckily, behavioral support and ABA broadly give us more tools than just that. That's the type of issue that I want to talk about today. Let's get started.

Thinking about Jeremy, there are three elements that we want to strive for within our behavior support plans in order for them to be successful. Now when I'm talking about these three elements, I'm not talking about technical elements, I'm not talking about behavioral elements, I am talking about three contextual elements that we really need to make sure that we are focusing on. Number one is safety. Obviously, safety is the most critical element that we have to focus on. We need to make sure that the student is safe and we need to make sure that those around them are safe. This might take the form of physically blocking Jeremy from leaving the room or running into the street. It might take the form of talking to another student about feelings

of potential suicide or feelings of wanting to hurt somebody else. It might take the form of talking to families about crisis management. Many of us don't want to have those conversations and so sometimes we don't. We think that we can just avoid them. But I will tell you from experience that it's much better to have those conversations when we're not in the middle of a crisis and to have the strategies planned for them proactively and never have to use them than to not have those strategies in place and have to need them. Anticipate those strategies when you can and prioritize them in your responsive strategies. What strategies is the team going to use to make sure that everyone is safe?

The second thing that we need to think about is to try to avoid reinforcing the behavior. Now this isn't the same as ignoring or extinguishing the behavior, because notice that I said try to avoid reinforcing the behavior. Here's the thing, sometimes we can just extinguish the behavior by withholding all the reinforcement. If a child is tantruming because he wants candy, and I can make sure that everyone is safe and that no one is going to walk up and give him the candy in the middle of the tantrum, then I can, over time, extinguish the tantrum by not giving him candy. Now that assumes that the extinction burst, which is the increase in behavior before it decreases when reinforcement is withheld—so we always get that increase in behavior when we hold back that reinforcement, we always run that risk that it's going to get worse—we are assuming that that's not going to escalate the behavior to something that I have to respond to in order to assure safety, that it's not something I have to respond to in some way that might inadvertently reinforce it. Maybe not with candy but maybe with attention. That's how some behaviors grow. That's a lot of assumptions. Many of them don't pan out in the real world. They may not work out in other environments.

For instance, maybe when the teacher's there, she can keep that situation from escalating. But when she's not there, it might escalate. When it escalates, maybe it ends up getting reinforced at a higher level and then we've made the problem worse. We really want to think about that. Now some behaviors like Jeremy's running aren't even going to allow for this at all because they're starting off with a safety problem. You have to respond to his running in some fashion. You have to chase him and block him and respond. Now you can do it without yelling and you can do it without giving him a lot of verbal attention. That might be helpful to reduce the amount of attention that he's getting. But having two people chase him down the hall, even if they aren't calling after him, might still be enough to reinforce Jeremy's running. In a situation like Jeremy's, the proactive approach where we're teaching him a replacement behavior to get that high level of attention, is going to be super critical. It's why just a responsive strategy is not enough for his behavior plan. We're going to need to teach him a way to get the attention of those two or three people who would normally chase him and have it be a big reaction so it can compete with the reaction of running down the hallway to running down the hallway.

If you remember in Episode 98, I talked about response efficiency of replacement behaviors. If you don't remember, you can go back and listen to it at autismclassroomresources.com/episode98. We're going to need to make sure that our replacement behavior gets that big reaction faster, easier, and more consistently. We're also going to need to make sure that that replacement behavior gets as big a reaction as that running out of the classroom gets. That's going to be a really key element in making sure that

replacement behavior wins out for him because we can't not respond to his challenging behavior.

Here's what I might think about what to do with Jeremy's running. First, I want to teach him a replacement behavior of asking for attention and getting the attention of two people attending to his every word for a few minutes regularly during the day. We want to practice and cue him to use that behavior regularly throughout his day. But to respond to the negative behavior, what if I immediately just attended to Jeremy with three people, so more than two who usually chase him, paying him lots of attention when he heads for the door? We could even practice having an adult station right outside the door and set up a situation that might trigger running, so that person would be right ahead of him to immediately attend to him while walking him back into the classroom while they're attending to him. What if we up front our reinforcement at the beginning of the behavior rather than have the reinforcement escalate as the behavior gets more dangerous? Right now as he gets closer to outside and closer to the road, their reinforcement gets bigger.

The great thing about using replacement behaviors is that I can queue him to use it, I can prompt it, and I can reinforce it. I don't have to extinguish the challenging behavior by completely removing the reinforcer to it. Essentially, I'm avoiding reinforcing the negative behavior as strongly but I'm also willing to reinforce it to get it to stop if I need to. But I can reinforce the replacement behavior more consistently, easier, and more strongly in order to make it more likely to pay off over time so I can make it a better bet.

Finally, the third thing that you need your responsive strategies to be is you need to choose responsive strategies that can be implemented by everybody. If we choose responsive strategies that everyone who interacts with the students can't implement, if there are people who can't do it, then he will still be engaging in challenging behavior with those people. We have all worked with students, most likely, who behave one way with one person and one way with another. It's likely because they respond to them differently. Some people are great at ignoring whining, for instance, and others really are not. We can practice and try to get some people to be able to handle certain behaviors, but sometimes, we just aren't going to be able to change their behavior fast enough to make a difference for this student's behavior. But that's okay, because here's the beauty of behavioral support: there isn't one answer. There really isn't ever just one answer to the right strategies for a behavior support plan because the behavior support plan has to fit the student and the context in which the student is working in. You might have a different support plan for home and for school, for instance, because the student is the same but the context is different. Fitting the context means fitting the expectations, the situations, and the staff.

If you have staff members who can't follow through on responsive strategies, brainstorm other strategies that might work in their place. Throw out a bunch of ideas and see what sticks. That's the great thing about behavioral support. It's about adjusting the variables that make it fit the individual and the situations in which they live. Obviously, that doesn't take the place of staff training and we still need to train the staff to implement the behavior plan. But it means that they

should be part of developing the plan and we need to find a good fit for everybody that's involved.

In addition to the behavioral strategies, and of course, the legal issues and approaches, these are three common things that you want to think about in developing your responsive strategies: First, is safety, have we discussed methods for how everyone is kept safe? The second is have we found ways to boost the reinforcement for replacement behaviors to be higher than any reinforcement that we can't avoid for negative behavior? Third is have we established responsive strategies that the members of the team can follow through with? If you hop over to the post at autismclassroomresources.com/episode99, you can grab a free template that I use for writing behavior plans that help staff to see the whole plan. If you're looking for tips on dealing with challenging behavior, you can also grab the free webinar on preventing challenging behavior in the classroom. I'll make sure that link is in the show notes as well.

As always, thanks so much for spending this time with me. I hope that you will come back next week when I will be talking more about challenging behavior. Until then, I'll just be over here thinking about how I can make lesson planning more reinforcing for teachers.