

Emotional/Behavioral Disorders: Understanding the Challenges

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## Emotional/Behavioral Disorders: Understanding the Challenges

Children with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (E/BD) may present a variety of challenges for educators in a school setting. The current trend in public schools is to mainstream children diagnosed with E/BD into regular education classrooms as much as possible (Sutherland, 2000). While few would dispute that mainstreaming children with E/BD is a bad idea, it may cause job-related stress among regular education teachers who have E/BD children in their classrooms (Morin, 2001). This paper offers information that may help teachers work more effectively with students who struggle with E/BD.

Children with emotional/behavioral disorders (E/BD) have high rates of comorbidity. For example, a student with Oppositional Defiant Disorder will often have comorbid Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (Seligman, 1998). Children with these sorts of diagnoses present teachers with considerable challenges. They require collaborative interventions (e.g. therapy, case management, individualized education program, etc.), and are often resistant to interventions. Teachers will likely increase their effectiveness if they take dual diagnoses into account when working with these children.

Children with disruptive behavioral disorders are often the most difficult to manage in a classroom setting (Sutherland, 2000). Behavioral disorders such as Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, and Disruptive Behavior Disorder Not Otherwise Specified refer to a pattern of behavior which includes the violation of others' rights and disregard for the major age appropriate norms (Vernon, 1999). The behaviors fall into four categories: aggression toward people and animals; destruction of property; deceitfulness and theft; and violation of the rules. Children diagnosed with any one of

the above named categories can create disruption in the classroom, making teaching difficult. Teachers can use the assistance of school counselors when implementing interventions designed to minimize the disturbances in their classroom.

### Benefits of Mainstreaming

Mainstreaming gives children with E/BD the opportunity to interact with other students who act appropriately in the classroom. Individuals synchronize behavior through the process of imitation, complementarity, and reciprocity (Farmer & Cadwallader, 2000). Imitation occurs when one person copies the behavior of another. Complementarity occurs when behaviors are dissimilar, but are mutually supportive. Reciprocity occurs when people respond to each other with similar behavior. If a student with E/BD remains in a self-contained E/BD classroom, they will imitate, complement, or reciprocate the behavior of the other students with E/BD.

The benefit of mainstreaming children with E/BD may be found in peer interactions. Students with E/BD can learn new behaviors by modeling the behavior of other students. While peer interaction in and of itself will not change a student's disruptive behavior, the interaction will provide the student with E/BD the opportunity to view more effective ways of interacting within the school setting. If a student with E/BD remains in a self-contained classroom the student continues to be exposed to interaction styles of peers that are often disruptive.

### Teacher Challenges

Teachers are faced with the demands of larger class sizes, children with less home support, and more substantial problems among students (Vernon, 1999). The issues facing teachers today are difficult. Mainstreaming children with E/BD into regular

education classrooms increases demands on an already stressed system. Responding to stress, teachers may utilize strategies with children with E/BD that maintain order in the short term rather than strategies that serve long term solutions.

It is important to note many teachers work very well with students diagnosed with E/BD, however, some teachers may struggle. Teachers may feel that they can not be effective at teaching children with E/BD. The sense of ineffectiveness may result in a teacher becoming less willing to keep a student with E/BD in his/her classroom (Morin, 2001). When a teacher feels ineffective with a student he/she may experience a feeling of helplessness, which in turn may progress into a feeling of frustration, anger, and even rage (Long, 2000). The expression of teacher frustration may fulfill the student's belief that the teacher is hostile, rejecting, and cannot be trusted. Teacher frustration or anger may also reinforce the student's conviction that he/she should not get involved with the teacher. When a teacher maintains their conviction, the student often continues their misbehavior and feels justified in doing so. Due to the student's continued misbehavior the teacher continues to feel increasing ineffectiveness, which may result in a sense of anger or even rage.

Teachers who experience increasing ineffectiveness may make judgments about the motives of a student's disruptive behavior (e.g. that the student is being willfully disruptive), rather than examining the stressors in the student's immediate environment. Judgments made by the teacher may lead him/her to be more intrusive than necessary. Teachers need to be encouraged to be objective and examine their role in the misbehavior of student with E/BD (Morin, 2001). This may be difficult to achieve.

Convincing a teacher that a student's motives are based on an ecological condition requires a change in the teacher's attitude. In order to achieve an attitudinal change, the teacher must be open and committed to the change process. Any intervention that is discussed will likely be ineffective if a teacher fails to believe that he/she has the power to change their interactions with E/BD students.

### Behavioral Assessment and Interventions

Children with E/BD exhibit behavior that serves a function for them (Smith & Heflin, 2001). When the function or purpose of a behavior is understood, then the behavior can be changed more effectively. A functional behavioral assessment (FBA) will help teachers and counselors understand the behavior. Quinn, Gable, Rutherford, Nelson, and Howell (1998) defined functional behavioral assessment as a variety of techniques and strategies used to diagnose the causes and to identify interventions intended to address problem behaviors (p. 3). They go on to say that FBA includes consideration of biological, social, affective, and environmental factors as potential functions of problem behavior (Quinn et al., 1998).

#### *Assessment*

Functional behavioral assessment is generally considered to be a problem-solving process for addressing student problem behavior. It relies on a variety of techniques and strategies to identify the purposes of specific behavior and to help IEP teams select interventions to directly address the problem behavior. Functional behavioral assessments should be integrated, as appropriate, throughout the process of developing, reviewing, and, if necessary, revising a student's IEP.

An FBA looks beyond the behavior itself and focuses on identifying significant, student-specific social, affective, cognitive, and/or environmental factors associated with the occurrence (and non-occurrence) of specific behaviors. This broader perspective offers a better understanding of the function or purpose behind student behavior. Behavioral intervention plans (BIP) which are based on an understanding of the purpose or function of student misbehavior are extremely useful in addressing a wide range of problem behaviors. Functional behavior assessments should be completed within which the natural context that the problem behavior occurs. Miller, Tansy, and Hughes (1998) presented a thorough description of functional behavioral assessments and behavioral implementation plans. Miller also developed very useful forms for both functional behavioral assessment and behavioral intervention planning (see appendix).

Teachers can most effectively change behavior when they avoid fulfilling the function of an undesired behavior, and assist a student fulfill the behavioral function or purpose through a desired behavior. For example, if the function of a student's yelling is to gain the teacher's attention, the teacher may remove the student from the class (time-out) and deliberately avoid fulfilling the behavioral function to gain the teachers attention. However, when the student speaks in an appropriate tone of voice the teacher gives the student the attention he/she desires and assists the student in choosing a desired behavior.

### *Interventions*

Behavioral change takes time and children with E/BD will not stop disrupting the classroom over night. Teachers must begin by shaping a student's behavior in successive approximations (Brems, 1993). Smaller specific targets must be met,

leading to the desired behavior. Positive reinforcement may be introduced until target behaviors are mastered, and then phased out as the student continues to choose more desirable behaviors. An example of shaping may involve having a student raise his/her hand to leave his/her seat. Consequently, the teacher may reinforce the student for only leaving his/her seat three or fewer times during a class period. Finally, the student may only receive reinforcement for remaining seated during the entire class period. When each step is mastered the teacher phases out the reinforcement that he/she has put in place with the student. If a target is too difficult for a student, it may need to be simplified.

Another positively focused technique involves reinforcing incompatible behaviors in students with E/BD (Brems, 1993). The desired behavior may be selected as the opposite of the undesired behavior. A student can not be yelling if he/she is using a quiet voice. A teacher may want to reinforce the quiet voice whenever the student demonstrates that behavior.

Teachers may use token economies to achieve behavioral change. Token economies can be as simple as positive reinforcement, or as complex as a complicated contingency program that combines many behavioral strategies (Brems, 1993). A level system may be employed, where points are accumulated in order to move up the levels, or a teacher may agree to give a student free time if a desired behavior is achieved. Reinforcement can be tailored to each student as the teacher gets to know what works with a particular student.

Working with E/BD students can be a time consuming effort. Therefore, it is important that teachers collaborate with others in the school system early in the process

in order to design and evaluate interventions (Smith & Heflin, 2001). School counselors can serve as effective collaborators in designing, implementing, and evaluating strategies. Teachers should be a part of a team when working with students with E/BD. The team approach is helpful in two ways: teachers feel supported, which may alleviate some of their job-related stress; and the students will receive consistent treatment from various members of the school system that are involved with them.

### Summary

It is important to realize that students who are diagnosed with E/BD often have or should have dual diagnoses. Regular classroom teachers may perceive a sense of ineffectiveness and consequently develop resistance in working with students with E/BD. Mainstreaming students with E/BD allows them to interact and learn more effective interaction styles and interpersonal skills. Behavioral assessments and interventions when implemented on a consistent basis by all involved can help both the teacher and student succeed in the classroom. Students with E/BD present challenges to public schools and stretch a system that is probably already expected to accomplish too much. However, when teachers work in collaboration with school counselors and other members of the school system, the team concept increases consistency for the student and effectiveness of interventions used.

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# Functional Behavioral Assessment: Part 1 (Description)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ ID: \_\_\_\_\_ DOB: \_\_\_\_\_ Case Manager: \_\_\_\_\_

Data Sources:  Observation |  Student Interview |  Teacher Interview |  Parent Interview |  Rating Scales |  Normative Testing

<b>Description of Behavior</b> (No. ____):
<b>Setting(s) in which behavior occurs:</b>
<b>Frequency:</b>
<b>Intensity</b> (Consequences of problem behavior on student, peers, instructional environment):
<b>Duration:</b>
<b>Describe Previous Interventions:</b>
<b>Educational impact:</b>

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

## Functional Behavioral Assessment: Part 2 (Function)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Function of Behavior</b> (No. _____): Specify hypothesized function for each area checked below.
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Affective Regulation/Emotional Reactivity</b> (Identify emotional factors; anxiety, depression, anger, poor self-concept; that play a role in organizing or directing problem behavior):
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Cognitive Distortion</b> (Identify distorted thoughts or self-statements, and erroneous interpretations of events that play a role in organizing or directing problem behavior):
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Reinforcement</b> (Identify environmental triggers and payoffs that play a role in organizing and directing problem behavior): Antecedents:  Consequences:
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Modeling</b> (Identify the degree to which the behavior is copied, who they are copying the behavior from, and why they are copying the behavior):
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Family Issues</b> (Identify family issues that play a part in organizing and directing problem behavior):
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Physiological/Constitutional</b> (Identify physiological and/or personality characteristics; developmental disabilities, temperament; that play a part in organizing and directing problem behavior):
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Communicate need</b> (Identify what the student is trying to say through the problem behavior):
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Curriculum/Instruction</b> (Identify how instruction, curriculum, or educational environment play a part in organizing and directing problem behavior):

# Behavioral Intervention Plan

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ ID: \_\_\_\_\_ DOB: \_\_\_\_\_ Case Manager: \_\_\_\_\_

Behavior Number(s)	Expected Outcome(s) Goal(s)	Intervention(s) & Frequency of Intervention	Person Responsible	Goal/Intervention Review Notes

\* Review Codes: GA = Goal Achieved | C = Continue | DC = Discontinue

Expected Review Dates: \_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_ | \_\_\_\_\_

Signatures: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_