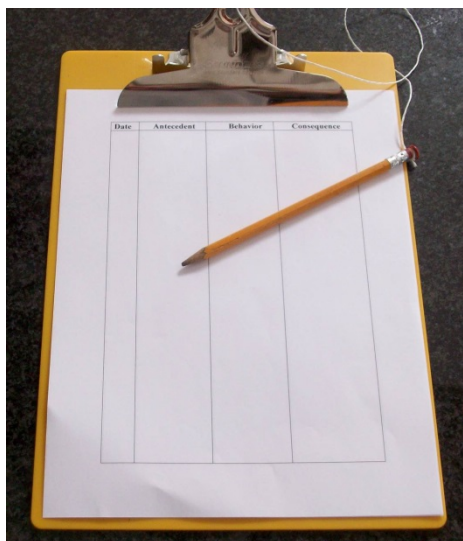




Cindy's Corner

Charting Behaviors and Desensitizing Strategies



Children who engage in inappropriate behaviors can be both challenging and thought provoking. Often the solution to shaping appropriate behavior is relatively simple, such as establishing a predictable environment or teaching a more appropriate way to communicate. Given structure and consistency, most behaviors respond well to traditional behavior management strategies. As teachers, many of us know that Introduction to Behavior 101 and traditional approaches to behavior intervention don't fit every experience we encounter. Some behaviors can be a lot more ambiguous and the solutions to them a lot more evasive. I thought it might be helpful if I shared some strategies and techniques that I found to be effective in the classroom.

When the cause of a behavior eludes you, you need to look for a pattern. This means you have to document the behavior over a period of time. This may seem like just one more thing you have to do, but consider that improved understanding of what triggers a behavior may help to reduce it or eliminate it all together so you can get back to teaching. A solution might become obvious, such as the need to restructure the classroom environment or implement a consistent toileting routine. At the very least, charting behavior will sharpen your observation skills and make you better able to articulate the problem to an expert.

Documenting behavior is not as hard as it sounds. Target the behavior you want to remediate and document it every time it occurs over a two-week period. Note the time and date and what happened just before the behavior occurred (this is called the antecedent). It is important to write down everything you remember, particularly the things that happened in the background, even if you don't think they had anything to do with the behavior. Record the behavior itself. Keep it simple; devise an abbreviated system (e.g., B for biting, K for kicking) to make charting easier. Document what happens after the behavior ends (this is referred to as the consequence). This is important, because over time it will show you what was effective and how you were able to help your child or student regroup.

At the end of two weeks, analyze the chart to try and find a pattern. If one doesn't emerge, keep charting. Sometimes you can see a pattern emerge after just a few days; usually you will see a pattern by the end of a few weeks. Often the pattern will surprise you. Once you get into the habit of charting behaviors, it will become routine for you. If a pattern doesn't emerge, the empathy and insight you gain from charting and analyzing the behavior may help you learn strategies that will help to soothe your student when they are distressed or compress the amount of time involved in a pattern of irregular behavior.

As you start to see a pattern emerge, you may be able to isolate a trigger. For one of my students, the trigger to aggressive outbursts turned out to be the sound of a heavy fire door closing in another part of the building - a noise we weren't even aware of until we analyzed our notes looking for antecedents. Once we realized the door was the cause of the extreme behavior, we were able to intervene whenever it happened by labeling it reassuringly "That's the sound of the heavy door closing, it's a good sound, because it means they remembered to close the door behind them."

As a young teacher, I never understood the relationship of anxiety to behavior. If I were asked to characterize a student's behavior, I typically used the term "oppositional" to describe what I thought of as noncompliant behavior. It would not have occurred to me that the student might be anxious. Fortunately for my students, I worked with a strong support team and excellent behavior management specialists who helped me develop a better understanding of the role anxiety plays in behavior and encouraged me to search for effective strategies.

Many of my students demonstrated difficulty with making transitions, or "shifting," from one activity or place to another - and not only from preferred activities. Difficulty making transitions can be related to anxiety over change. Desensitizing strategies can help to reduce many anxiety-related behaviors. Effective strategies might involve incorporating consistent use of a daily schedule or using transition pictures/symbols to aid in making the transition from one activity to the next. Poor temporal concepts can also cause anxiety-related behaviors - a student might fear that everyday is going to be the day they get their flu shot. Adaptive calendars and tangible timelines can make the concept of time more concrete and minimize anxiety by showing when things will happen.

Students with visual and multiple impairments can be particularly sensitive to extraneous noises because they have fewer cues than their sighted peers on how to classify them. Consistent labeling of environmental sounds using a reassuring tone is one of the easiest and most effective desensitization strategies available to us. I often found it helpful to put a positive spin on noises. For example, "That's the sound of Pat emptying the wastebasket, that's a good sound because it

means our classroom will be clean." Or "I hear people talking, it's nice to know that people have friends to talk to, just like we do."

If you are planning a repetitive class field trip, e.g., to a grocery store, read stories about grocery stores and write simple social stories about what will happen on the field trips. Make your first visit an exploratory one. You might find it works best to let an anxious student acclimate to the new setting by sitting the first field trip out in the van with you. Roll the windows down and soothingly label the sounds of the parking lot; the sound the rolling carts make, the sound of car engines turning on and off, the closing of car doors and the chatter of customers.

To prepare students for an impending physical change in the environment - announce the change at group meeting well ahead of time. For example, "I have an exciting announcement. In the month of April, we get to have our spring assembly in the new building with air conditioning!" Mark the date on adaptive calendars and time-lines. Do a countdown as it gets nearer. Methodically structure in short field trips to desensitize your students to the new space, exploring it in small steps until you feel your students are comfortable. You might start off by simply standing in the open doorway talking about the sounds you hear around you. Step inside and do the same thing. Explore a little more on each field trip. Compare it to the old space. Physically explore the way the space is structured, walk between the rows and up the aisles. Look up what the word stage means and go up and explore it. Write follow-up stories after each trip.

Use desensitizing techniques to demystify visits to the doctor or dentist. Make nonthreatening visits ahead of the appointment. Sit in the waiting room. Meet the receptionist and the dentist. Ask for permission to go sit in the examining room when it's empty. Sit in the dentist chair. Increase the length of time the student can tolerate the new space over multiple visits. Read books about a visit to the doctor or dentist ahead of time and write social stories about what will happen. After each visit, write follow-up stories. Announce that the student sat in the dentist chair during good news time at the next group meeting. Encourage his or her peers to reinforce them for their bravery. Celebrate the occasion by marking it on the time-line.

In the community, we can encourage innovative programs that incorporate desensitization strategies, such as the Autism and Law Enforcement Education Coalitions that hosts open houses at police and fire stations. The programs expose children with autism and other developmental disabilities to equipment and responders they might see in an emergency. Perfect application of desensitizing strategies!

Good luck!