Recommended Practices

Addressing Persistent Challenging Behaviors

Lee Kern

High quality early education settings contain a number of features that will prevent most challenging behavior. For instance, structure and routines keep children interested and occupied. Developmentally appropriate practices, such as brief periods of seated activities and circle time, will avoid stretching children's attention span. Skill instruction in areas, such as initiating interactions, making friends, and communicating emotions, prepares children to successfully negotiate social situations. In addition, high rates of positive teacher feedback encourages children to behave in desirable ways. Together such universal approaches are sufficient to engender appropriate behavior among most young children (e.g., Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003). There are, however, a small number of children whose challenging behavior continues in spite of high quality programming. Successful remediation of persistent behavior challenges requires an individualized approach that is derived from assessment information.

Recent approaches to managing behavior have recognized the need to conduct a comprehensive assessment in order to fully understand circumstances that contribute to the behavior challenges. This means identifying environmental events that trigger problems, skill deficits that render problem behaviors a reasonable alternative, and reactions following behavior that contribute to its continuance. The assessment process used to parcel these various factors that are connected to problem behavior is called functional assessment or functional behavioral assessment. The following paragraphs delineate a five-step process for conducting a functional assessment and developing a related individualized behavior support plan (e.g., Bambara & Kern, 2005).

Step 1 in initiating the assessment and support plan development process is to *prioritize and define the challenging behavior.* Prioritizing challenging behavior means deciding which behavior is most serious and therefore warrants immediate intervention (e.g., Janney & Snell, 2000). Primary considerations include (1) how harmful the behavior is to the child or others, (2) how it might interfere with learning, (3) how it hinders participation in activities, and (4) if it will impede positive social relationships and social acceptance. Once prioritized, the behavior should be clearly and precisely defined to permit unambiguous communication. Precise definitions allow others to unmistakably determine whether or not the behavior has occurred. One example of a clear and precise definition is

IDEAs
thatWork

References

Bambara, L. M., & Kern, L. (2005). Individualized supports for students with problem behaviors. New York: The Guilford Press.

Fox, L., Dunlap, G., Hemmeter, M. L., Joseph, G., & Strain, P. (2003). The teaching pyramid: A model for supporting social competence and preventing challenging behavior. Young Children, 58, 48-53.

Kern, L., Gallagher, P., Starosta, K., Hickman, W., & George, M. (2006). Longitudinal outcomes of functional behavioral assessment-based intervention. Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 8(2), 67-78.

Janney, R., & Snell, M. E. (2000). Teachers' guide to inclusive practices: Behavioral support. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Newcomer, L. L., & Lewis, T. J. (2004). Functional behavioral assessment: An investigation of assessment reliability and effectiveness of function-based interventions. Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 12, 168-181.

O'Neill, R. E., Horner, R. H., Albin, R. W., Sprague, J. R., Storey, K., & Newton, J. S. (1997). Functional assessment and program development for problem behavior: A practical handbook. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

On the Web

Center for Evidenced-Based Practices: Young Children with Challenging Behavior
http://www.challengingbehavior.org

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning
http://www.csefel.uiuc.edu

Positive Beginnings: Supporting Young Children with Challenging Behavior Training Materials
http://pbs.fsu.edu

Early Childhood Behavior Project
http://education.umn.edu/ceed/projects/preschoolbehavior

"Tyron plays with objects, gazes around the room, and rests his head on the table". This definition affords much more clarity and precision than "Tyron is inattentive".

Step 2 in the assessment and support plan development process is to *conduct a functional assessment*. Functional assessment defines a process of information gathering that explains the reasons for challenging behaviors. Information is gathered by interviewing individuals who know the child well and by directly observing the child. The purpose of interviews and observations is to elucidate conditions and events in the environment that lead to challenging behavior referred to as antecedents and events that maintain challenging behavior referred to as consequences. During interviews parents, educators, and others can speculate based on their intimate familiarity with the child about the antecedents and consequences to challenging behavior. In addition, lifestyle issues, such as the availability of a parent to interact with the child in the evenings, may be obtained. There are a number of structured formats commercially available to solicit this information (e.g., O'Neill, Horner, Albin, Sprague, Storey, & Newton, 1997). Direct observations are used to specifically note antecedents and consequences when the behavior challenges occur. A commonly used format is the ABC chart. This can simply take the form of a sheet of paper divided into three columns to document (a) antecedents, (b) the challenging behaviors, and (c) consequences.

Once sufficient information is obtained Step 3 occurs in *developing hypothesis statements*. From the functional assessment information, behavioral patterns should emerge. For example, direct observation data showed that Maria's aggression toward her peers almost always occurred during free play in the sandbox. The observations further indicated that the sandbox was a favorite activity among many children, and sand toys had to be shared. These data, coupled with information from the parent interview that Maria had no siblings and rarely had opportunities to interact with other children, suggested that sharing with others was a problem. To summarize such information, a hypothesis statement is formulated that describes: (a) the antecedents, (b) the behavior, and (c) the presumed function the behavior serves. Presumed functions most frequently fall into one of the following categories: to obtain attention, to obtain a preferred item or activity, or to escape a non-preferred task, activity, or person. Based on aforementioned data, Maria's hypothesis stated, "When a peer has a toy that Maria wants, she engages in aggression to obtain the toy". The hypothesis statement serves to link the assessment information to the support plan by stating the relationship between environmental events and the problem behavior. That is, the hypothesis implicates classes of interventions that are likely to be effective because of their match to the antecedents and function.

Step 4 of the assessment and support plan development process is to *develop a support plan*. Comprehensive and individualized support plans involve making changes in antecedent events to prevent problems, providing skill instruction to build appropriate behaviors and to obviate the need for challenging behaviors and identifying response strategies to decrease the possibility of reinforcing behavioral challenges. In

Maria's case, her instructors developed a plan that included a temporary antecedent modification of limiting the number of children in the sandbox area. Simultaneously, Maria would be provided with instruction on sharing, including turn taking, asking politely to play with a toy, and engaging in joint play activities. As soon as Maria demonstrated that she could correctly role play sharing skills in mock situations with her peers, the number of peers in the sandbox were to be gradually increased. Then, Maria would be reminded to use her new sharing skills. As a consequence for using aggression to obtain toys, Maria would lose the toy for 1 minute and then be guided to ask her peer nicely for it.

The final step is to *implement, evaluate, and modify the plan*. Just before the support plan is implemented, baseline rates of challenging behavior and appropriate skills to replace the problem behavior are coded. After the support plan is implemented, behavior is again measured on a continuing basis to evaluate whether the plan is effective. A decision should be made defining what represents sufficient progress. Keep in mind that teaching new alternative skills takes time, and rapid elimination of problem behavior is not always forthcoming. Rather, continued behavior improvements may represent a more reasonable goal. If, however, behavior change is not observed or gains are not sufficient, the plan requires modification. This may require adjusting or supplementing the original plan, refining the hypotheses, or collecting additional functional assessment data.

The previously described process holds advantages over conventional approaches of behavior management in that it considers antecedent modifications for immediate prevention in challenging behaviors as well as skill instruction for long-term reduction. By linking intervention to assessment information, the approach is individualized and targets specific environmental features and skill difficulties making it effective and efficient. Growing evidence indicates that an assessment based approach results in more successful outcomes than other approaches to behavior intervention (e.g., Newcomber & Lewis, 2005). In addition, this well-researched and comprehensive approach holds promise for long-term resolution of challenging behavior (e.g., Kern, Gallagher, Starosta, Hickman, & George, 2006).