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Successful Strategies to Assist Children With Challenging Behaviors

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to determine successful strategies to assist students with challenging behaviors by implementing three interventions to determine if there was a change in the challenging behaviors. The participant was a first grade boy served by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in a special education self-contained setting. After initial data collection of noncompliance, physical aggression, physical disruption and elopement of a functional behavior plan (Demand Fade-In) with six phases was implemented. The first phase starts with no demands and then each phase adds a demand of something mastered, eventually pairing it with an un-mastered demand.

Keywords: challenging behaviors, Demand Fade-In, special education

Successful Strategies to Assist Students with Challenging Behaviors

Teachers in the public school system are seeing an increase in the number of children who are demonstrating challenging behaviors. The children demonstrating these behaviors are doing so at a much younger age. Preschool teachers are seeing more children who demonstrate these behaviors as well as all other teachers in the elementary grades and beyond. “The number of young children who demonstrate challenging behaviors has been increasing in recent years” (Brown, Conroy, Davis, & Fox, 2002, p. 35). “In fact researchers estimate that as many as 10-15% of preschool-aged children demonstrate challenging behaviors that place them at risk for developing an emotional/behavioral disorder” (Brown, Conroy, Davis, & Fox, 2002, p. 35). According to research of all the children who demonstrate challenging behaviors 94.3% of them are on the autism spectrum and have been reported to display some form of challenging behaviors.

Children who demonstrate challenging behaviors at very young ages are also at risk for academic failure, problem behaviors in adolescence and difficulties in adulthood. The causes for these behaviors could be several different factors and issues. Generally, in young children behaviors are a way for them to communicate. They may not know the words to express what they want, they may want attention from someone, or they may just want to get out of doing a task they do not enjoy. Other factors that can influence behaviors are a child’s home life. Children living in poverty or being abused may demonstrate challenging behaviors. Throughout their school day student have many expectations put upon them that define their day.

These expectations may influence how a student behaves in a particular situation depending on the variables involved.

A great number of variables have been found to influence the occurrence or nonoccurrence of undesirable classroom behavior. Some of these include the level of task difficulty, the manner in which instruction to complete a task are delivered, and the level of interest a student shows in a task. By identifying these variables through functional assessment, curricular features can be modified to reduce the occurrence of undesirable behavior. (Kern, Childs, Dunlap & Clarke, 1994, p. 8)

Currently, in the early childhood special education setting one first grade boy has been self-contained to the special education room for challenging behaviors. A functional behavior assessment plan is in place as well as incorporating preference assessments and a fade plan to reintegrate back into the general education setting. The question behind this research project is, can these behavior strategies work successfully for student to regulate their behaviors and be able to function successfully in the general education setting?

Literature Review

Identifying challenging behaviors can be a very tedious task and one that teachers may not always agree with how it is done or implemented. In order to find out what is causing the behaviors teachers have to determine the triggers. According to Mendler (2014) there are five basic reasons kids misbehave. These are identified as attention, power, control, competence and belonging. Within the public school setting teachers are seeing more and more challenging behaviors, such as kids who are oppositional defiant,

severe attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), disruptive and out of control, kids who have problems working in groups, those kids who don't connect in class and leave, and those who struggle to read. Mendler (2014) mentions that teachers have to remember the behavior being seen is merely a symptom of something greater.

One way to begin to overcome challenging behaviors is to believe in every child and let them know teachers are there for them. Teachers need for them to know that school is a safe place and that the teachers are there to help them. When behaviors begin to occur instead of arguing with a child, teachers need to ask them questions and give them choices so they feel like they are in control of the situation. Teachers need to encourage the students to talk about their home life or issues that are bothering them or causing them pain or to be angry. While doing this teachers also need to share their story with them, so they will begin to trust adults and start building a relationship that meaningful to them.

Teachers cannot even begin to imagine some of the struggles and heart ache some these kids go through and experience in their short life. As teachers, all know relationships take time to build and building relationships is not always easy, there will setbacks from time to time and these are to be expected. Mendler (2009) mentions that there are three major times we can build relationships with our students. First, in class when they are supposed to be there and we are teaching our content second in school but outside of our class and third outside of school.

Once the relationship has been built, researchers suggest that functional assessment techniques be applied to young children who demonstrate challenging behaviors (Conroy, Davis, & Brown, 2002). Conroy et al., (2002) suggest that it is

important to note that functional assessment is a process, rather than a specific set of instruments or ridged procedures. At the same time it typically includes the following steps: first, clearly and specifically defining the target behavior(s), second, determining the broader environmental events or factors that may increase the occurrence of the behaviors, third, identifying the antecedents and consequences that occur immediately before and after the behaviors, fourth, hypothesizing the function or purpose of the behaviors, fifth, validating the hypothesis through experimental manipulation, and sixth, developing behavioral intervention plans that address the contributing and maintaining factors related to the behaviors (Conroy, Davis, Fox, & Brown, 2002).

As teachers implement some of these strategies according to Mendler (2014) it is important to make sure students feel like they have control and praise kids to make them feel good. The more we praise them the more we can criticize them Mendler (2014). Another great strategy Mendler (2014) suggests is that while implementing these assessments is to question kids because questions are much harder to argue with than statements. As teachers we have to complement them on what they do well while ignoring the nonsense. As Mendler (2009) reminds teachers, they want to get students to take responsibility for their own actions, by giving them constant choices within clearly defined limits.

Not all researchers agree with these strategies for dealing with challenging behaviors. According to Frea and Hepburn (1999) often, parents are asked to take part in, and implement independently, somewhat specific and complicated interventions without an understanding of why the intervention was chosen. Frea and Hepburn (1999) also suggest that the use of case studies does not demonstrate functional control sufficient to

make bold claims that the use of a manualized functional assessment training for parents can provide them with enough information to independently create effective behavioral programs in the home. Although as teachers we use these assessments in school successfully, they are not always as successful in the home setting with parents running them, which is unfortunate. As teachers, we may need to help in the education for parents of these assessments so everyone can benefit.

Methods

Data Collection

This action research project was conducted in an early childhood special education classroom due to the fact the student is self-contained to this room. The participant for this project is a white, first grade boy who is seven years old and comes from a relatively stable family. He has been placed on the autism spectrum and demonstrates challenging behaviors when he is in the general education classroom, as well as the special education classroom.

The student is on an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that has a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and a Demand Fade-In plan. The student require a one-on-one associate who will provide verbal prompts, social skills reminders, repetition of directions, assist with transitioning, general safety, and will implement his Behavior Intervention Plan. Academics are not a concern for the student as he is very intelligent. The student refuses to do the work because he says it is too hard for him. Even when broken down into smaller chunks he will still shut down when asked to do work or will become aggressive towards staff. If the demand is not the student's idea he will refuse to do it. The student wants to do what he wants, when he wants to.

When the student becomes aggressive towards staff, he will hit, pinch, kick, throw things at staff, spit, elope, be verbally disruptive and destroy things. The student has very little respect for adults or property. When the student was younger and would do the things, he would show remorse for what he had done and say he was sorry, but any more he just thinks it is funny.

The focus of this action research project was to determine if the student's Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) and Demand Fade-In plan could minimize his challenging behaviors enough to start reintegrating him back into the general education classroom. In order to determine this quantitative data was collected over a two and half month period. The student was observed every ten minutes from the time school started to the time school ended. The school day goes from 8:10am to 3:10pm. So every ten minutes the student is observed for being appropriate, noncompliant, physically disruptive, physically aggressive, and verbally disruptive, for spitting or eloping.

These are the requirements for each noncompliance area. Noncompliance (NC): means not following an adult direction within 5 seconds of the direction being given. Examples include laying his head down on the table, arguing with an adult, negotiating and stating "no" when given a direction that does not require a "yes/no" response. Non-examples include not responding to the direction because he did not understand or hear the request being made, such as time to line up from recess (if playground volume is loud) and complying with an adult direction within 4 seconds or less of the direction being given.

Physical Disruption (PD) means causing harm or damage to another person's property or disrupting the learning environment of others. Examples include grabbing and

throwing toys, crawling on or under tables, banging item down on table, kicking furniture/materials or knocking over toys/furniture during center time. Non-examples include cleaning up items and placing them in approved area/containers for cleanup.

Physical Aggression (PA) means physical behavior that has the potential to cause pain or harm to another individual. Examples including hitting, kicking, or throwing an item at another person. Non-examples include did not hear instruction, given a choice of activity he indicates, "No" he doesn't want to choose a particular activity, kicking a ball, hitting a ball with a bat, bumping into friend on accident while playing, spitting up when ill.

Verbal Disruption (VD) means he engages in verbalizations that interfere with the learning environment. Examples include screaming, elevating his voice louder than speaking volume, yelling, growling, screeching. Non-examples include elevating his voice to a volume that is appropriate for the current activity, yelling while at recess, requesting an object.

Spitting (S) means he expels saliva from his mouth and directs it towards another person. Examples include spitting toward an adult with or without making contact with that person (person may move out of the way). Non-examples include spitting in a trashcan or bathroom sink, spitting on the floor or spitting in his food or drink.

Elopement (E) means he leaves the area he is supposed to be in without adult permission. Examples include walking or running out of the classroom, leaving the school building, wandering around the classroom or hallway. Non-examples include leaving an area with permission, leaving an area as part of an activity, or running around in the gym during a PE activity.

If the student gets too physically aggressive towards staff then he is moved into time out room by two staff who are CPI certified, so he is moved in the right way and is not injured in doing so. Safety of the student is always a concern and we never want to do anything to jeopardize him or the staff involved. This is why each day the student's one-on-one associate is responsible for filling out his data sheets. Then at the end of the week, she gives all his data to the teacher who then puts into his IEP graph.

It is very important for the one-on-one associate to be very consistent in the data collection so all those involved with the student's IEP can get a true picture of his challenging behaviors and to see if the plan is working or if thing need to be changed. Appendix A provides a sample of his daily behavior sheet where data is entered throughout the day. After the initial data was collected and the student's Demand Fade-In plan was implemented to attempt to minimize the student's challenging behaviors. The Demand Fade-In plan consists of six phases with behavior expectations and a decision making rule as when to move on to the next phase. Here are the phases and rules. Appendix B shows his pre intervention data

The behavior expectations for phase one consists of a choice between preferred work tasks or play with access to multiple tangibles at once, if he chooses to play with different items. This choice of work or play will be presented to him every ten minutes throughout his day. Recess and specials (computer lab, music, library, PE, and art) will be offered as a choice. The adult will say, "Do you want to go to music or keep on playing." Instruction for the student will take place in the special education setting with adult supervision. When the student transitions outside of the room for bathroom breaks, lunch or recess an adult will supervise him.

For the decision making rule the student needs to have four out five consecutive days of zero physical aggression and zero elopements with 90% appropriate behavior. In the event that there is an increase in the data above that from the highest point in baseline, the team will review and make changes as necessary (ex. environmental enrichments, choice of academics, etc.). This decision making rule is used for each of the six phases identified in the student's plan.

The behavior expectations for phase two are that the student must complete one mastered /easy/preferred work demand. For example, the teacher may say, "give me the red object," "point to the letter A," or "tell me the number" when presented with a flashcard to earn a token on his "I'm working for card." When the student earns a token he is able to play for ten minutes until the next work task is presented. If the student has not engaged in physical aggression, physical disruption, or elopement then he will end his day with 20 minutes of play with one to two preferred peers. They would engage in a game of his choosing or other activity.

Phases three through six of the Demand Fade-In Plan consists of the same format as phase two, with one exception. One additional work demand for each phase is added in order for the student to earn a token. During phase six the student will do four mastered/easy/preferred work demands and one new/un-mastered work demand to earn his five tokens. Additional phases will be added as needed with one new/un-mastered work demand added to each phase.

On this plan, this is what a typical day looks like for this student. The student comes in at 8:10 in the morning and chooses his highly preferable item that he wants to do for 10 minutes. This is always the iPad. Once that time is over the one-on-one

associate's presents him with a demand. Once the student completes the demand then the one-on-one associate sets the timer for 10 minutes. After the 10 minutes is up the student has to complete another demand, then the student can request his highly preferable, which is always the iPad. The demands change according to the students Demand Fade-In plan that was presented earlier. This process just repeats until 3:10 and the student's day is over. The student is given of choice of going to all specials, but has refused every time. The student is required to go outside for the last 15-minute recess. There has never been an issue with the student going out so after spring break the team has decided to incorporate the lunch recess into the student's day.

Since starting this Behavior Intervention Plan and Demand Fade-In Plan the student has made some progress. The student met phase one on January 13, two weeks after beginning. The student met the second phase on January 17, four days after beginning this phase. The student met phase three on February 17, four weeks after beginning. Lastly the student started phase four on February 20. The student met phase four on March 23.

The student has been showing more aggressive behaviors again lately, which may indicate that something else is something going on in the student's life to make him act this way, since nothing at school has changed. When the teacher talked to the student's mother, she indicated that nothing at home had changed. However, the mother did mention that the student gets no screen time at home anymore and asked the teacher if it would be possible to not have the iPad as the student's highly preferred item every day or if it had to be the student's highly preferred item each day could the team put educational games on it instead of Minecraft and other games the student prefers. The

teacher went back to the team with the questions the mother had. The team responded that if things change the iPad will no longer be highly preferred. The team also chose not to take off the student games, but did agree to put educational games on the iPad. However, the teacher cannot make the student choose these games. The mother would prefer the student did not have the iPad at all, since she believes he is addicted to it and that is causing his behaviors. The mother indicated that since taking all screen time away at home he his behaviors have improved there. The Area Education Association (AEA) team agreed that this could be an issue, but is not willing to make any changes as of now. The rest of the team did not really have a say in the situation. The team consists of the AEA for our school district. Those people include behavioral specialist team and the school psychologist for our district. It also includes the teachers and principal.

Results

As a teacher working with this student there were some potential bias that could exist. Those biases could be knowing the student and working with him for two years, knowing and understanding what triggers his behaviors and what calms him down. Despite some bias issues, the student paraprofessional did the data collection and this is her first year working with him. She is not as familiar with what his triggers are or how to calm him down.

Pre intervention data indicated that the student's behaviors were intense and very frequent. His percent compliant each day was significantly lower. On several occasions the teacher would have to implement a room clear to keep the other students safe. The student with the challenging behaviors would throw chairs, books, containers that contained manipulatives and he would tip over the student desks. This caused a lot of

anxiety among the students. The student was also running the halls and trying to hide from staff and being very disrespectful towards them. On two occasions the student eloped outside to playground, his other elopements were out of the classroom.

Once the Behavior Intervention Plan and Demand Fade-In plan were implemented the student has made progress, but there is still progress to be made. The student is still showing challenging behaviors, but the behaviors are less frequent and less intense. The student shows challenging behaviors if he does get the iPad on his demand when he has lost it due to his behavior. What needs to be considered is that the demands put on the student right now are minimal. The student is not attempting any first grade reading or math and still is refusing to go to all specials. The student also shows no concern that he is not with his peers. The student even started skipping breakfast to come down to the classroom early so he could have more iPad time. The teacher explained that the student would have to go to breakfast or recess because school does not start until 8:10 and that is when he can have the iPad. Appendix C provides the results of the data collection from December 15, to March 9.

The finding of the quantitative data shows that before implementing this Demand Fade-In plan the student had a mean percent daily compliance of 52%. After implementing the plan, the student ended with a mean of 93% daily compliance. The mean was found by using the first five data points of his pre intervention data and the last five data points collected. The data shows the plan is effective, however, the progression has been very slow, with minimal demands, and the student is not close to returning to the general education classroom to be with peers.

Discussion

Prior to the intervention the student with challenging behaviors was very aggressive and this became concerning to the general education teacher as well as, the special education teacher and his mom. Safety of students was also becoming an increased concern, as it was causing them stress and anxiety. The students challenging behaviors were intense and frequent.

Once the intervention was put into place and the student was placed in a self-contained special education room his behaviors decreased and became less intense. This was due to the fact that he could receive his highly preferable (iPad) for being compliant. At this time the Demand Fade-In Plan was put into place along with an updated Behavior Intervention Plan. During this time the student also receives 20 minutes of specially designed instruction in the area of social skills. The student also was participating in a group called Peaceful Alternatives To Tough Situations (PATTS). This was a nine-week program to help students learn nonviolent conflict resolution skills resulting in a reduction of aggressive behavior, suspension, and principal referrals. The student attended the first three or four sessions and then stopped going because the student felt he didn't need to know that information. Since everything in the student's plan is a choice this decision to be honored. After one week, the student returned to the group.

Research indicates that giving students choices and building relationships with them is important in life. Most teachers would agree with this, but most teachers would also agree students need to learn consequences also. As teachers it is our responsibility to teach and prepare kids to be successful in the real world. This starts at a very young age and these students have learned how to "play the game," to get what they want. Other

students observe the behavior of the student who is self-contained and don't understand why he gets to play all day when he acts inappropriately in school.

Conclusion

The results from the data collection show a decrease in behavior for the student. Considering his BIP and his Demand Fade-In Plan, the results have shown to be a slow process with no or very few demands put on the student. The student is still not required to do any of the first grade academic work that his peers are expected to complete. This plan has lasted for 47 days with the student being in control of what he does, which has consisted of playing on the iPad. Educators may ask the question, "Is this the best plan as teachers prepare students for their future?"

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Appendix A

Daily Behavior Sheet

Time	Behavior code							Note the work task
8:00-8:10	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
8:10-8:20	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
8:20-8:30	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
8:30-8:40	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
8:40-8:50	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
8:50-9:00	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
9:00-9:10	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
9:10-9:20	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
9:20-9:30	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
9:30-9:40	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
9:40-9:50	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	
9:50-10:00	Appropriate	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	

Appendix B

Student Pre-Intervention Data

Date	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	% Compliant
11/15/16	10	3	0	0	0	0	42
11/16/16	10	5	3	0	5	5	72
11/17/16	2	0	0	0	0	0	37
11/18/16	14	10	1	0	10	0	52
11/21/16	10	10	0	0	7	0	83
11/22/16	10	10	2	0	0	3	62
11/23/16	4	2	0	0	2	0	95
11/28/16	14	8	0	2	6	0	57
11/29/16	8	4	3	3	4	4	72
11/30/16	8	8	0	3	8	0	83
12/1/16	5	5	0	0	5	0	90
12/2/16	20	15	5	6	15	8	33
12/5/16	12	6	0	1	6	0	79
12/7/16	8	7	2	3	7	0	70
12/8/16	17	13	1	2	13	5	43
12/9/16	8	3	2	0	3	2	70
12/14/16							100

Appendix C

Behavior Data

Date	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	% Compliant
12/15/16	12	8	0	0	8	0	59
12/16/16	11	2	0	0	0	0	62
12/17/16	17	4	0	0	4	0	41
12/20/16	4	2	0	0	0	0	86
12/21/16	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
12/22/16	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/4/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/5/17	1	1	0	0	0	0	95
1/6/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/9/17	0	3	0	1	3	0	88
1/10/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/11/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/12/17	4	3	1	1	1	0	86
1/13/17	1	0	0	0	0	0	98
1/17/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/18/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/19/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/20/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/23/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/24/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/25/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
1/26/17	2	0	0	2	2	2	95
1/27/17	3	2	0	1	1	4	93
1/30/17	1	1	1	0	1	1	98
1/31/17	1	0	0	0	0	0	98
2/1/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
2/2/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
2/3/17	1	0	1	0	1	1	95
2/6/17	9	4	3	0	4	4	74
2/7/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100

2/8/17	6	5	5	0	5	6	83
2/9/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
2/10/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
2/15/17	1	1	0	0	0	0	98
2/16/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
2/17/17	1	1	0	1	0	0	98
2/21/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
2/22/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
Date	NC	PD	SP	E	PA	VD	% Complian t
3/2/17	0	0	0	0	0	0	100
3/3/17	3	3	0	0	2	3	93
3/6/17	2	2	0	0	2	2	95
3/7/17	2	2	1	0	2	2	95
3/8/17	13	12	4	0	12	4	70
3/9/17	7	7	3	0	7	5	81