A Checklist of Things to Do

1. Carry out a functional assessment to determine the various purposes the problem behavior serves.

2. Based on the results of the functional assessment, choose functionally equivalent communication forms (i.e., forms that serve the same purpose as the problem behavior).

3. Teach the student to respond with the new communicative behavior in situations that formerly set off the problem behavior.

4. If the problem behavior serves more than one purpose (as it often does), make sure to teach multiple communication forms that address each of the purposes served by the problem behavior.

5. Monitor for success. Success means the student asks frequently (and appropriately) for attention, assistance, or tangible items and does so quickly and consistently in situations that used to signal the problem behavior. The problem behavior will decrease or be eliminated. Remember that change takes time.

6. If the problem behavior persists, assess if delay in obtaining the desired outcome is a factor. Determine if the delay in obtaining the desired outcome that typically follows communicative behavior is longer than the delay in obtaining the desired outcome that typically follows the problem behavior.

7. If delay in reinforcement is a factor, then observe the student to see if the communicative behavior involves too much effort. Also, check to see whether others readily interpret the communicative behavior. Interpretability is an issue if others fail to respond to the communicative behavior, appear confused (by repeatedly asking, “What do you want?” or saying, “I don’t understand.”), or frequently offer the student the wrong reinforcer.

8. If either effort or interpretability is an issue, choose a new functionally equivalent communication form that is more efficient than the one that it is intended to replace.

9. Minimize your reactions to the problem behavior to help teach the student that such behavior is no longer a very efficient means for producing desirable outcomes.

10. Monitor for success over a period of weeks. The new form should produce reinforcement reliably and with little delay. The student should display the new form consistently in all appropriate situations. Finally, the problem behavior should decrease or disappear altogether in the targeted situations.