



FACT SHEET

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PROJECT ACCESS

Missouri's educational
 leader in autism support

Ethics of Behavior Change

As we support individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), we often choose goals to improve behavior. Some of our students do not have the communication skills to let us know what they want and need in a conventional way, so they use interfering behavior to express those messages. Other students have not yet developed social competence and rely on interfering behavior. Still others use interfering behaviors because they have worked for them over time. There are good reasons to support behavior change, but most importantly we want to support change that increases the quality of life for our students. Independence, employability, and skills to participate in the community are worthy goals. Interfering behavior does not occur in a vacuum, it always serves a function. There is a reason for the behavior. It is our job as educators to understand the function or reason for the behavior and support students to meet those functions in appropriate ways.

Below is a hierarchy for selecting behaviors needing support as we develop programming for our students

Is the Problem a Problem?

- Is the behavior dangerous to the person doing it?
- Is the behavior dangerous to others in the immediate area?
- Is the behavior dangerous to the environment?
- Is the behavior seriously disruptive to the operation of the program?
- Does the behavior make the person different and valued negatively by the public?
- Does the behavior prevent the person from advancing to more independent opportunities?

Attention to the behaviors above will improve quality of life for our students in areas of safety and increased participation. Dangerous behavior is always paramount, but also consider behaviors that are keeping students from moving on to that next environment or are keeping students in more restrictive settings.

As we focus on best practices, completion of a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) becomes a priority. The results of an FBA help us discover the function or reason for the student's behavior. Once we know that, we can design interventions to help the student meet the function of their behavior in more socially valid ways. Project ACCESS has workshops and additional Fact Sheets addressing FBAs. Check our website at <https://education.missouristate.edu/access/>.

As we continue to think about behavior change, decision making must be based on ethical considerations. The following questions assist in that endeavor.

- What is the *right thing* to do?
- What is *worth doing*?
- What does it mean to be a *good behavior* manager?

(Cooper, Heron, Heward, 2007)

When we make decisions concerning behavior change, we do the *right things*. We make sure the behavior support is designed to improve quality of life. We make sure that our determination of the function(s) of behavior is based on collected data from a variety of sources. We make sure that interventions we provide include Evidence-based Practices.

To determine what is *worth doing* we look to the hierarchy above and consider other issues. For example, is the behavior of concern something that many students of the same age do? Changing a developmental behavior common to a particular age range would not be worth doing. Decreasing a behavior because it just annoying to you is not worth doing. Using time to address a minor behavioral concern when there are bigger issues may not be worth doing.

Being a *good behavior manager* means sensitivity to the student's needs first and foremost. Avoidance of opinions and assumptions are critical; information is gained from data collection, and decisions are made from that data. Intervention requires thoughtful use of Evidence-based Practices. Good behavior managers do not rely heavily on punishment. Punishment does not teach the student what TO do; it just teaches them what not to do. Positive support is implemented including reinforcement, modification of the environment, and teaching of appropriate skills that may be lacking for the student. Additionally, we try to intervene in the least invasive way to get the job done.

Further, consideration for the dignity of the individual being served is necessary. Confidentiality is critical, and the student is not to be discussed with those who are not directly involved. To the point we can, it is also our job to uphold positive attitudes

and understanding among those serving our students. If we value our students, no matter the behavior, so will others.

Resources:

Cooper, J.O., Heron, T.E., & Heward, W.L. (2007) *Applied behavior analysis* (2nd edition) Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson/Merrill/Prentice Hall.

For information on Evidence-based Practices look to Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules (AFIRM) at <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/afirm-modules>.

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