

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Behavior Intervention and Support Module: Developing a Prevention System

Lou Denti, Ph.D.
Special Education Program
California State University, Monterey Bay

~ Module 3, Session 2 ~ Lecture Notes

Introduction

As pointed out in Session 1, when teachers encounter annoying student behavior they tend to respond in predictable ways. They either fight (punish) the student or flee (withdraw) from the interaction in a very passive “give-up trying” manner.

In Session 1, we looked at student behaviors that annoy, aggravate, and frustrate teachers. Developing a clear, identified, prevention system in schools and classrooms as well as for individual students emanates from a basic awareness by teachers of the “blow-up—give-up” cycle. Once aware, teachers can begin to practice different ways of interacting with students based on knowledge and skill.

One way to gain this newfound knowledge and skill is to learn why students misbehave in the first place. This session informs teachers about four distinct goals of misbehavior. Once teachers understand why students misbehave, they are more likely to intervene and prevent behavior from escalating into verbal or physical aggression.

Goals of Misbehavior:

In the 1930s, the famous educator Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs advanced a theory about student misbehavior. After observing students for years in controlled and unstructured environments, he determined that students were trying to “get/avoid” something through their misbehavior.

He determined that there were four goals of student misbehavior:

1. attention seeking behavior,
2. power seeking behavior,
3. revenge seeking behavior, and
4. avoidance of failure behavior.

By identifying the goals of misbehavior teachers are able to deal more effectively with students and are less likely to be trapped in the “fight or flee” cycle. The following are brief outlines of the four goals of misbehavior.

A more thorough analysis can be found in the book Cooperative Discipline authored by Linda Albert and published by American Guidance Services Inc.

Goal 1: Attention Seeking Behavior

Some students misbehave to get attention. The message according to Albert is “Look at me!” These students require an audience and they never seem to get enough attention to satisfy them. Though this behavior is relatively benign it can agitate teachers and trigger the fight or flight response.

Goal 2: Power Seeking Behavior

Students who seek power ultimately want the upper hand. They challenge teachers directly (let’s fight, or argue) or indirectly (passive noncompliance). The key goal of the misbehavior is to establish control or to be in charge, thus usurping the teacher’s authority in or out of the classroom.

Goal 3: Revenge Seeking Behavior

Students who seek revenge are retaliating against real or perceived hurts or injustices. Students are not usually angry with their teachers but angry with an administrator, parent, or peer who may have hurt them. It might be too risky to take their retribution out on them so they take it out on the most likely target—the teacher. Students, who are revengeful, lash out, sulk, and scowl. Revenge behavior may emanate from power seeking behavior especially if the teacher has responded with a show of force.

Goal 4: Avoidance of Failure Behavior

Students who avoid failure send a very basic message—“you don’t bother me and I won’t bother you!” Their behavior is predicated on a belief system that they are unable or can’t do things well. They tend to give-up “coasting” so to speak or doing as little as possible to get by. Procrastination, clowning around, noncompliance, feigned illness, ambivalence, and displays of inadequacy characterize their behavior.

As educators we must be cognizant of the fact that students might misbehave because of boredom, unclear limits, lack of acceptable outlets for their feelings, powerlessness, or attacks on their dignity. When teachers create an instructional environment wherein students take an active role in their learning misbehavior becomes less of an issue. When using strategies to support positive behavior, remember to **“separate the act from the actor”**.

Useful Strategies:

Attention Seeking Behavior (GOAL—“look at me”)

- Move the student
- Notice appropriate behavior
- Ignore the behavior if possible
- Use a replacement behavior i.e., pencil tapping with writing; talking out of turn with an opportunity to talk with a peer at a sanctioned time; for pushing behavior the teacher replaces it with high or low fives.

Power Seeking and Revenge Behavior (Power GOAL—“I win you lose”; Revenge GOAL—“I’ll get back at you.”)

- Withdraw from the power struggle and give the student some time to discuss the issue later. You can’t win a power struggle! Kids are way too savvy.
- Use “behavior specific” dialogue “I need you to sit down now.” “I’ll talk with you when you are calm.”
- Be calm and use a monotone voice tone to send a clear verbal message of what you want the student to do. This reduces tension. If behavior escalates calmly restate your verbal request.
- Be consistent in your responses especially when students argue, talk back or threaten you or another student. Consistency sends a message that you are in control of the situation and discourages misbehavior.
- Set up clear consequences for students to mitigate the thrill they might get when they push the limits. Remember if there are no consequences for their misbehavior—THEY WIN!
- Stand back a couple of feet from the student if he or she is agitated.
- Give choices and review consequences for verbally and physically aggressive behavior.
- Set up conflict resolution or social skills program as a preventative.
- Do not adopt a “power stance” as a show of force. Back away give some room and allow for some verbal venting.

Avoidance of Failure Behavior (GOAL—“You do it for me” or “leave me alone”).

- Legitimate the student’s feelings by letting them know that you struggle with certain academic and social areas as well.
- Set up realistic expectations for students who believe they can’t do it.
- Emphasize completion, not perfection—making mistakes okay.
- When using encouraging language relate it to a specific behavior i.e., “I like the way you described earthquakes in your opening paragraph.”
- Realize that it takes time for students that avoid failure to develop trust in you.
- Don’t give up on the student!