

Positive Behavior Support – Challenging our Thinking on Challenging Behavior

Dana Rooks, MEd & Emily Graybill, PhD, NCSP

Center for Leadership in Disability

We encounter challenging behavior in children (and adults!) more than we'd like. All too often we are unclear of where it came from or what it was about, or perhaps we've used everything in our bag of tricks to deal with it and have no idea what to do next. Read below for a few scenarios that may be familiar.

Megan, age 11, attends fifth grade at her neighborhood elementary school. She is well-liked by her peers and her teacher, and has always been a fairly strong student academically. In the last few weeks, Megan's teacher noticed her staring out the window during independent work, and often turning in her work incomplete. Megan has also begun talking to the other students around her during independent work time, and her teacher is concerned that Megan doesn't care about her work and only cares about socializing. Megan's off-task behavior has become very disruptive to her classmates, and her grades have fallen dramatically.

Joshua, age six, attends first grade at a private, faith-based elementary school. Joshua's parents decided on the smaller school setting after he struggled socially and behaviorally in his neighborhood kindergarten. Joshua always seemed "young" for his age, and received therapy early on for delays in his language development. Joshua's mother struggles with his behavior at home. He refuses to follow her directions, constantly telling her, "No!" and sometimes hitting her. Joshua's teacher has started to notice the refusal behavior at school as well, and his interactions with his classmates are often aggressive, shoving them and growling at them.

Too frequently the behaviors in these scenarios are addressed through the use of traditional discipline methods (e.g., yelling, time out), which tend to be minimally effective at creating long term behavior change. This article will describe the positive behavior support process, which is a more effective approach at increasing positive behavior.

Positive behavior support is a process for understanding and resolving challenging behavior in children. It involves

- ✓ thinking about why a child engages in a behavior
- ✓ creating strategies for preventing the behavior
- ✓ changing the way others respond to the child's behavior
- ✓ teaching the child new skills that can be used instead of the behavior

Positive behavior support can be used with a variety of challenging behaviors, such as aggression, noncompliance, self-injury, and tantrums. (Source:

<http://challengingbehavior.org/explore/pbs/pbs.htm>)

Positive behavior support comes from the idea that challenging behaviors have meaning, and are typically a child's attempt to communicate something that he or she cannot let others know any other

way. Consider the way a baby uses crying to let her mother know she is hungry – crying is the only way she has to communicate her needs to someone else. In the same way, your 14 year old son’s angry outbursts may actually be the only way he knows to communicate his anxiety about a problem at school – “I hate you!” could really mean, “I’m worried about the older guy that is picking on me at lunch!”

The positive behavior support approach suggests that we first try to understand what a child is trying to *communicate* with a challenging behavior, or *why* he or she is engaging in the behavior. Is the child trying to tell you he wants or needs something? That he doesn’t want to do something? That he needs your help? Rather than thinking about how the child’s behavior affects you or the others around him, think about what the behavior accomplishes for the child. Does it get him laughter from his friends? Does it get him out of doing his math work? Does it get him the action figure he wants?

Behavior generally occurs to communicate one of four things:

1. “I want attention.”
2. “I want to escape.”
3. “I want _____ (desired object/activity).”
4. “I like doing it or it feels good.”

A little detective work on your part, through observing, asking questions, and looking for behavioral patterns, will help you identify what the child is trying to say or accomplish with the behavior. Only then can you create a meaningful plan for helping the child communicate (therefore, behave!) more appropriately and effectively. Read more about Megan and Joshua.

Megan’s teacher is concerned that she might be developing attention problems. She can’t seem to focus on or complete her work. Megan’s teacher begins watching her more closely during independent work time, and notices her off-task behavior occurs more during math activities. A review of her grades not only shows the decline is mainly in math, but that it seemed to start when they began the unit on fractions. Megan’s teacher shares her concerns with her mother, who agrees that math homework has become a nightly struggle. Megan’s teacher is beginning to suspect her off-task behavior isn’t attention-related, but Megan’s way of communicating she wants to escape the math activities that are hard for her. She offers to work with Megan on fractions for an extra 30 minutes after school and modifies her math homework to reinforce the early concepts she may have missed. She also lets Megan work with a classmate who has a stronger grasp of fractions during independent math work time.

Joshua’s mother is worried that his behavior is getting out of hand. She asks his teacher to write down how his day went at school in a notebook. She begins to notice Joshua’s behavior is worse at school when his father works out of town, and realizes the same thing is occurring at home. Joshua’s mother feels he may be trying to communicate his desire for extra attention (even if it’s negative) when his father is away. She asks Joshua’s father to call Joshua on the way to school to give some encouragement for the day, and sets aside a few minutes after dinner for a fun activity of Joshua’s choosing when his father is gone.

In both scenarios, the adults identified what Megan and Joshua were trying to communicate through their behaviors by looking for patterns in their behaviors. The adults then changed aspects of the home or school setting to address what the children were communicating. As a result of the setting changes, the behaviors were less likely to occur.

Read the next article for more on how to prevent challenging behavior in your home or school. For more information about positive behavior support, visit the Positive Behavior Videos, which is a free, online resource for families, educators, and community service providers.

www.positivebehaviorvideos.org

Dana Rooks, MEd, worked as the Positive Behavior Support Associate for the Center for Leadership in Disability at Georgia State University. She has 10 years of experience in special education, in both instruction and identification of children with learning differences.

Emily Graybill, PhD, NCSP, is a faculty member in the Center for Leadership in Disability at Georgia State University. She is a school psychologist by training and worked as a school psychologist for six years. She currently trains educators around the state on individualized positive behavior supports. Contact Dr. Graybill with inquires about positive behavior support training egraybill1@gsu.edu