

Interventions -- Preventive and Reactive Strategies

Dana Rooks, MEd & Emily Graybill, PhD, NCSP

Center for Leadership in Disability

The positive behavior support process is a holistic approach to dealing with challenging behavior in that it considers not only the behavior itself, but also the circumstances and characteristics of the child exhibiting the behavior and the people and situations surrounding it. Interventions developed using this approach are based on manipulating or changing what is going on before and after the behavior occurs, either to prevent (or reduce the likelihood) that the behavior will occur, or to react in such a way that the behavior no longer “works” for the child. These preventive and reactive strategies are based on the concepts of triggers and responses. Read about Carrie – are the strategies being used by her teacher effective?

Carrie, age 11, has been struggling to complete her classwork, and is constantly talking to her classmates and calling out to her teacher. Carrie’s teacher frequently reprimands her, and has to stand by her desk most of the day to keep her quiet. Carrie’s teacher knows she is capable of doing the work, as she can complete it without help as long as the teacher is standing with her.

Once a trigger, or thing that “sets off” behavior has been identified, it may be possible to prevent it from happening, which, in turn, prevents the behavior from happening. For example, if you know staying up late causes your teenager to slam doors and yell at his younger sister the next morning, insisting on an earlier bedtime may prevent those rough mornings.

Some triggers may not be preventable, but their impact could be lessened (e.g., a teacher may not be able to prevent a child from taking the seizure medication that makes her student sleepy – and therefore cranky -- but she can schedule a break at the time she knows he will be his sleepiest). Using preventive strategies to manage challenging behavior requires planning on your part, but does have benefits:

- Keeps your interactions with the child more positive, as you are not having to address the behavior in the middle of a situation when emotions may be high
- Gives the child more chances to practice appropriate behaviors and receive positive feedback
- Is usually less disruptive to classroom or home routines

Examples of preventive strategies

Strategy	Examples
Using high interest materials during non-preferred tasks or activities	Practicing math problems on an iPad Completing journal activities in a Spiderman notebook
Modifying the task	Reducing the number of chores Breaking the reading selection into shorter chunks
Building in breaks	Scheduling exercise or sensory activities into the daily routine Allowing a 2 minute break for every 15 minutes of homework completed

Visual cues	Provide a picture schedule of the morning routine for getting ready for school Using red/green cue cards to signal when hand-flapping is okay
Environmental modifications	Strategic seating (away from a window, nearer to the teacher) Dimming lights to reduce stimulation

Evaluating your (or others') responses to behavior, or what happens directly after the behavior occurs, also allows you the opportunity to affect whether or not the behavior "works" for the child. For example, if your typical response to your child refusing to clean her room is to eventually do it for her, the refusal will continue because it works – she gets to escape a task she doesn't like. But if you begin to respond by leaving her room alone and offering to help her put away her laundry (the part you know she dislikes the most) if she cleans the rest, her refusal behavior is not as effective. Choosing a more effective response, one that will reduce the likelihood of a challenging behavior occurring again, is a reactive strategy.

Examples of reactive strategies

Strategy	Examples
Praise	Giving a high-five after putting toys away. Saying, "Great job!" after completing a spelling activity.
Rewarding a desired behavior	Providing assistance after a child raises his hand instead of calling out. Giving a sticker for the behavior chart when the child brushes her teeth instead of crying.
Planned ignoring	Not responding to a child until he raises his hand.
Redirection	When your child throws his blocks, say, "It's not okay to throw blocks, but you can go outside and throw the ball."

It can also be very effective to pair preventive strategies with reactive strategies. Read on to see the new strategies Carrie's teacher decided to try.

Carrie's teacher realizes her off-task behavior is probably her way of saying, "I want attention." Carrie's teacher decides to give her extra attention prior to seated classroom activities by letting her pass out papers or materials as the "teacher helper" (preventive strategy), and letting her work with a partner for the last 5 minutes of the activity if she does the first part on her own (reactive strategy).

Carrie's teacher tried to prevent the behavior by giving her some of the attention she wants before the activities that do not involve much interaction with others, and to react to the desired behavior (working quietly on her own) with attention from a classmate through a partnership. She used both preventive and reactive strategies to reduce Carrie's challenging behavior.

In the next article we will introduce you to Positive Behavior Videos, a free, online resource for families, educators, and community service providers focusing on using the positive behavior support model for dealing with challenging behavior. 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