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## Evidence Based Behavioral Objectives

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to inform school personnel of best practices for writing targeted behavioral objectives for student with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD). Five key elements are presented, which include: Measurable, Student-Oriented, Positive, Individualized, and Relevant. Also discussed are broad characteristics and outcomes of students with EBD regarding effective supports involving programming and transitioning.

### Introduction

Of those students in school receiving special education services, nearly a half million students are identified as having an emotional behavioral disturbance (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Forness and Brigham (2008) point out that while in school, students with EBD overwhelmingly experience a multitude of failures and setbacks: academic underachievement, low grades, grade retention, suspension and expulsion, and dropping out of school. As adults, students with EBD do not fair well in community life either. Post-secondary outcomes suggest they may experience a range of obstacles and hardships: poverty, homelessness, incarceration, drug addiction, and institutionalization (Greenbaum, Dedrick, Friedman, Kutash, Brown, Lardieri, & Pugh, 1996).

Furthermore, students with EBD struggle so profoundly with behavioral issues, they usually fail to achieve personal life goals. More importantly, limited opportunities to interact and engage in appropriate social behaviors while in school affect their ability to reach individual competence (Kauffman, 2005). Vaughn and Bos (2008) point out that students with learning and behavioral issues often have such difficulty communicating with others; it ultimately impacts their learning and social success in school. Students with EBD need specific communication skills that allow them to engage in positive social relationships with others and gain social acceptance by peers. Ideally, students with EBD should experience opportunities to interact with others to promote their language and social development (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995; Getty & Summy, 2006).

When developing target behaviors for students with EBD, it is best to have a thorough understanding of their unique needs so clear and precise goals and objectives can be developed. Accurate identification of target behaviors should be specific to the individual student to address competency domains (i.e. social, emotional, behavioral, academic). More precisely, to gain insight into the function of the individual student's behavior, a functional behavior assessment (FBA) must be conducted (Schoenfeld & Konopasek, 2007).

After the FBA has been conducted, the behavior intervention plan (BIP) may be developed. The BIP should clearly identify which behaviors will be increased, decreased, maintained, etc. Specific intervention strategies, both proactive and reactive, should be clearly stated and meet the individual needs of the student. Also, rather than

### *Positive*

Because students with EBD often perceive they have little control over their lives, a common reaction to an unstructured and poorly managed classroom is frustration and disruptive behaviors. Therefore, students with EBD need their teachers to support them in becoming self-determined (i.e. self-monitoring, self-awareness, self-regulated). They need help on learning how to manage, monitor, and evaluate their own learning and behaviors. This begins by helping students with EBD by providing proactive intervention strategies, which are preplanned activities and interventions that help reduce and prevent potential issues from arising in the classroom. Educators must establish classroom consistencies and routines and provide opportunities for students with EBD to engage in academics and appropriate social behavior. To reduce antisocial and misbehavior, the classroom should be designed with a clear purpose in mind: promote positive teacher-student-peer interactions that support learning and success (Heward, 2009). Following is an example of a goal that is not written positively and is difficult to measure. "Increase compliance with directives (vague), decrease use of foul language, decrease class disruptions, and increase focus on task." In contrast the subsequent goal is written pro-socially and is measurable, "Focus on class assignments by starting work within five minutes of instruction and staying on task for 20 minutes or more."

### *Individualized*

Objectives that are individualized are focused on the needs of the student rather than the convenience of others. Accordingly, objectives that are individualized for a particular student are specific to his/her needs and do not embody a "cookie cutter" approach across multiple students in the classroom (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006). Based on the above example, it could be inferred that Joe has a difficult time staying in his seat for periods of longer than 5 to 10 minutes necessitating a specific individualized objective of 10 minutes in seat behavior given a time period of 20 minutes. Applying this same context, Susie, Joe's peer, may be experiencing problematic in seat behavior. However, Susie is only able to stay in her seat for periods of up to three minutes requiring a different behavior objective. From the school's perspective it may be easier to manage the collection of behavioral data if Joe's and Susie's objective were the same. However, this violates the principle of individualized and should be avoided.

### *Relevant*

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) provides an agreement that specific interventions will be implemented to increase the probability that students with disabilities will enter adult life. Transition goals should be in place by age 16 and include specific ways to support students toward self-advocacy and relate to post-school such as employment, independent living, and post-secondary education. This is important to note since students transition from elementary learning environments to secondary environments (i.e. middle and high school) where the demands such as content, curriculum, and behavioral expectations on the learner increases as the students age (Rueter & Kinnison, 2009). In addition, when students transition from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school, they encounter new classrooms and multiple teachers due to content specialization. Planning for transition requires an understanding of the new school environments and processes. Thus, school personnel must prepare students for these new settings through instruction (i.e. goals and objectives) and support services (Wood, 2006).

Accordingly, individualized education program (IEP) team members should write objectives that are applicable to the student's present learning environments and draft objectives that take into consideration the student's future classroom settings and placements. This is particularly important when students are in transition grades (i.e. from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school). Additionally, as Lynch and Adams (2008) noted, when considering the relevancy of objectives, access to the general education curriculum must be considered. More precisely, IDEA (2004) requires IEP goals and objectives that address the individual needs of students as well as general curriculum standards. Moreover, when drafting behavior objectives that are standard based and takes into account the student's present and future learning

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