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PROJECT ACCESS

Missouri's educational
 leader in autism support

When Behavior Escalates to the Point it Can't be Ignored

As we've learned ways to support behavior, we know it is important not to reinforce interfering behaviors. When a behavior is reinforced, it is more likely to continue. When a behavior does not meet with contact from a reinforcer, it is more likely to decrease. Sometimes we recommend planned ignoring of an interfering behavior, and that is fine as long as the behavior is not dangerous or seriously disruptive. We all know of those situations where a student escalates to the point you cannot ignore the behavior.

Let's look at a scenario that may explain this better.

Jody is a sweetheart, but he demonstrates escalating behavior that leads to self-harm. The teacher is very concerned he might hurt himself, so she can't ignore the behavior. What can she do? First of all, her team needed to conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to try and determine the function or reason for the behavior. The team completed an FBA and hypothesized the function of Jody's behavior was to escape difficult and non-preferred tasks. These included participation in circle time and participation in seat work. The team observed Jody on multiple occasions and noticed Jody engaged in an escalating series of behaviors. For example, when Jody was told to join the rest of the classmates on carpet squares for participation in circle time, Jody wandered around the room. The teacher continued to request he come to circle time, but Jody went to one of the stations in the room and played with the materials there. When requested again, Jody whined softly and hit the side of his head with his fist. He wasn't hitting hard enough to leave a red mark, but the teacher was concerned he could really hurt himself.

When we determine a student is engaging in escape/avoidance behavior, the first step is to teach and reinforce a more appropriate way to avoid. We know, most teachers would rather he not avoid the task, but this is a process and using a better way to avoid is where we start. So, initially, we are fairly confident letting Jody avoid circle time by using a break card or saying Break Time! As time moves on, they will put procedures in place to help Jody tolerate non-preferred tasks. For example, they might use backward chaining. They could determine the small amount of time Jody will stay in circle time. Then they might have him join circle at the end of the activity for a time slightly less than the amount of time they determined he would stay. That way, he would leave circle time successfully and the teachers can reinforce heavily. Over time, the staff will gradually increase the time he participates.

So, what about the student who engages in very dangerous behavior such as hitting others? This obviously can't be ignored. A very speedy FBA (you can't observe for weeks at a time for behavior like this) indicated this student

was suffering from sensory overload. The noisier and more crowded a situation, the more agitated this student became. There was a quiet area available to this class, and the teacher wanted the student to recognize when he was becoming overloaded and request to go to the quiet area. Because they couldn't put the hitting behavior on extinction by ignoring it, they came up with another idea. They taught this student to use the Incredible 5-Point Scale which visually depicts how overloaded he feels. They also took the student out of the noisy crowded environment and had him practice requesting the quiet area. Slowly, they added noise and other people to the environment, directed the student to show how he felt on the scale and then prompted him to use the request for the quiet area. When he requested the quiet area, he was heavily reinforced. All of this amounted to a great deal of work but the payoff was amazing when he made requests in the classroom setting instead of hitting. This staff was aware of evidence-based practices and utilized this knowledge to develop a plan that worked. Functional Communication Training (FCT) was used to give the student an alternate communication (requesting the quiet area) to hitting. Prompting was given to help him make the request, and Self-Management happened when he recognized his sensory status on the Incredible 5-Point Scale. We all know there is no silver bullet, but careful planning and use of evidence-based strategies makes a difference.

We usually like to work on a behavior within the environment where it occurs, but in a dangerous or escalating situation, consider practicing the alternate behavior in a neutral or less aversive environment. Then, work slowly to integrate the new behavior into the more uncomfortable environment.

Something to be aware of when dealing with big behaviors is to avoid inadvertent reinforcement. If you have a student whose behavior is avoidance/escape based and you use suspension, you've inadvertently reinforced her. One of our favorite stories here at ACCESS is the frustrated administrator who gave a student who was truant out-of-school suspension. He didn't understand he just reinforced this student who didn't want to be at school. Time-out may work the same way for students who are engaging in avoidance behavior. A tip to remember: Time-out only works if it is time-out from a reinforcing environment! Time-out doesn't work for escape/avoidance behavior. It can actually be reinforcing! The function or reason for the behavior guides the behavior plan-not the school policy book.

The function of behavior for some students is to obtain attention. What happens? The student is sent to the office or to the counselor. What did he get? That's right-attention. We just reinforced this attention-seeking student. Additionally, peers may need training to avoid laughing or giving other attention to the student who is seeking attention inappropriately.

It is sometimes appropriate when dealing with escalating and dangerous behaviors to ask for help. Project ACCESS offers several avenues for assistance including phone consults, emails, the Project ACCESS Helpline, and Zoom and in-person consults.

This kind of behavior support is not easy, but your team can make a difference.

Resources:

The Incredible 5-Point Scale <https://www.5pointscale.com/>

Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (AFIRM) <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules>

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