

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 am super excited that you're here. Today I wanted to follow up on our replays of some data collection podcasts that we've been doing and I wanted to follow it up with one that is new. I think it's really important that we remember that when we are dealing with challenging behavior, the question we always want to be able to answer is "Why are they doing it?" not "What are they doing?"

I know that that's one of the really hard things about collecting Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence Data. ABC data is what you need if you're doing a naturalistic assessment of challenging behavior. It's going to give you the most kinds of information but only if it's taken correctly. If you are newer to doing functional behavior assessments and taking behavioral data, I think this will be a great podcast for you with some tips to use. Then if you are an old hand at FBAs, or behavior analyst, who's been doing them forever, it might be a good podcast just to hold on to when you run into problems with people who don't have as much experience and maybe need to hear it from somebody besides you.

Because I know that when I was running programs, people often needed to hear things that I said coming out of someone else's mouth, that sometimes made it more important. I have a free download for you with some reminders to help keep it fresh in your brain and for the staff in your classroom, because I love those visual cues for all the adults. Let's get started.

When you're collecting Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence Data, the whole point behind it is to try to get as much information about what's going on in the environment and do that without any kind of assumptions. I'm going to start off just talking a little bit about some general things to know about ABC data in specifics. The first is that when you are taking ABC data, you want to think about the context. Don't limit yourself to just single events.

When you go to describe the antecedent, the behavior, and the consequence, which is the epitome of what we're trying to do with this type of data, we're trying to gather as much information about what's going on at the time that the behavior occurred and before and after it so that we can put some ideas together about why the behavior is happening, what the common antecedents are, what the common consequences are.

It's important to recognize that when we say antecedent, we aren't talking about what you think triggered the behavior. Because if we knew that, we wouldn't need to take the data. We're looking for all the things going on in the environment at the time that the behavior began. Because we are expecting to have to go back through that data and find patterns.

The more that you think that before context or as it starts context, the better, the more that you can provide information about what other people are doing in the environment. The more that

you can talk about what's happening in the before the behavior but also the consequences. The consequences are something that in our society, we tend to use the word consequence to mean some sort of disciplinary or penalty type of response.

In ABC data, that's not what we mean. We mean simply what happened after the behavior, not whether or not you intended it to have anything to do with the behavior. Just describe what happened after or as the behavior was ending. That's what I mean about think context. You want to make sure that you're gathering as much information as possible and not trying to insert patterns based on your thoughts about it at that moment, because we're going to go back through the data and look for patterns.

The more information that we have, the better. That doesn't mean that you have to take a long journal all the time. I'll definitely include some blog posts that give some ideas of different kinds of data collection to streamline this process a little bit.

Number two is that nothing never happens. I know that that is a double negative, and I do it on purpose, because I hope that people will actually pay attention to what I said. One of the biggest issues that I run into using ABC data sheets is that someone almost every time will write usually in the antecedent section that nothing happened. Well, unless we're living in a vacuum, something was happening at that time.

Typically what people mean when they say nothing is that they didn't think there was anything going on that was related to the behavior. Or they didn't think that anything that was happening was a trigger for behavior. Or some of them may say that when what they really mean is "I don't know, I wasn't there. I didn't see it." I'd rather have the I don't know, because that's more representative of what is actually being recorded. Because, again, if we knew what the triggers were, we wouldn't need to take the data. Recording what's happening in the environment is so important.

Next up, it's really, really important that we are being objective in the way that we're recording the information. It's very easy to get in your head what you think the function of the behavior is, or to get in your head what you think the student is doing or getting out of it. I see a lot of people that will write "You know, he is disrespectful, he's mad at me." Well, why did you think he's mad at you? Don't tell me what the emotion was that you can't necessarily observe. Tell me something objective.

Let me give you two examples. One person is writing "Simone is purposely unresponsive and does not listen to the teacher's directions." That is not objective data. That is making the assumption that Simone is doing it on purpose, that she heard the direction, that she chose not to listen, and chose not to follow the direction. That is the implication of that statement. It tells me a lot about the person taking the data and how they perceive this behavior. But it doesn't really tell me a lot about what was happening in the environment or what the behavior looks like.

More objective data would be "Simone did not follow the teacher's instruction that was given to the class." Okay, that's what she actually did, that is the observable thing that we can write about. Another example, "Simone is oppositional and refuses to follow the teacher's

instructions.” Again, we’re encoding a lot of blame related to the child, but also we’re encoding a lot of our assumptions in that information that she did it on purpose, she was being oppositional, meaning she was purposely not doing this, and refuse to follow.

Again, that’s very different than an objective which was “Following the teacher’s instruction to the class to line up, Simone remained in her seat drawing on her paper.” Okay, the way that that’s written, I don’t know if Simone didn’t hear the direction. She didn’t know it was meant for her. She didn’t know that it was something she needed to attend to, which happens with a lot of students. I just know that she didn’t do what the teacher said and the teacher was giving the direction to the whole class, not directly to Simone. Those are two important points to know when I go through that data and figure out what to do with it.

There are a couple of reasons why the objective piece is so important. One is because we get better data. It doesn’t encode what people’s assumptions are about the behavior which sometimes gets in the way of finding what the real problem is. Because if we’re just assuming, we might as well go ahead and design a plan on that. Because if we’re just assuming when we’re taking the data that we know what the problem is, I don’t know why we’re taking data in the first place. It is very hard with challenging behavior at most difficult times to be objective. It makes us emotional at times because we’re frustrated or upset, or just because we’re trying to figure out the problem and it’s really frustrating for us not to know.

But the language that we use in writing about the behavior is as important as the information that we need to record. There’s a big difference to someone who’s reviewing the data to read the examples that are not objective versus to read the examples that are. If I was a parent, I would assume that you think you already know what the issue is, and the problem is the child, as opposed to just the facts. I think it’s important to recognize that your data will always be a form of documentation, and that you want to make sure that it is as objective as possible for that reason.

The other thing that we need to know is that we want to avoid making those judgment statements about the staff, as well as about the students. Remember that you’re probably not the only person going to read this. The more objective you are, the more it gives us real information that we can use outside of assumptions that we can address behavior because, let’s face it, if you’re making assumptions about the behavior, then you go ahead and create a plan on that. It doesn’t necessarily mean it’s going to work.

My guess is if you already think you know why the behavior is happening, and in this case, you’re thinking it’s part of who the child is, there aren’t a lot of options for us in order to change that behavior because we have no magic wands that change children. We change their environment to change their behavior. But in order to do that, we need objective levels, objective information about the environment.

Finally, just very quickly, it’s important to recognize that we include what other students are doing, that we’re not just confining what we are recording as the information about what teachers did, and it’s not just about things that we did on purpose. It’s about what happens in the environment that makes a difference, because again, we’re going to go through that

information and really try to find those facts, find those patterns, and figure out what the function is.

I've got some reminders for you in a poster that you can use in your classroom. It's in our Resource Library, and you can find it by just going to our website for this episode, which is autismclassroomresources.com/episode135 and you can sign up for the Resource Library and download it there. It's got just some basic things that I've just talked about as reminders just because sometimes it's really hard for everybody to remember them.

I'll be back next week and I'm going to continue talking a little bit about taking ABC data and I will share with you some strategies that sometimes can make it easier in the classroom, and a data sheet that we can use for that. I hope that you will join us then. Until then, if you're looking for more about how to figure out what the function of behavior is, how to take that data, how to make sense of that data, and even an easy tool for graphing the data the way that I recommend to look for the function, come join us in the Special Educator Academy. We have all of that in our Behavioral Problem Solving Course. You can get a seven-day free trial at specialeducatoracademy.com. Thank you so much for joining me. I know your time is precious. I hope you're having an amazing beginning of the school year. I hope to see you again next week.