

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 Chris Reeve and I'm your host. Today I want to talk a little bit about consequences and when we are using them for our benefit and when we might not be. I talked a lot on the blog and in the podcast about the need to be proactive and to teach skills when the student is not engaging in behavior—so kind of the opposite of consequences—that we're actually teaching them when the student is calm and able to accept new information as opposed to when they're in crisis.

But when I write about consequences, I get a lot of responses because I think all of us really struggle with knowing what exactly am I going to do when the behavior happens. In addition, we also live in a society in which consequences seem to be the expectation for challenging behavior. I've actually heard teachers, paras, and family members say things like, "Well, he just needs a consequence." When I say the word consequence, I'm referring to something that happens after the behavior occurs. When most people say consequence, they mean a discipline or a penalty for something that the student did that follows that behavior. So it meets the consequence definition, but I'm not always talking about consequences as being negative either.

I think that we all struggle with how we're going to react to challenging behavior. I think that most often, people talk about behavior in terms of "How should I respond to it?" rather than "What should I be doing when the behavior isn't happening?" I want to talk a little bit about what a consequence is, what it means, and one that you probably may have seen used at different points or used it yourself in a way that may not always be the most productive for students. So let's get started.

Let me start by talking a little bit about what society means when they use the term consequences. One of the things that I do hear over and over again in my job is "He needs a consequence," or "I just can't just let the behavior go. He needs a consequence." There really is a feeling in our society that we need to punish people's bad behavior. But believe it or not, a punishing consequence for one student is not a punishing consequence for another student. I talk a lot about this when I talk about reinforcement.

One of my favorite analogies is when I'm doing training, I will ask people, "Stand up if you really, really love sushi like it's one of your favorite foods." I can tell who is going to answer my next question, which is "Now stand up if the idea of sushi makes you ill" because they've already got that look on their face that shows that they've already thought about sushi and it's already starting to bother them. I happen to be a person who absolutely loves sushi. It's one of my favorite foods. So for me, if my behavior increased when it was followed by sushi, sushi is a reinforcer for me. But I could really like something and still not have it be a reinforcer. If my behavior doesn't change, then the reinforcer doesn't happen. That's one piece of it.

The other is that imagine that you are a person who hates sushi. If I use sushi as my reinforcer for all behaviors, my people who love sushi might increase the behavior that I'm using it as a reinforcer for, but my people who hate it are not only not going to make progress on that skill, but they're probably going to actively avoid it, because they don't even like to see sushi, or think about sushi, much less eat sushi. So we want to really make sure that we're clear on what really serves as our reinforcer and our punisher in our consequences for behavior.

For some of our students, what we might use as a punishment may actually serve as a reinforcer. Let's take a common consequence that we use with young kids, and we often use this in school, of removing a student from an activity because their behavior was problematic. Essentially, we're separating them from the group. They're removing them. We're expecting that this social exile really, is going to be something that is punishing for our students. Sometimes people call it going to the thinking chair. We used to call it timeout.

We use timeout with younger students, frequently young kids, especially at home, timeout has taken on a new meaning that is often put with seclusion and restraint. I'm not talking about timeout in that way. I am talking about removing the child from circle time because his behavior was inappropriate thinking that that is a consequence that is going to reduce his behavior problems in that setting in the future. In moderation, that quiet chair or thinking chair may work with typical kids pretty frequently, because often typical kids, especially young children, are often very hungry for adult attention.

They really want adults to interact with them in a positive way. They often like the activities that they are in with the other kids. So when we remove them, that is something they don't like, something that is a negative for them so it may serve as a punisher. Even though we're calling it the thinking chair, don't think for a moment that it is actually a behavioral punisher. It may not be what we talk about, we talk about punishment and restraint, but it is still a punisher, it is something we're expecting to reduce the behavior that that consequence follows.

Now, let's consider Thomas, who is not a real person, but some of you may know him. Thomas is a five-year-old with autism. Interacting with other people is one of the hardest things that he does all day long. It's not that he doesn't like people or that he wants to be completely isolated. But social interaction and communication are hard for him because of autism. Most of his interactions focus around things that he wants to get, or situations that adults have set up to get more communication and interaction from him.

Sometimes Thomas starts hitting the kid next to him, shoves him off his chair, or starts to scream in the middle of morning meeting. So the classroom asked for support and did a functional assessment that showed that Thomas's behavior serves to get him removed from social activities. Before the functional assessment was completed, Thomas's teacher was doing something many preschool teachers do in removing him from morning meeting probably because he was so disruptive that the meeting couldn't continue when he was there, and partly removing him to the thinking chair with the idea that he needs to calm down before he comes back to join the group, and that this would make it less likely that he would engage in this behavior in the future.

But when we looked at the data, the data showed us that calming down didn't usually occur until it was time to move to centers. When the behavior analyst shared this with the teacher and told her that she needed to ignore the screaming and the hitting, and keep Thomas in circle, obviously, this teacher got pretty frustrated, because that solution wasn't working for the rest of the classroom. That solution to his behavior was going to completely ruin the ability to keep the rest of the classroom on-task in that group activity.

She also stated that she couldn't just do nothing. He has to have a consequence for that behavior. Was the thinking chair or the timeout effective for decreasing Thomas's behavior? Was it an effective consequence? No, it was effective in increasing the problem behavior, because it was actually reinforcing the problem behavior. Because he was removed from that difficult time of day and he's not motivated to be around the other students in the same way. It's difficult for him to interact in those kinds of situations so Thomas's hitting was followed by escape from the activity, that was pretty difficult for him sitting in a group listening, communicating, and social interaction.

Just because the teacher was the one removing him didn't make it any less reinforcing. Just because we perceive removal as being a punishment didn't make it a punisher, didn't reduce the behavior for Thomas. Now with that said, we know that that is not a good strategy for Thomas based on our FBA. But the rest of the response, you just have to keep him here and make him stay is also not a good consequence for the behavior. That's going to be a hard task for the teacher to follow through on. It's going to be very disruptive for the rest of the class. So it's still not a good solution.

The opposite of thinking chair of "Just keep him there" is not a good consequence for the behavior either. Other solutions might include teaching Thomas to ask for a break, which gives the teacher the opportunity to remove him for an appropriate skill rather than inappropriate behavior. Another might be changing morning meeting, so maybe he has more communication and social support through more communication supports and visuals like a mini schedule that shows him what's coming next. That might make it easier for him to remain in that situation that may be stressful for him.

Another idea might be to have him participate just for shorter periods of time, where he can be successful, and then when he can be successful, gradually increasing that amount of time; the time that he's not in the morning meeting, maybe he does something proactively, an independent work task or more direct instruction with a para where we can directly instruct and give explicit instruction for maybe some of the skills that are being taught as part of a morning meeting that he's missing.

In keeping with my mantra that many of you may have heard if you've listened for a while, which is there's always more than one solution to every problem, sometimes it's really easy for us behavior analysts to get blinders on and think, "Well, you're doing this and it's reinforcing the behavior. You should do the opposite." Is that behaviorally something that might work? Possibly. Is it necessarily the best solution? Maybe not. Because if it can't be implemented in the setting where it needs to be used, it isn't going to be effective because it won't get implemented.

If it is implemented, it's going to get implemented wrong because it's just too difficult in that setting for somebody to physically keep him in the chair. Nor is that teaching him how to stay in his chair. If I want to teach him how to stay in a group activity more effectively, I probably going to have to do it effectively for a short period of time and reinforce that. When he can do it for that amount of time, I'll bump up how much he needs to stay and reinforce that. Then I'll bump it up again until it gets to the point where he can sit, participate, and be productive during that time and have it be a reinforcing activity.

We have to find the solution for the challenging behavior that fits both the student as well as the environment or the context in which the behavior is taking place. Just like with anything else, when we're choosing a response or a consequence to challenging behavior, look to your functional behavior assessment to tell you what is going to be effective, or what is going to work against you and try to help others understand that "consequences" aren't always the most effective way to change behavior. Because often our students, when they get to crisis, are not taking in new information during that time. The consequences that we can provide that we think are punishing may not always be punishing.

I will step down from my little soapbox talk at the end of this and just say just always be thinking about other ways to do things. It's a really good way to get your creative mind going and it's also a really good reason why behavioral support needs to be done and decided on by a team because more people participating means we have more ideas to work with. I hope that gives you some things to think about. I'm going to take a brief break over the next few weeks for the holidays and will be rerunning some podcasts that you may have heard or may have missed. I hope that you will tune in for those and I will be back in January with a new topic and some new thoughts.

Thank you so much. Have an amazing winter break. Make sure that you are taking time for yourself. Make sure that you are getting the rest that you deserve. I hope to see you fresh back in January for our next new episode. Have an amazing winter break.