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Choosing an Alternate Behavior

Choosing to teach or reinforce a behavior that is an alternate to challenging behavior can be tricky. If you haven't, read our fact sheet on Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) to refresh your understanding of functional equivalence. This is key to behavior change.

That alternate behavior isn't as easy as just choosing something that you would like the learner to do. The alternate behavior has to have the same function as the challenging behavior.

Let's check out this scenario:

Holden bumps into kids in the hall just about every time the class is moving from one location to another. His classmates are at the point they try and avoid Holden. The behavior specialist has been called in to help the teachers and para with completion of an FBA. The teacher's thought was to have Holden move from place-to-place a little earlier than the rest of the class. However, the results of the FBA indicate the function of Holden's behavior is to engage with the other students. So, was the alternate behavior of having Holden move in the hallway at a different time than his classmates a good choice? This is a pretty obvious No, and it is a no for two reasons. First, the alternate behavior did not meet the function of the problem behavior in the hallway behavior. Secondly, the alternate behavior provided no support in teaching Holden a more appropriate behavior.

What might be a better plan? Holden needs to learn to engage with peers in a more acceptable way. An alternate behavior might be to teach Holden to gently tap on a friend's shoulder. Maybe Holden could practice saying something to his friend to get his or her attention. If Holden is not communicating well, maybe he could use some sort of voice output device to get a friend's attention. These choices meet the function of the challenging behavior and they are teaching important skills!

There are two ways to think about teaching an alternate behavior. If the alternate behavior is in the child's repertoire, we heavily reinforce the use of the behavior, while doing our best to prevent the challenging behavior from working. This is called differential reinforcement. If the alternate behavior is not in the learner's repertoire, then we teach the behavior. There are many teaching strategies including discrete trial (a good way to learn a new skill) use of task analysis (breaking a skill down into its components and teaching those), modeling, and others.

So, the important take-aways:

- When dealing with behavior change, it is best practice to complete an FBA, so the function(s) of the problem behavior is clear.
- The alternate behavior MUST meet the same function as the problem behavior. Think functional equivalence.
- Reinforce the alternate behavior already in the learner's repertoire.
- Teach and reinforce the alternate behavior not in the learner's repertoire

The information in this fact sheet includes evidence-based practices as outlined in the Missouri Autism Guidelines Initiative: Autism Spectrum Disorders: Guide to Evidence-based Interventions.

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