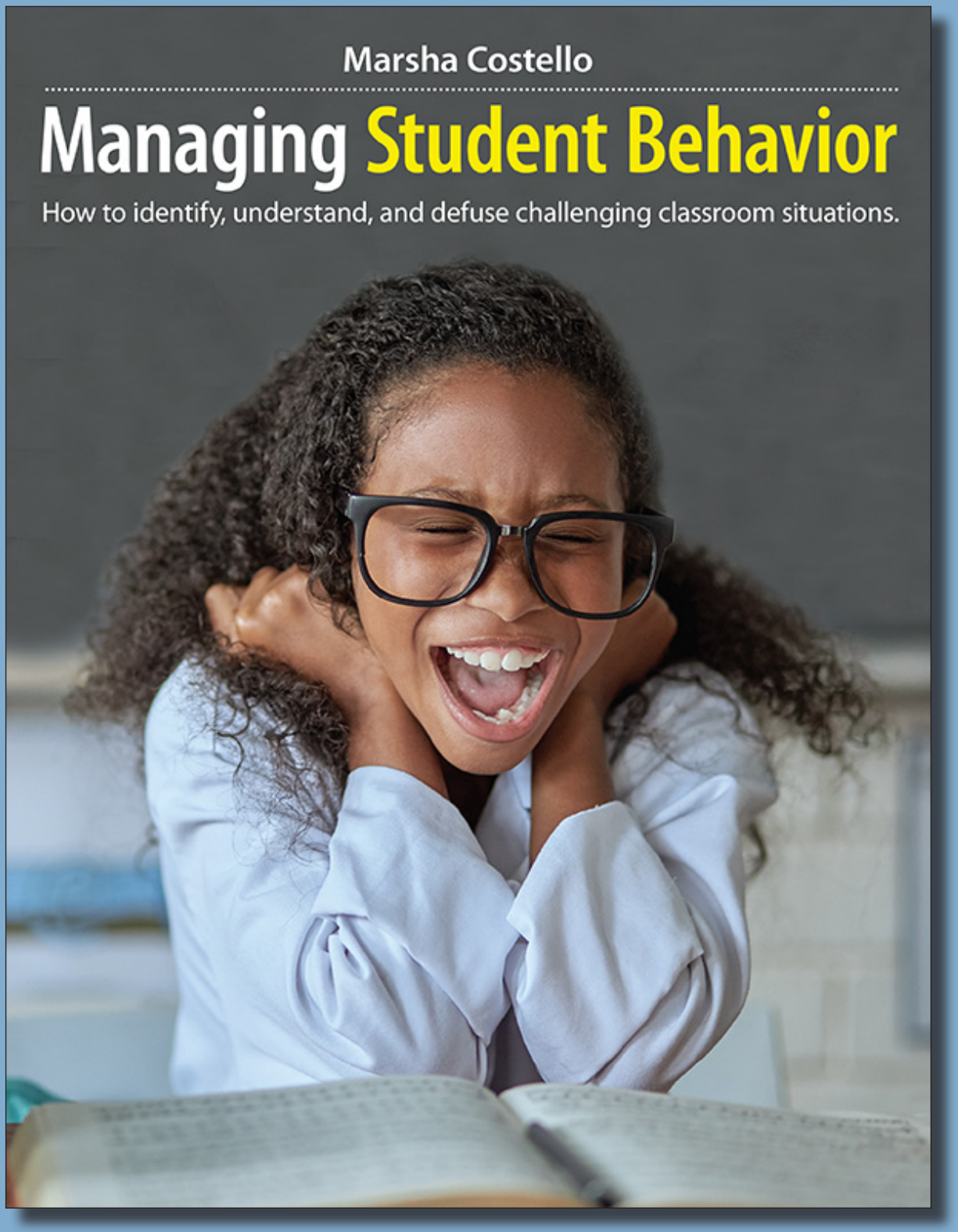
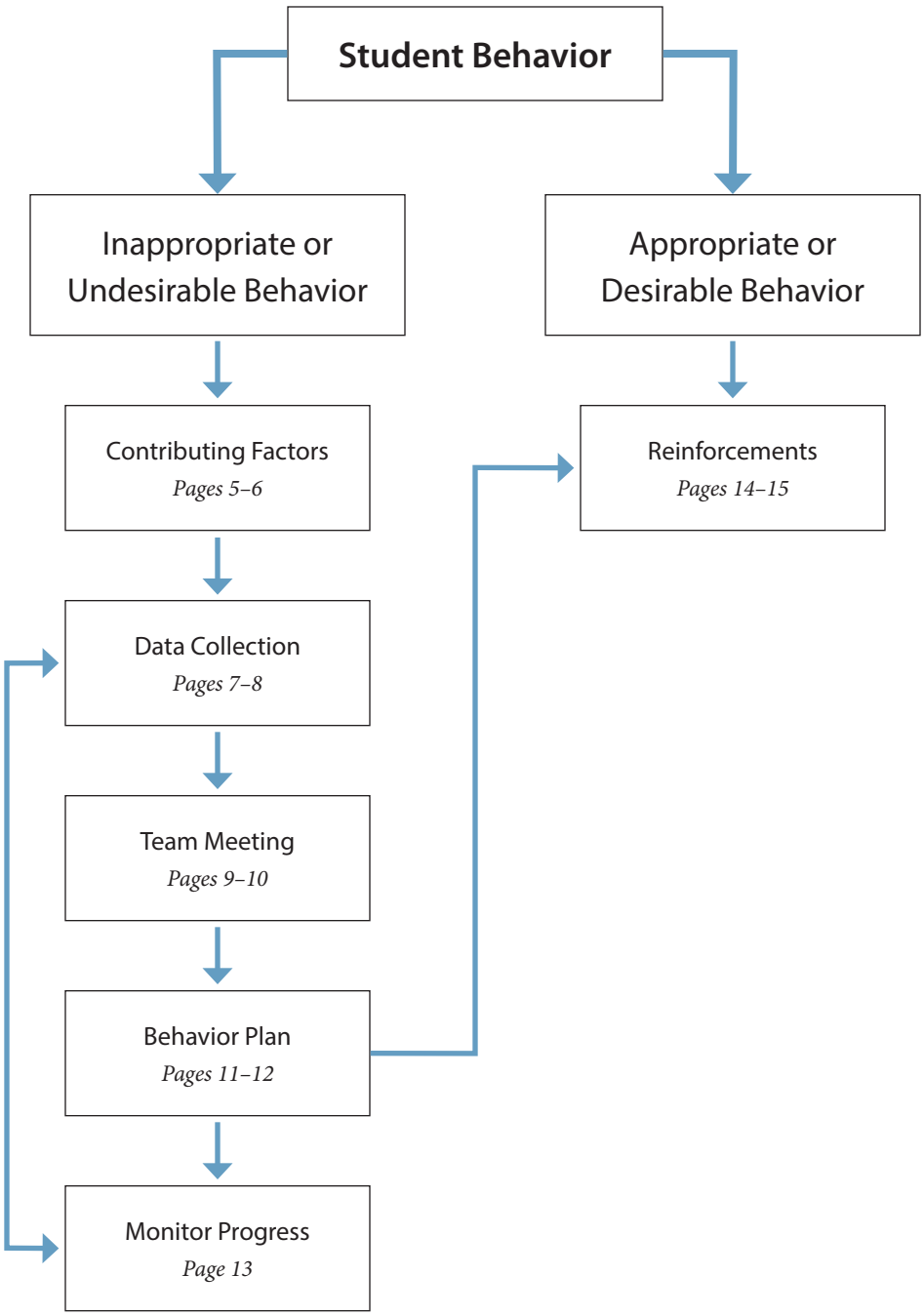
Pull-Out Guide

Highlights from the book *Managing Student Behavior*





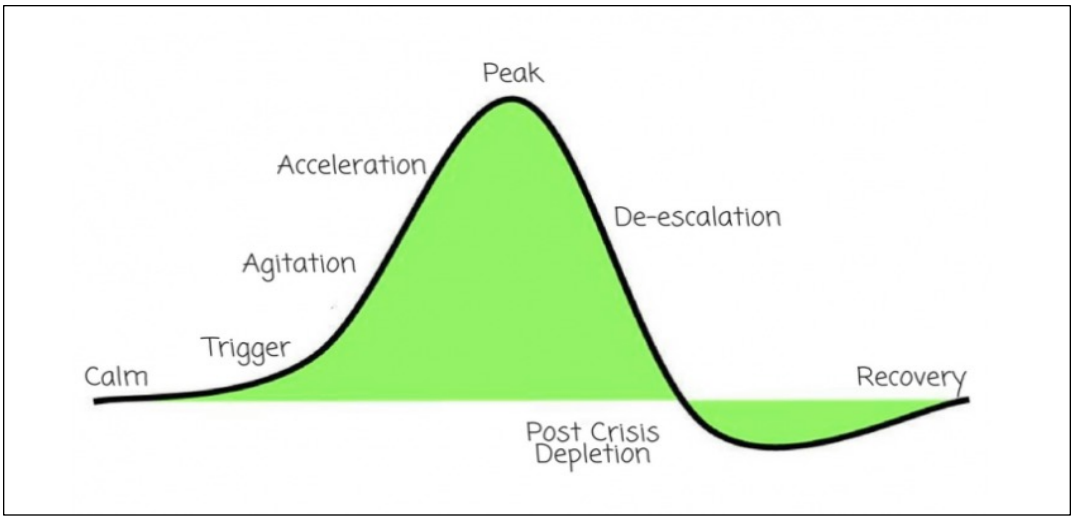
Behaviors are complex and they can feel very personal. Try to remain as emotionally disconnected from behaviors as you can. Students are not doing these behaviors to you or at you; they have a much deeper function. If you engage in these behaviors on an emotional level, it will be much more difficult for you to address them effectively.

Although you may be tempted to view students who exhibit extreme behaviors as manipulative or delinquent, this is not the case. Instead, they have learned to meet their needs through these challenging behaviors. Your goal is to teach them new, more appropriate or acceptable ways to meet their needs.

You may find it difficult to rebuild rapport with the student without first addressing the issue at hand. Keep in mind that accountability will happen, just maybe not right away and maybe not in the way you might expect.

When having follow-up discussions with the student, make sure that judgments are not part of the conversation. Understanding the situation and expectations, and discussing strategies to prevent a reoccurrence of the issue, should be the focus.

Student Behavior



Source: https://hes-extraordinary.com/6-powerful-nvci-skills-for-handling-meltdowns

Although student behavior may appear to escalate quickly, there is generally a pattern to the escalation. As shown in the figure above, something usually triggers a student to transition from a calm and productive state to an agitated state. It is sometimes difficult to recognize these triggers, but you can often determine them through data collection. An agitated state, if not settled, can escalate into a meltdown (peak). This is where you see the most challenging (and sometimes dangerous) behaviors, including flipping desks, physical aggression toward peers, staff, or self, and more. When the meltdown subsides (de-escalation), the student is often mentally and physically exhausted, described as post-crisis depletion. After a meltdown (recovery), students can experience feelings of guilt or shame. It is very important at this stage to rebuild a positive relationship with the student.

The Functions of Behavior

Even when the cause of a student's challenging behavior has been identified, it is important to determine the function of the behavior. The most common reasons for challenging student behavior are escape, avoidance, attention, tangible, and sensory.

- Escape—When the student is faced with something they do not want to do or a situation they do not want to be in, they may behave in such a way to escape the task or situation. Consider an example: You put a math test on the student's desk. They flip their desk or call you an idiot, and you send them to the office. The result is that the student has successfully escaped the math test.

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- Avoidance—This reason is similar to escape, except that the student knows the unwanted task/situation is coming so their behavior happens beforehand so they can avoid it altogether. Here's another over-simplified example: Language arts follows recess. The student struggles to read and write. They hate feeling stupid in front of their peers. They shove the students in the line-up on the way into school and they are sent to the office. In this way, they avoid language arts completely.
- Attention—For some students, the attention they get when they misbehave makes the behavior worthwhile. Students who misbehave for attention very rarely distinguish between positive and negative attention—any attention will do. For example: When the teacher reprimands a student and everyone is watching, they have an audience. This attention may be all that is needed to maintain the behavior.
- Tangible—In this situation, the child behaves in a certain way to obtain an object. For example: A child throws a temper-tantrum in the grocery store checkout line and the parent offers the child a box of Smarties to keep them quiet. In the simplest terms, tantrum in the checkout line = Smarties.
- Sensory—These behaviors serve a sensory need for the student. For example: A student may constantly rub or tap or bang, stomp instead of walk, or hurt their peers because they hug them too hard. These behaviors may not be for disruptive purposes or to be mean to peers, but instead they may serve a sensory need for the child.

http://www.autismadventures.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Slide2-1024x686.jpg

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Contributing Factors

TIP **Keep in mind that the diagnoses or root cause(s) of behavior help provide an understanding of why behaviors occur. But regardless of the diagnosis or root cause, you still need to consider and address the behaviors.**

There are many factors which may contribute to a student's behavior. The factors discussed in this section are not exhaustive; in fact, they are just the tip of the iceberg.

Medical Difficulties/Diagnosis

Vision and/or hearing problems, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), autism, anxiety, chronic medical conditions, epilepsy, sensory needs, and more—multiple conditions can affect learning and/or behavior. This does not mean that students with these conditions should be permitted to misbehave because of their condition(s). Rather, you can use this information to anticipate challenging behaviors, understand why they are occurring, and proactively plan for them.

Academic Struggles

Some students may believe they can't do the work or don't know how to do it. Others may be scared to try it or have accepted that they will never be able to do it. Students may struggle with non-preferred tasks or may have a learning disability in a particular area. In addition, absenteeism can create learning gaps. When students experience these types of academic challenges, they may engage in behavior to avoid academically demanding situations.

Sensory Difficulties

In basic terms, students may be over- or under-stimulated by their environments, which in turn can lead to problem behaviors. A student who is over-stimulated by their surroundings may tend to avoid activities and/or experiences with increased sensory input. Students who are under-stimulated by their environment may demonstrate increased or exaggerated responses to their environment.

Home Stress

Abuse, chronic illness, or death in the family, financial stress, substance use problems, mental health problems, separation/divorce—all these types of adverse childhood experiences can lead to behavior problems in the classroom. Abuse, neglect, and household challenges have an impact on children and have been linked to poor outcomes later in life, as well as poor academic achievement.

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School Stress

Students may experience bullying, social media stress, limited/lack of friendships, social difficulties, personality conflict between student and teacher, limited supports and resources, lack of understanding of a learning/medical/behavioral condition, and more. This stress can lead to poor academic performance as well as an increase in disruptive behaviors. Although it is important to address behaviors as they occur, it is even more important to support students in reducing the stress they are experiencing so they can fully engage in their learning.

Trauma

Behavior stemming from childhood trauma is often the most difficult to address as it can take years for the student to get to a place where they are ready, able, and open to engage in meaningful learning (academic or otherwise). Trauma can be very complex and extremely challenging. Children who have experienced trauma can present as though they are significantly impacted by ADHD and even ODD. Receiving support from a trauma specialist is an important part of support for the student and the school team.

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Data Collection

Although data is often the most useful tool in addressing challenging behavior, it is also the most underused. Dealing with challenging behavior can be very draining and can take up a considerable amount of time. It is not surprising that the thought of collecting data seems overwhelming.

Make the collection process as simple as possible. The person collecting the data should not need to take five minutes each time a behavior occurs to write down a word-for-word account of everything they watched unfold. Nobody has time for this, and it is not an optimal use of time. Using a checklist to collect data can be very useful for all parties involved. You can find a wide variety of data collection checklists online.

Collecting Baseline Data

When student behaviors and challenges are overwhelming, you may start to feel like these things are happening all the time. You may also feel like the behaviors happen for no reason, or that the student is melting down over everything. You may feel this especially if you have been trying to manage these challenges and behaviors for a long period of time.

The good news is that things are often not as bad as they seem. Baseline data is data you collect before you put any strategies in place. Collect a solid chunk of data, such as over a week or two, and then analyze it for patterns. You will use these patterns to develop strategies and suggestions or build a behavior support plan. Baseline data provides a look at the behavior at its worst before you have intervened. It gives you a bar from which to measure the success of your intervention. Just seeing that the behavior is not occurring all the time or is occurring for a particular reason provides a feeling of manageability.

TIP **Baseline data offers you a different view of things and may help you feel that things are not quite as bad as you initially thought.**

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What Counts as Data

Before you start collecting data, consider what it is you want to know and/or track about the behavior. Important things to collect might include:

- the specific behavior(s) that occurred;
- what was happening immediately prior to the behavior (antecedent);
- what happened immediately following the behavior (consequence);
- the time the behavior occurred; and,
- the initials of the staff member collecting the data.

Using the Data

Once enough baseline data has been collected, the team will meet to look at the data and identify any patterns (e.g., is there a specific time of day, day of the week, subject area, etc. where behaviors occur the most often? Does the behavior appear to result in a specific consequence, such as attention or avoidance?). It is common to collect two weeks of baseline data before supports have been put in place to target the behavior.

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Bringing It to the Team

When looking at data to determine the function of a behavior, it is important to have all the key players around the table. This includes the teacher, any support people, and the parent(s)/caregiver(s). Sometimes students may participate in a meeting depending on their age and ability, as well as the sensitivity of the information to be addressed. Participants can share their knowledge of the student and their experiences with the challenging behaviors. This process should cover a broad scope to give a detailed understanding of issues and contexts that may be supporting the behavior(s), including student strengths, background information, triggers, behaviors, and consequences. These elements become the foundation for the behavior support plan.

- Strengths—Includes anything that the student is good at (even relatively speaking). You can also include things the student likes. Beginning the meeting by focusing on strengths accomplishes two things: It allows you to identify possible reinforcers when looking at a behavior plan, and it sets a positive stage for discussing challenging behaviors.
- Background Information—Includes things that may contribute to a student's difficulties but that do not immediately precede the behavior, such as learning disabilities, medical diagnosis, social difficulties, family situation(s), and more. Background information, commonly referred to as slow triggers, includes things that are part of the student's context that may add to their stress level on any given day.
- Triggers—Unlike slow triggers, which are always part of a student's context, fast triggers are the things that immediately precede a behavior. Examples of fast triggers may include peer humiliations, task demands, being told "no," specific subjects, and more. Identifying the fast triggers that most commonly precede a behavior is important for addressing the behavior.
- Behaviors—Includes explicit and definable behaviors. Identifying that the student "melts down" or "gets upset" is not optimal as this looks different to different people. What one teacher might consider a meltdown could be viewed by another as "just blowing off steam." When defining behaviors, include specific actions like biting, kicking, cursing, slamming a fist into the desk, rolling eyes, spitting, etc. There are fewer misinterpretations when you define behaviors in very specific and explicit terms. This is especially important when multiple people are supporting and addressing the student's behavior.
- Consequences—Includes anything that occurs immediately after the behavior happens. You may think that consequence means punishment, but in reality, multiple consequences occur naturally following a behavior. For example, if the students in the class all gasp or laugh or fall silent, this is a consequence of the behavior. Similarly, if a peer laughs loudly or yells out "good one," this is a consequence of the behavior. If the student is addressed sternly by the teacher or is asked to leave the room, or if the teacher sends a note home or calls the parent(s), these are also consequences.

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Consequences can be very reinforcing for a student and often serve to maintain challenging behaviors. It is also important to note that peer consequences (e.g., laughing, giggling, gasping, etc.) provide attention. And, as we stated before, for many students seeking attention, there is no difference between good and bad attention.

TIP **Many experts now refer to "attention seeking" as "connection seeking" or "relationship seeking" as this is more positive and creates a different understanding of the student and the behavior. We use "attention seeking" here only because that term is more common.**

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Making the Behavior Plan

Data discussed above is analyzed to identify any patterns that may be present. Patterns can involve key times when issues present, specific tasks that cause behavior outbursts, or consequences that appear to maintain the behavior. Once the data is analyzed, a behavior support plan (BSP) is created to outline the approach that will be taken to modify the challenging behavior(s).

The behavior support plan is created from the information discussed above. Each topic (i.e., strengths, background, triggers, behaviors, and consequences) becomes the basis for a section in the BSP.

- **Strengths** are used to identify objects and/or activities that would be reinforcing to the student. These are then built into the plan as scheduled opportunities and/or contingent reinforcement. Both types of support are beneficial. With scheduled reinforcement, the student has positive activities built right into their day. These occur according to the schedule and are not contingent on behaviors. Whether the student is having a good day or a not-so-good day, they still participate in these opportunities. With contingent reinforcement, the student receives reinforcement based on the presence or absence of specific targeted behavior.
- **Supports** address any areas of need that arise in the background section. These could include referrals to services such as a pediatrician, psychologist, speech pathologist or occupational therapist, family counseling, trauma support, and more. In-school supports such as academic assessment and/or intervention could also be included in this section to address academic gaps that may have been identified.
- **Strategies** are identified to help the student react more appropriately when they experience "triggers." These could be educative in nature and may involve the guidance counselor, a school youth service worker, or even the resource teacher. Skills taught may include things like identifying bodily cues for stress/frustration, learning to ask for a break, deep breathing or relaxation techniques, and many more. Necessary materials might also be referenced in this section, like social stories, visuals, break cards, timers, etc.
- The **behaviors are prioritized** to determine which behavior to focus on first. It would be too overwhelming to try to tackle everything at once! You will also track behavior to make sure you are seeing a change in the right direction.
- **Consequences** are also used to help identify reinforcers. For example, if the data suggests that peer attention is maintaining negative behaviors, then build opportunities for positive peer attention into the plan.
- The plan includes a section that outlines the **consequences for behaviors moving forward**. This section is progressive and provides guidelines for how staff should respond to the various behaviors the student exhibits. For students who become violent or physically aggressive, it is important to include any physical intervention that may be necessary and to detail the logistics of this (e.g., when and why a restraint/hold might be necessary, who would perform this, required training, and any necessary follow up). It is important to understand any guidelines/restrictions your district has in relation to physical interventions (i.e., restraints, holds, etc.) and ensure all involved staff understand them.

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It may be useful to record "by who" and "by when" for any actionable items. For instance, if a referral to a pediatrician is part of the plan, document who is making the referral and when this is happening. This will help keep track of progress on all aspects of the plan. Frequent follow-up meetings are recommended, perhaps bi-weekly or monthly depending on the needs of the student and feasibility of such scheduling. Review how things are going, who has done what, challenges, and supports needed during the follow-up meetings. Reviewing data to ensure that behaviors are decreasing is also an important part of these meetings.

TIP

Behavior support plans are comprehensive. They are very detailed and outline a plan of action involving multiple support people. Reviewing the BSP with all parties involved, and having them sign the plan, is important to ensure everyone is aware of and agrees with the plan.

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Monitoring Progress: Following Up on the Behavior Plan

Once your behavior plan is in place and everyone is on the same page, you will use data to track the progress of your plan. If the data indicates a decrease in inappropriate behaviors, your plan is working. This is great news! You may want to check in on the data regularly to make sure you remain on the right track.

If the data does not show a decrease in inappropriate behaviors, your plan is not working. If your plan isn't working, you need to review the plan and look for things that may need to be tweaked.

Your data may reveal new patterns, or there may be inconsistencies in how the plan is implemented, how reinforcers are accessed, whether or not reinforcers are actually reinforcing/motivational, etc. Sit with the team and consider areas that may need to be addressed. Once you have revised your plan and put the revisions into place, again use the data to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan.

In this way, your data will always be informing your plan. Data based decision making is always the ideal.

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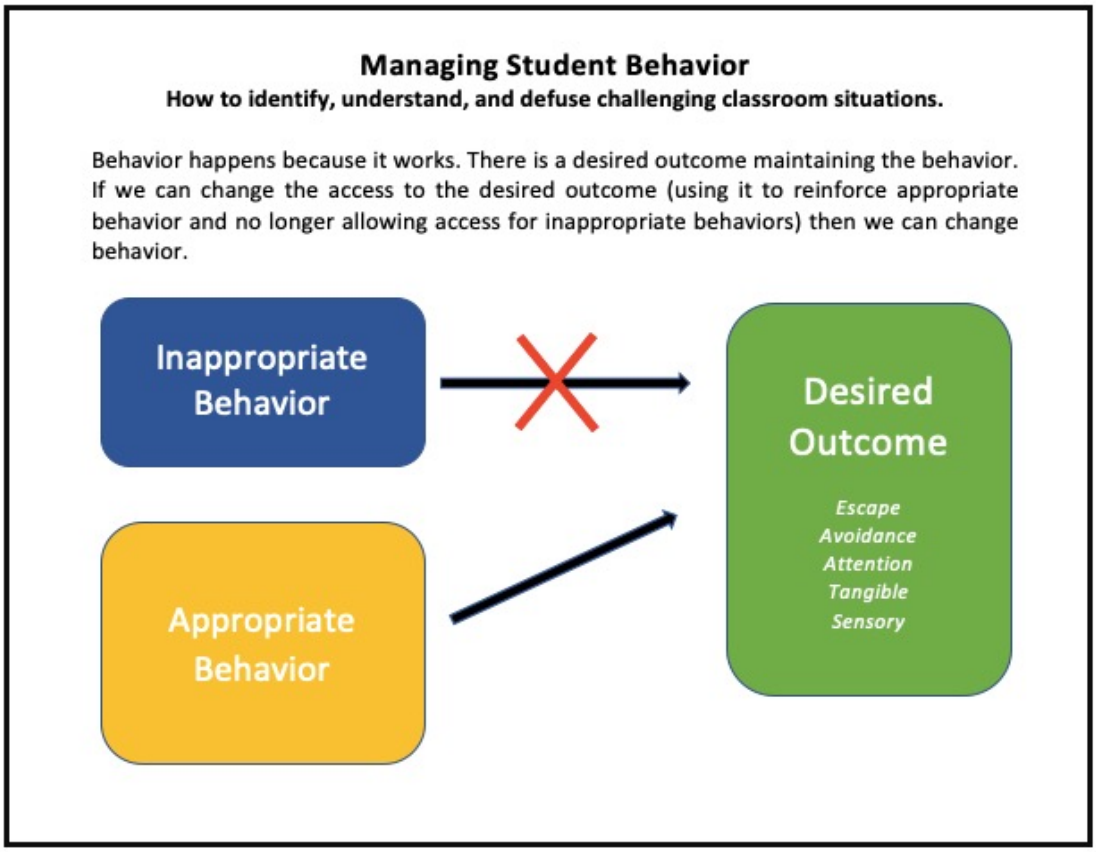
Reinforcement

Reinforcement is the process by which you increase a specific behavior. In the simplest of terms, you observe a desired behavior, you reinforce that behavior, and that behavior occurs more often. One of the key factors in reinforcement is using things that you know are motivating (reinforcing) to the student. What you offer as reinforcement must be more reinforcing than what the student is currently getting out of the misbehavior.

For example, if a student misbehaves to get sent out of class, you need to offer the student something that is more motivating than getting out of class. You may also choose to offer "getting out of class" as the reinforcement since you know the student is motivated by this. However, for this to work you must ensure that the student is no longer removed from class for misbehavior and instead only gets out of class as a reinforcement for appropriate behavior.



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The Important Features of Reinforcement

The acronym DISC is used in many behavior programs and resources. It outlines the important features of reinforcement that you need to remember.

- D—Desirability (or Deprivation): Reinforcers must be something the student wants. Remember just because you think they would like/want it, doesn't mean they will. You also need to ensure the student does not become saturated with their reinforcer (i.e., they get it so often as a reinforcer that it loses its motivational value).
- I—Immediacy: Reinforcement must happen immediately following the target behavior. If you are earning something for later (e.g., a movie at the end of the month), make sure the checkmark or token is given immediately following the desired behavior.
- S—Size: The size of the reinforcer must equal the size of the expectation. If you are offering one token for one multiplication problem, you can't expect the student to complete their multiplication quiz for one token.
- C—Contingent: Make sure the reinforcer is contingent on the behavior. In other words, the behavior must happen in order for the student to access the reinforcer. The student should not have access to the reinforcer outside of the reinforcement system.

Reinforcement versus Punishment

By definition, reinforcement is a process that increases a behavior, while punishment decreases a behavior. Punishment sometimes feels like it works instantly, and on the surface, it doesn't seem to require as much time or effort as reinforcement. For instance, you raise your voice, maybe even yell, and things quiet down. Raising your voice or yelling are punishers in this example as they decrease the behaviors that had been occurring.

So why go to all the bother of reinforcement? There are several reasons.

Reinforcement:

- Builds replacement behaviors;
- Builds appropriate behaviors;
- Lasts over time;
- Can be paired with natural reinforcement to level the playing field; and,
- Is positive and helps build relationships and respect.

In contrast, punishment:

- Does not build replacement behaviors;
- Does not build appropriate behaviors;
- Can be detrimental;
- Does not promote respect;
- Can be embarrassing for the student and cause them to shut down or feel isolated/exposed; and,
- Can sometimes hit a little too close to home for some students (e.g., although yelling may settle a student who is struggling, yelling may also be a consequence they experience at home and could be paired with other negative forms of punishment). As easy as it may sometimes be to punish, we encourage you to reinforce positive behaviors as often as you can.

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Managing Student Behavior provides a foundation for understanding the dynamics of K-8 classrooms. It explores a variety of proven strategies for calming confrontational situations and diffusing disruptive behavior.

This practical book provides an in-depth understanding of behavior, and includes useful insights to help identify factors that trigger troubling situations. It provides an overview of how to use positive reinforcement, which is fundamental in behavior change, along with effective and evidence-based strategies to improve classroom behavior.

This comprehensive approach to understanding student behavior explores the fundamentals involved in

- creating a behavior support plan that addresses the complexities of classroom practice
- encouraging the development of self-regulation skills among all students
- striving for a calm environment with respect for all as common ground
- identifying and reinforcing positive habits, what they look like and how they work
- tracking, monitoring, and using data to inform next steps
- establishing schedules, routines, and predictability to better manage all situtions

This highly readable book includes examples that illustrate a variety of behavior challenges along with strategies that support positive change. It is committed to showing you how to create a non-threatening environment in which students are better able to focus on their learning. Designed for easy classroom use, you will find tips and key ideas throughout the book, along with useful templates.

Managing Student Behavior recognizes that effective strategies, applied consistently, will have a profound effect on managing and modifying behavior in your classroom.

Photo credit: Faith Costello

Marsha Costello has been an educator for more than twenty years. She has worked in many roles, including alternate education, resource, special education, and Autism. Marsha is currently principal in a small, rural, elementary school in St. Louis, PEI. Supporting challenging behaviours was a significant aspect of all of these roles and continues to be a focus in the role of principal. Marsha is devoted to addressing challenging situations through a calm and consistent approach to behavior change.

ISBN: 978-1-55138-355-2

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