Individual Behavior Plans & Functional Assessment

Tier 2 & 3

Tier 2 & 3 Intervention

Teachers and administrators frequently find themselves managing challenging behaviors of students. These behaviors range from relatively minor disruptions such as talking out of turn, getting out of seat, and using classroom materials inappropriately, to more severe behaviors such as leaving the classroom and aggression. The problem behaviors of most students can be addressed through classroom-wide or school-wide rules and consequences in addition to reinforcement of appropriate behaviors. However, some students continue to exhibit problem behavior even with these supports in place. For those students, more intensive behavior interventions are warranted. Individual behavior plans are plans that employ methods of decreasing problem behavior and increasing pro-social behavior of individual students. Because individual behavior plans focus on individual students, plans may differ even between students who display similar problem behavior.
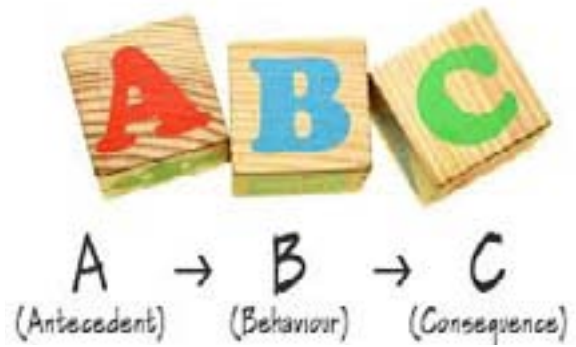
Effective individual behavior plans are created by teams of school employees who are knowledgeable about the specific student and behavior-change practices. Such a problem-solving team creates individual behavior plans. The problem-solving team should consist of several staff members from the school, the student's parent or guardian, and an individual or individuals with substantial knowledge of behavior support (Benazzi, Horner, & Good, 2006).

What are Individual Behavior Plans?

An individual behavior plan is a kind of "prescription" of specific behavioral and other interventions tailored to the needs and behavioral data of a particular student. The idea of the plan is to be explicit about the specific interventions to be applied to the student to change that student's behavior, and to coordinate the efforts of the adults involved in implementing the plan. The purpose of an individual behavior plan is to systematically modify a student's environment with the goal of changing a student's behavior. Individual behavior plans are tailored to individual students and their specific behavioral difficulties. As such, every individual behavior plan will look somewhat different. However, a number of common elements are critical in establishing an effective individual behavior plan.

Based on sound behavioral theory. Effective individual behavior plans should be grounded in behavioral theory (Repp & Horner, 1999). Research on behavioral theory supports that student behavior is maintained by factors in their environment. In other words, problem behavior should be viewed as an issue arising from an interaction with the environment and the student, rather than solely an issue within the student. Additionally, effective individual behavior plans should use established behavioral principles such as reinforcement.

A-B-C Analysis. Individual behavior plans often rely on an analysis of the antecedents to the behavior, the specific behavior to be addressed, and consequences of the behavior (thus the "A-B-C analysis"; Goh & Bambara, 2010). Antecedents are the events that precede a specific behavior and tend to signal that a behavior may occur. Consequences are the events that follow a specific behavior, and they may affect the future frequency of that specific behavior. Antecedents and consequences can be identified in a functional behavior assessment and a functional analysis (Goh & Bambara, 2010)

Data collection. Individual behavior plans are most effective when data is consistently collected. Data is collected before the implementation of the plan (i.e., baseline) and during the implementation of the plan to allow the problem-solving team to compare behavior across conditions, identify patterns and trends in behavior, and determine the effectiveness of the plan.

Functional Behavior Assessment

Individual behavior plans are most effective when they are based on functional behavior assessments (FBA; Ingram, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 2005). By gathering data and analyzing the antecedents and consequences, an Functional Behavior Assessment can identify

hypotheses about the function of a problem behavior (Umbreit, Ferro, Liaupsin, & Lane, 2007). The function of a behavior is the purpose that a behavior serves for that student in that circumstance (Umbreit et al., 2007). In other words, the function of a behavior describes what a student is "getting" out of a behavior. For example, if students leave the classroom in order to avoid completing work, the function of the behavior is escape. The function of a specific behavior will vary from individual to individual, but all functions can be understood through the principles of positive reinforcement (i.e., the student is getting something from performing the behavior) and negative reinforcement (i.e., the student is getting out of something from performing the behavior). The two most common functions are attention (e.g., social attention from teacher) and escape (e.g., getting out of schoolwork). However, other common functions include tangible (e.g., receiving a desirable item), self-stimulation (e.g., access to twirling hair), power or control, and revenge.

Functions of Behavior

Examples of possible functions of behavior which might be identified as a result of a functional assessment:

- Power/Control
- Escape/Avoidance
- Attention
- Acceptance/Affiliation
- Expression of Self
- Gratification
- Justice/Revenge

(Neel & Cessna, 1993)

Prior to the FBA, the problem-solving team should carefully, specifically, and objectively define the target behavior (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2006). Successful completion of an FBA requires careful, systematic observation of student behavior and recording of behavioral data. Interviews with students, teachers, and other adults who are familiar with the child can also be helpful. As such, only individuals who are trained in observation, interview techniques, and data analysis, such as school psychologists, special educators, or other specially trained teachers should conduct FBAs.

Conducting an FBA helps inform individual behavior plans. An FBA provides data on the antecedents and consequences of a behavior. Understanding the antecedents of a behavior allows the problem-solving team to modify or manipulate the antecedents in order to prevent the behavior from occurring (Umbreit et al., 2007). Understanding the consequences of a behavior allows the problem-solving team to avoid implementing interventions that actually reward the student's problem behavior. For example, if students are motivated by escaping school work then sending students out of the classroom would reward students, which might actually increase the frequency of escape-maintained behavior. Further, understanding the function of a behavior can inform the problem-solving team which rewards will lead to a successful intervention. For instance, a student who is strongly motivated by adult attention can be rewarded with one-on-one interaction with a teacher.

The purpose of the problem-solving team is to identify the problem behavior, identify the function (e.g., attention, escape, tangible, automatic) of the problem behavior, identify the antecedents and consequences, and to create strategies that produce positive change (Medley, Little, & Akin-Little, 2008).


What Do We Know about Individual Behavior Plans?

Individual behavior plans that are based on FBAs are derived from decades of research on applied behavior analysis, positive behavior interventions and support, and reinforcement (Erbas, 2010). Research has also been conducted specifically on the effectiveness of individual behavior plans. One caveat to this body of literature is that because behavior plans necessarily differ from case to case, the research should be interpreted differently than a standardized intervention that is delivered the same way every time. Another limitation to individual behavior plans is that because they are individualized, they take a substantial amount of time; therefore, they should not be used for every case of problem behavior.

Despite these limitations, individual behavior plans that are carefully based on FBAs can have dramatic effects on the behavior of students of all ages (Goh & Bambara, 2010). Hundreds of studies have been conducted on these techniques using single-case methodology. Despite the fact that these studies used single case research designs, the results converge to conclude that individual behavior plans are effective for a wide variety of problem behaviors. Studies have addressed self-injurious behavior, aggressive behavior, and off-task behavior (Goh & Bambara, 2010) among others. These studies also addressed a wide variety of categories of student behavior, including various behavior problems of students with emotional or behavioral disorders, as well as students on
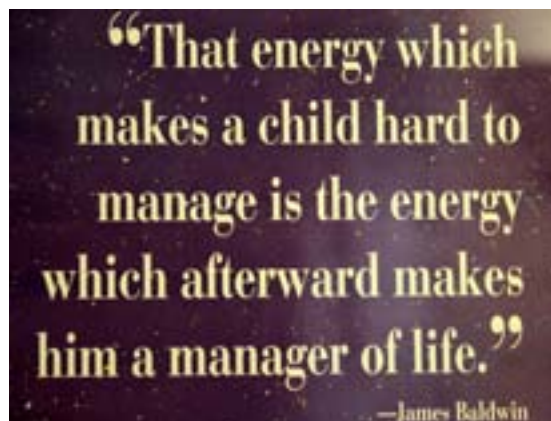
the autism spectrum, and students with other developmental disabilities (Carr et al., 1999). Other large-scale research syntheses have found similar results (Harvey, Boer, Meyer, & Evans, 2009). These studies have typically relied on trained and knowledgeable individuals to develop the intervention plans; however, implementation is usually carried out by school personnel who, on a daily basis, spend the most time with those students.
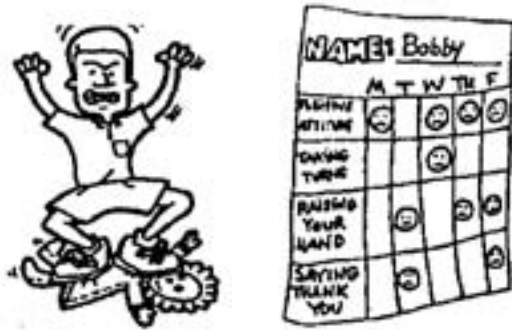
A number of factors contribute to increasing the likelihood of success for an individual behavior plan. Team decision making during the planning stages of the intervention has been linked to increased intervention effectiveness (Goh & Bambara, 2010), particularly if the team includes someone knowledgeable about behavior support (Benazzi et al., 2006; Cook et al., 2007). The presence of school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) in the school increases success rates (Medley et al., 2008; see the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports strategy brief). However, careful functional behavior assessment remains the most important factor (Erbas, 2010; Goh & Bambara, 2010; Ingram et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Individual behavior plans are intensive interventions designed to decrease the problem behavior of an individual student. Accordingly, individual behavior plans should be reserved for students who exhibit challenging behavior that is resistant to less intensive intervention efforts. When implemented correctly (i.e., when informed by functional behavior assessments, data-based decision making, and supervised by a problem-solving team with members trained in behavioral support), individual behavior plans have been shown to reduce problem behaviors and increase pro-social behaviors in a variety of populations, including students in special education. Functional behavior assessments and individual behavior plans should therefore be considered as evidence-based practices for changing student behavior, particularly when supported by school wide positive behavioral interventions and supports.

"That energy which makes a child hard to manage is the energy which afterward makes him a manager of life."

—James Baldwin

See related Strategy Briefs on:
> Behavior Contracting; Motivation; Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports; and Reinforcement.

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