Connecticut PARAPROFESSIONALS' *Guide to* Challenging Behaviors

CONNECTICUT

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Paraprofessionals have an important role in supporting students who exhibit challenging behaviors; they are often called upon to prevent, manage, and de-escalate problem behaviors which may include the implementation of the student's behavior intervention plan (BIP). This brief will give readers an overview of how to respond to challenging behaviors and will outline the development and implementation of a BIP.

We welcome your comments and suggestions regarding this publication. Comments should be directed to Iris White, Bureau of Accountability and Improvement, at iris.white@ct.gov.

A Paraprofessionals' Guide to Challenging Behaviors

The development of a BIP occurs after the student has undergone a functional behavior assessment (FBA).The FBA determines the function or purpose of the student's difficult behavior. All behavior should be considered a means to an end. Students who are compliant behave that way because it works for them and their behavior meets their needs. Unfortunately, students who are more difficult to manage likely engage in challenging behaviors because it meets their needs. Therefore, the FBA allows educators to determine the need that the student is trying to meet and gives opportunities to find alternate, more appropriate ways to meet the student's need. This approach may seem counterintuitive. Traditionally, we approach students with challenging behaviors by trying to control them or "punish" them into producing more appropriate behaviors (see Figure 1). However, this very approach may make the behaviors that we are trying to eliminate stronger and more entrenched. If we try to understand the purpose of the behavior, we are able to give students opportunities to use more appropriate and, perhaps, more efficient behaviors instead.

Understanding Challenging Behaviors

Challenging behaviors often occur due to some unmet need which may include the need for freedom; a desire for sense of belonging; a need for feeling of competence or recognition; a craving for attention; or quite simply pleasure or entertainment. To build effective behavioral supports, we must understand not only why the student behaves the way he or she do, but also the conditions or context under which the behavior occurs. The development of a functional behavior assessment allows us to determine both of these important factors.

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)

A FBA is a problem-solving process for addressing challenging student behavior by looking beyond the behaviors to assess the purpose that it serves. The assessment

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Preschool–Grade 12

Teacher Supervisory Checklist
Preschool–Grade 12

involves teacher, student, and family interviews as well as direct observations of student behavior. The data must be organized into at least three areas: (1) events before the behavior occurs (antecedents); (2) the conduct itself (behavior); and (3) events after the behavior (consequences). This sequence of events is sometimes referred to as the ABCs of behavior.

When addressing students with challenging behaviors, we often focus on the consequences in an attempt to correct the behavior and neglect the changes we can make with the antecedents or the behavior itself. Thus, we try to punish students for poor behavior and reward them for good behavior. This can sometimes be a rather frustrating approach when students are exhibiting extremely inappropriate behaviors. If we choose the punishment route, we sometimes have to escalate the punishments in order to see the same effects – presuming that the punishment worked at all. Conversely, some students provide very few opportunities for rewarding behaviors and never get reinforcement that would encourage better behavior. Research has indicated that a positive approach to managing behavior is more effective at maintaining long-term behavioral change than punishment (Carr, et al., 2002). Prevention is the most efficacious way of addressing concerning behavior. Controlling the antecedents should eliminate the conditions under which the behavior occurs, thus preventing the need for a punitive response (Sugai, Horner, & Algozzine, 2010). This is because the manipulation of the antecedents actually may prevent the undesired behavior. If we can understand the conditions that are supporting the behavior, we limit the opportunities for students to exhibit problematic behaviors.

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)

Based on what we learn about the student and the student's behavior through the FBA process, a BIP may be developed. The purpose of the BIP is threefold - to make the behavior irrelevant, ineffective, and inefficient. A good BIP should include components which support our efforts when working with students: Prevention, Teaching, and Responding.

PREVENTION. This includes changes in the environment (physical and social) as well as changes in instructional practices. Adults can play a vital role in preventing the escalation of behaviors. The old adage, it takes two to tango, is relevant when considering adult-student interactions. While the student's role is quite obvious to us, our role in the escalation of behaviors may be less so. When a student's behavior begins to escalate, we must step back, take a breath, and consider how we can intervene rather than punish or control. Specifically, we must draw upon what we currently know about this student and their triggers.

TEACHING. We cannot make assumptions about students' prior learning. Therefore, the teaching of appropriate behavior is a crucial part of the plan. Teaching involves providing the student with the strategies and skills for coping as well as teaching students replacement behaviors. Students engage in behaviors that work for them and may need to be taught other behaviors that can work as well or better than the inappropriate behavior. This increases the student's ability to self-regulate and manage their own behaviors better.

RESPONDING. The responding section of the BIP gives information about the types of cues and feedback that the student needs as well as how to reinforce students for appropriate or close approximations to appropriate behavior.

There are two aspects to the plan: the technical and the adaptive. The technical part of the plan provides the framework of a BIP as was indicated in the previous paragraph. However, another important part of the plan is the adaptive component and this has implications for how well the plan is implemented. Paraprofessionals often have strong relationships with the students with whom they work and can be an important support to the implementation of the plan.

STRATEGIES

Frequently, educators ask for prescriptions to improve student behavior. However, these decisions need to be made on an individual basis given our understanding of what maintains that student's behavior. It is important to remember that regardless of who students are individually, strategies will be more effective in a positive and supportive environment where faculty, staff, students, and their families feel respected and both physically and emotionally safe. In such an environment, it will be easier to build relationships with even the most challenging students and practice techniques to de-escalate problem situations when they arise.

BUILDING STRONG AND POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Having strong and positive relationships with the students with whom you work may decrease the likelihood that they will exhibit inappropriate behavior. When students feel a connection with an adult they want to please that adult. Here are some ways to contribute to a positive learning environment and connect with students:

- Make an effort to get to know each student individually. Call them by name, ask them questions about their weekend, learn what they like to do in their spare time, etc.
- Communicate happiness and excitement to see each student. Remember to smile, make positive comments and always avoid sarcasm.
- Offer choices whenever possible. Allow students to make decisions such as the order in which to complete assignments, where to sit, who their partner will be, etc.
- Ask questions. Rather than assume what a student needs, ask questions such as: How can I help you? Is there an easier way for you to do this? Would you like me to repeat the directions?
- Start fresh each day. Every day is a new day and every student should begin each day with a clean slate. If you follow this guideline, students learn to trust that no matter what may have occurred the previous day, this day can be different.

DE-ESCALATION

When it comes to the de-escalation of a volatile situation, the primary goal is to avert physical aggression and diffuse angry outbursts. The situation can then be processed at a later time with the student. Simple steps for de-escalation follow.

- Remain calm and use a quiet, even tone of voice. When being yelled at, our automatic response is to raise our voices right back. However, reacting in this way can further agitate the student. Use a quiet voice and a calming tone. An additional benefit to replying calmly is that it sets a good example for the other students.
- Listen to what the student is saying. Often students will calm down once they verbalize what is upsetting them. Interrupting them or shutting them down may have the effect of increasing the student's anger.
- Validate the student's feelings. When the student pauses, say something non-judgmental such as, "I understand that you are upset, ___" and conclude with the student's name.
- Offer choices and clear consequences. For example: "If you come back into the classroom, we can continue this discussion. If not, this discussion is over for the time being."

If you are working with a student with challenging behaviors, here are a few questions that you may want to ask your supervisor:

- Has an FBA been conducted for this student?
- If an FBA has been done, is there a BIP?
- Can you explain the BIP?
- What are your expectations for me in supporting the implementation of the BIP?

Professional Development Resources for PARAPROFESSIONALS

The **CSDE** professional development for paraprofessionals is coordinated by Iris White, Education Consultant, Bureau of Accountability and Improvement. Iris White can be contacted at **iris.white@ct.gov** or at 860-713-6794.

The **State Education Resource Center (SERC)** provides many professional development opportunities through its *Paraprofessionals as Partners* Initiative. Through a variety of diverse professional development opportunities, paraprofessionals working in collaborative partnerships with general and special Education teachers and support services professionals can enhance and acquire skills to improve their ability to effectively provide instruction and other direct services to meet the needs of all students. SERC also coordinates the annual *Paraprofessional as Partners* conference in the fall of each year.

For more information, contact Anthony Brisson, Consultant with SERC's Paraprofessionals as Partners Initiative, at **brisson@ctserc.org** or at 860-632-1485, ext. 315. More information can also be found on SERC's Web site: **www.ctserc.org**.

The **Capitol Region Education Council (CREC)** also offers a variety of professional development and job opportunities for paraprofessionals and aspiring paraprofessionals, including a comprehensive, job-embedded professional development curriculum called *The Compass*. This series of training modules, aligned with the *National Paraprofessional Standards*, has been designed to enhance paraprofessionals' skills in working with students in educational settings. More information can be found on the paraprofessional page of the CREC Web site, **www.crec.org/paraprofessional**, or by contacting your local regional educational service center (RESC):

ACES: Patricia Hart-Cole, **phart@aces.org**

CES: Dr. Christine Peck, **cpeck@ces.k12.ct.us**

CREC: Donna Morelli, **dmorelli@crec.org**

EASTCONN:Jim Huggins, **jhuggins@eastconn.org**

EDUCATION CONNECTION: Jodiann Tenney, **tenney@educationconnection.org**

LEARN: Tracey LaMothe, **tlamothe@learn.k12.ct.us**

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OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (2010). Reducing the effectiveness of bullying behavior in schools. www.pbis.org

Connecticut State Department of Education
Bureau of Accountability and Improvement
165 Capitol Avenue, P.O. Box 2219, Hartford, CT 06145
Telephone: 860-713-6760 ◆ Fax: 860-713-7035