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Supporting Students with Asperger's Syndrome Who Present Behavioral Challenges

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Though challenging behaviors are frequently the primary obstacle in supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome, there are few published studies to direct educators towards the most effective behavioral approaches for these students. What we know to date is largely based on experience and relies heavily on generalizing strategies from the applied behavior analysis arena. However, what appears most evident (given the heterogeneity even among these individuals) is that a primarily categorical approach will be unsuccessful for most, and that effective behavior support will require highly individualized practices which address primary areas of difficulty in social understanding and interactions, pragmatic communication, managing anxiety, preferences for sameness and rules, and ritualistic behaviors.

Recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA '97) will greatly impact how behavioral support is conceptualized and delivered to students with Asperger's Syndrome. IDEA '97 requires school districts to conduct functional behavioral assessments when student behavior negatively impacts individual student learning and the school environment. Although functional behavioral assessment has been regarded for many years as best practice for supporting a diverse array of students, its application to school settings in general, and individuals with Asperger's Syndrome in particular, is in its infancy. A general understanding of the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome in combination with a functional analytic approach to developing positive behavioral supports is needed to achieve best outcomes on behalf of these students.

General Characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome:

Williams (1995) provided a concise description of a broad range of characteristics of individuals with Asperger's Syndrome that may influence a student's school performance, and that provide a beginning road map for instructional and behavioral support issues that must be addressed in the school setting:


- **Insistence on sameness:** easily overwhelmed by minimal changes in routines, sensitive to environmental stressors, preference for rituals.
- **Impairment in social interactions:** unable to understand the "rules" of interaction, poor comprehension of jokes and metaphor, pedantic speaking style.
- **Restricted range of social competence:** preoccupation with singular topics such as train schedules or maps, asking repetitive questions about circumscribed topics, obsessively collecting items.
- **Inattention:** poor organizational skills, easily distracted, focuses on irrelevant stimuli, difficulty learning in group contexts.
- **Poor motor coordination:** slow clerical speed, clumsy gait, unsuccessful in games involving motor skills.
- **Academic difficulties:** restricted problem solving skills, literal thinking, deficiencies with abstract reasoning.
- **Emotional vulnerability:** low self-esteem, easily overwhelmed, poor coping with stressors, self-critical.


Characteristics of a Functional Analytic Approach to Developing Positive Behavioral Supports:


A functional analytic approach to developing effective positive behavioral supports rests on the use of a process commonly (and most recently) known as functional behavioral assessment. Functional behavioral assessment involves employing a diverse array of strategies (e.g., person-centered planning, team meetings, systematic interviews, direct






observations) to formulate hypotheses about why an individual behaves as they do. In order to effectively adopt a functional behavioral assessment approach, several assumptions about behavior must be regarded as valid:

 **Behavior is functional** - it serves a specific purpose(s). For individuals with Asperger's Syndrome, these functions may be expressed in highly idiosyncratic and often complex verbal ways.

 **Behavior has communicative value** (if not specific intent). Though it is generally accepted that all behavior has communicative value, it is important to remember that individuals with Asperger's Syndrome generally do not have a behavioral intent to disrupt educational settings, but instead problematic behaviors may arise from other needs, for example, self-protection in stressful situations. Although students with Asperger's Syndrome typically have excellent language skills, their ability to use communication effectively in a social context may be extremely affected. Inappropriate behavior may be the only available communicative response to difficult situations until other options are systematically taught.

 **Behavior is context related.** All individuals demonstrate some level of variability in behavior across different settings. This is just as true for individuals with Asperger's Syndrome. In fact, understanding how setting specific features impact an individual (either positively or negatively) is one of the chief outcomes of a functional behavioral assessment. This information has particular value for adopting preventive efforts or to set the stage for teaching alternative skills. Effective behavioral support is contingent on understanding the student, the context in which he operates, and the reason(s) for behavior.

Though there is often disagreement about the best means to conduct a comprehensive functional behavioral assessment, most researchers and clinicians are in agreement about the key outcomes of such an assessment. They are:

-  A clear and unambiguous description of the problematic behavior(s);
-  A description of situations most commonly, and least commonly associated with the occurrence of problematic behavior; and
-  Identification of the consequences that maintain behavior. In other words, once a behavior starts, what keeps it going over time? What is reinforcing the behavior so that it continues?

Conducting a functional behavioral assessment is a hollow exercise unless it provides information that: increases understanding of the individual, the problem behavior itself, and the physical and social setting(s) in which the behavior occurs; and can be used to guide the development of supports that are logically connected to this information. Once general understanding of problem behaviors is achieved, it is useful to adopt a positive behavioral support framework to systematically delineate interventions.

Positive behavioral supports are often difficult to define given the diversity of strategies and supports that encompass this term. However, it is important to remember a few hallmarks of positive behavioral supports, including: a focus on preventing the occurrence of problem behavior; a focus on teaching socially acceptable alternatives to problem behavior, especially alternatives that serve the same purpose as the problem behavior, and therefore are more likely to be adopted by the individual; and a focus on expanding beyond consequence strategies, and in particular those generally used as programs (e.g., time out, response costs) across a student's entire school day without regard for how they might match or mismatch with behavioral functions or individual student need.




Bambara and Knoster (1995) proposed a comprehensive format for outlining "multi-component" supports which addresses the following issues: antecedent/setting event strategies; alternative skills training; consequence strategies; and long term prevention. Each of these areas will be addressed in turn:

Antecedent/setting event strategies: The primary goals of this type of strategy are to prevent or reduce the likelihood of problem behavior and to set the stage for learning more adaptive skills over time. For example, many students with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulty with noisy, crowded environments. Therefore, the newly arrived high school freshman who becomes physically aggressive in the hallway during passing periods may need an accommodation of leaving class a minute or two early to avoid the congestion which provokes this behavior. Over time, the student may



learn to negotiate the hallways simply by being more accustomed to the situation, or by being given specific instruction or support.

Key issues to address when discussing this type of strategy are:




-  What can be done to eliminate the problem (i.e., the antecedent condition)?
-  What can be done to modify the situation if it cannot be eliminated entirely?
-  Will the antecedent strategy need to be permanent, or is it a temporary "fix" which allows the student (with support) to increase skills needed to manage the situation in the future?

The importance of using antecedent strategies should not be underestimated among the constellation of support strategies. Student's with Asperger's Syndrome often have to manage a great amount of personal stress. Striking a balance of short and long term accommodations through manipulating antecedents to problem behavior is often critical in setting the stage for later skill development.




Alternative Skills Training: The primary purpose of this type of strategy is to teach skills that replace problem behavior by serving the same purpose as the challenging behavior. For example, a young child with Asperger's Syndrome may have trouble "entering" into a kickball game by asking to play and instead simply inserts himself into the game, thereby offending the other players and risking exclusion. Instead, the child can be coached on how and when to ask to enter into the game.

Again, Knoster and Bambara (1995) provide a particularly useful framework for guiding efforts towards teaching alternative skills by examining the following three categories: equivalence training, general skills training, and self-regulation training.




Equivalence training requires support persons to ask the following sequential questions:

-  What is the function of the problem behavior?
-  What alternative skill(s) will be taught which serves the same function as the problem behavior?
-  How will the alternative skills be taught?

General skills training requires asking the following sequential questions:

-  What skill deficits are contributing to the problem behavior?
-  What other academic, social, or communication skills will be taught that will prevent the problem behavior from occurring?
-  How will these alternative skills be taught?

Self-regulation training requires asking the following sequential questions:

-  What event's appear to be contributing to the student's anger or frustration in reference to the problem behavior?
-  What self-control skills will be taught to help the student deal with difficult/frustrating situations?
-  How will these skills be taught?

One particularly relevant means to teach alternative skills is through the use of self-management strategies. Self-management is a procedure in which people are taught to discriminate their own target behavior and record the occurrence or absence of that target behavior (Koegel, Koegel & Parks, 1995). Self-management is a particularly useful technique to assist individuals to achieve greater levels of independent or even inter-dependent functioning across many



settings and situations. By learning self-management techniques, individuals can become more self-directed and less dependent on continuous supervision and control. Instead of teaching situation specific behaviors, self-management teaches a more general skill that can be applied in an unlimited number of settings. The procedure has particular relevance and immediate utility for students with Asperger's Syndrome.

The basic steps for teaching self-management, as outlined by Koegel, Koegel and Parks (1995) are: clearly define the target behavior; identify student reinforcers; design or choose a self-management method or recording device; teach the individual to use the self-management device; and teach self-management independence. Readers are encouraged to access this article for further instructions in this process.

It is also important for teachers to monitor their own behavior vigilantly when working with students with Asperger's Syndrome. Each time a teacher reprimands a student for mis-behavior, an opportunity to reframe the moment in terms of the student's need to develop alternative skills through a means such as self-management training may be lost.

Consequence strategies: Though consequences have traditionally been framed in terms of how they reduce problem behavior as punishment for behavior, reframing consequences in terms of reinforcement for achieving alternative behaviors should be the focus for students with Asperger's Syndrome. One way to reframe the use of consequences is to develop them as planned responses to instructional situations. This shifting of the type and use of consequences does not mean that negative consequences can or should be eliminated, especially in moments of crisis, but that a predominance of negative consequences is likely to heighten anxiety levels for the student and compete with teaching alternative skills.

Long term prevention: In the presence of immediate behavioral concerns, it may be difficult to adopt a long term approach to a student's educational program. However, it is imperative that plans for supporting a student over the long term be outlined right from the start. Many procedures and supports with the most relevance and utility for students with Asperger's Syndrome (specific accommodations, peer supports, social skills, and self-management strategies) must be viewed as procedures that are developed progressively as the child moves through school. These are not crisis management strategies but the very things that can decrease crisis situations from arising.

Once these questions are addressed, behavior support plans can be established. At the heart of these behavior support plans should be a discussion about how students with Asperger's fit into typical classroom management practices and school-wide discipline procedures. One issue to consider is how a student responds to practices such as response costs, penalties, or fines which are often built into such frameworks. Many students with Asperger's Syndrome become highly anxious in the presence of such penalties, and often cannot regroup following their application. This is especially true if threats over losing highly preferred items or activities are used. Another issue relates to school-wide discipline procedures. Schools which focus on suspension and expulsion as the primary approach rather than on teaching social skills, conflict resolution and negotiation, and on building community learning will typically be less effective with all students, including those with Asperger's. When school-wide discipline procedures and classroom management practices are adopted which are ineffective with the broader school population, students with Asperger's will use their behavior to highlight the weaknesses in these systems. As a result, school staff are forced to adopt intrusive practices which would be unnecessary in more effective systems. Once broader systems are addressed, family members and professionals will often need training about principles of behavior support, and about the characteristics of individuals with Asperger's Syndrome. There are many false assumptions about this population. For example, assumptions about what an individual with Asperger's Syndrome understands, especially related to social conventions, often sparks confrontation with the student but also among staff when discussing appropriate interventions.

Finally, those involved with the student will need to collaborate on a behavior support plan which is clear and easily implemented. Once developed, the plan will need to be monitored across settings. Inconsistencies in our expectations and behaviors, will only serve to heighten the challenges demonstrated by an individual with Asperger's.

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