



FACT SHEET #65

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Behavior Momentum

The evidence-based practice of Behavioral Momentum is used by teachers, parents, and therapists to assist students to complete non-preferred tasks. Its use does not require a great deal of training or a need to gather materials. It might be considered a “Have it in Your Back Pocket Strategy.”

What is the concept behind Behavioral Momentum? Have you ever played Simon Says? The leader in that game gives the participants a directive from Simon. Simon says do three jumping jacks. Simon says take two giant steps. Somewhere in the directives, the leader leaves out Simon says, and if a participant gets caught following the directive when Simon didn't say to do it, he is out of the game. The idea is following several directives that Simon says builds momentum. When Simon doesn't say, participants follow the directive anyway because of the built up momentum.

So, this easy concept can be used to help students complete a task or follow a directive they might otherwise not do. These tasks and directives are termed low-probability. Tasks and directives that students are likely to do are high-probability. When we give students a series of easy or high-probability tasks followed by direction to perform a low-probability task, the student is more likely to follow the directive or complete the task because of Behavioral Momentum.

Here are some examples:

- A preschooler may not easily follow the directive to sit down. His teacher is aware of Behavioral Momentum, so he has the child follow two or three high-probability directives like, “Clap your hands,” and “Touch your nose.” He then quickly says, “Sit down.” Our preschooler follows the low-probability behavior of sitting down because of Behavioral Momentum.
- A high-school student who struggles with getting out materials for his class (a low-probability behavior) is asked to answer several easy questions about a subject of

interest to him (a high-probability behavior). The questions are followed by asking him to get his math book and calculator out of his desk. He follows the directive, saving lots of instructional time.

- We know some of our students have difficulty with eating a variety of foods. A savvy mother who knows about Behavioral Momentum hands her ten-year-old bites of preferred foods several times. She immediately follows with a bite of a non-preferred food, and is surprised when she eats it.

Another evidence-based practice that can be used with Behavioral Momentum is reinforcement. The preschool teacher hands his student a favorite toy when he sits down. The high school student receives a checkmark on a grid. When he receives enough checkmarks, he is awarded a certain amount of free time. The mother whose daughter eats a new food gives lavish praise for trying a bite.

Some teachers and therapists take reinforcement to another level by also reinforcing the high-probability behavior. The thinking is the students will have increased motivation to complete the low-probability behavior, because they want the reinforcement to continue.

Like many of the evidence-based practices, two or more work in combination providing good results. Modeling is also used with Behavioral Momentum. One researcher asked classmates of his target preschooler to follow the same directions given to his subject. When the classmates modeled the behavior, the preschooler engaged in both high-probability behavior and the low-probability behavior.

When considering which high-probability behaviors to use with Behavioral Momentum, most research suggests the high probability behaviors should occur at least 80 percent of the time. The more engaged the student is with these high-probability behaviors, good results are likely to follow with the low-probability behaviors.

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