# Helping Teachers Manage Students' Externalizing Behaviors by Identifying Behavioral Cusps

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*Abstract: Managing students' externalizing behaviors is an essential but difficult and stressful task for many teachers. As a result, some teachers use ineffective intervention strategies, which end up exacerbating externalizing behaviors. This paper considers the theoretical model of behavioral cusps as an avenue to support teachers in the management of students' externalizing behaviors. This model helps identify what behavioral modifications to prioritize, guiding teachers' interventions and maximizing the cost-benefits of the strategies used. Finally, this paper will discuss the educational implications of deploying this theoretical model of intervention in brief in-service teacher training, while considering the resources that are generally available in pedagogical environments.*

*Keywords: Behavioral Cusp, Externalizing Behavior, Behavior Management, Teacher Training*

## Introduction

Students with externalizing behavior problems frequently exhibit antisocial behavior, distrust, aggression, impulsivity and hyperactivity (Achenbach, Ivanova, Rescorla, Turner, & Althoff, 2016). Those students require a lot of attention from teachers and disrupt the learning of other students (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006; Marzano & Pickering, 2003). Although managing these behaviors is necessary, teachers find it a major source of stress and one of their most demanding tasks (McCarthy, Lineback, & Reiser, 2015; Royer, Loiselle, Dussault, Cossette, & Deaudelin, 2001). In order to reduce externalizing behaviors,some teachers favor the use of punitive strategies (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008; Dobbs & Arnold, 2009; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). However, these strategies are generally ineffective in reducing externalizing behaviors in the long term and, additionally, have the potential to aggravate difficulties typically associated with it (e.g., low academic performance, peer conflict) (Alberto & Troutman, 2012; Horner & McIntosh, 2016; McCarthy et al., 2015; Perry & Morris, 2014; Roache & Lewis, 2011; Silver, Measelle, Armstrong, & Essex, 2010).Various strategies have been used in recent years to improve teachers' abilities to respond to students who exhibit externalizing behaviors (Alvarez, 2007; Baker, 2005; Horner & McIntosh, 2016).One of these strategies is the implementation of training programs for teachers. These have been shown to be effective in modifying teaching practices and in reducing externalizing behaviors among students (Allen & Blackston, 2003; Alvarez, 2007; Daley et al., 2014; Fabiano et al., 2009; Oliver & Reschly, 2014; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008).

Although these training programs do exist, the knowledge they convey is not always effectively transmitted, nor aligned with the practices currently in use among teachers (Cook & Odom, 2013; Cross & Donovan, 2002; Royer, 2006). Some of the reasons for their lack of success have to do with the fact that these programs are not necessarily available to teachers, they are too expensive to implement, they require too much time from teachers, they are too complex, they require good leadership from school administration, and they are sometimes perceived as being unadaptable to the realities of the classroom (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2008; Magidin de Kramer, Masters, O'Dwyer, Dash, & Russell, 2012). These barriers to success explain why one of the most complex choices involved in developing a training program has to do with determining what elements will be prioritized given a school's available resources (e.g., available time, financial resources) and goals (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). For example, since teachers have a heavy workload, programs that require too much time are not always practical nor adaptable to their schedules.

While it may seem desirable to have a multidimensional program that tackles as many aspects of a problem as possible (e.g. intervention at the student, teacher, and parent levels), the production of significant behavioral changes can be done with much less effort and fewer resources (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011; Sameroff & Fiese, 2000). In this article, we present the theoretical model of behavioral cusps as a way to maximize the effectiveness of interventions with students who present externalizing behavior problems. Taking behavioral cusps into account in behavior management is a promising avenue since they have the potential to modify a student's behavioral repertoire over and above the behaviors initially targeted. We will begin by defining behavioral cusps and then describing two behavioral changes that can be made in order to benefit students who exhibit externalizing behaviors. Finally, we will present how a brief in-service teacher training could integrate and utilize the theoretical model of behavioral cusps.

## Behavioral Cusps

Several intervention strategies have been developed to prevent or reduce externalizing behaviors among students (Reddy, Newman, De Thomas, & Chun, 2009; Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). Some researchers have focused on identifying behavioral targets that, in addition to reducing externalizing behaviors, are easily managed by teachers (Barkley, 2013; Bosch & Hixson, 2004; Ducharme & Shecter, 2011; Koegel, Carter, & Koegel, 2003; Robertson, 2015; Rosales-Ruiz & Baer, 1997). Behavioral cusp theory is one of these models, developed to increase the efficiency of mobilizing resources when intervention strategies are being put into practice.

The concept of behavioral cusps was first developed by Rosales-Ruiz and Baer in 1997. Behavioral cusps not only offer a theoretical model that aims to improve various behavioral problems in students, but also a model that better explains the operating mechanisms associated with it (Bosch & Hixson, 2004; Robertson, 2015; Smith, McDougall, & Edelen-Smith, 2006). According to this theory, behavioral cusps are specific behavioral modifications that can provide developmental opportunities beyond the initial change. These behavioral changes have a positive impact on students' behavioral, social, and academic spheres. Moreover, a behavioral cusp offers students a richer behavioral repertoire as well as new opportunities to experience situations that may lead to reinforcement (positive experience) or punishment (negative experience). Thus, there is a large variety and a large number of behavioral cusps (Bosch & Fuqua, 2001). For example, a child's acquisition of the ability to walk can be considered a behavioral cusp because it gives him or her the opportunity to explore his or her environment with ease and to participate in new activities (positive experiences), but, at the same time, also causes him or her to be more at risk of falling and being injured (negative experiences) (Bosch & Hixson, 2004). Learning how to be polite can also be considered a behavioral cusp because it can lead the teacher to pay more positive attention to a student, while also providing him or her with additional opportunities to act correctly (Robertson, 2015).

## Mechanism of Action

From a behavioral perspective, externalizing behaviors are partly perpetuated because they have a function or a purpose (Hanley, Iwata, & McCord, 2003). For example, a student's opposition to a task may allow him or her to get something he or she wants, such as the teacher's negative attention or the laughs of other students in the class, or to avoid something he or she finds unpleasant like performing an assignment that he or she dislikes (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). Consequently, it is possible to consider a student's opposition to a task as a behavioral cusp, since it paves the way for a multitude of positive and negative opportunities for the student (Robertson, 2015).

On the other hand, by promoting the development of certain behavioral changes in a student, which offer a positive and alternative perspective to problematic behaviors, it is expected that behavioral changes will provide new opportunities for the student as well as new ways to obtain socially acceptable reinforcement (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011). At the same time, these new positive opportunities will make negative behaviors less attractive to the student. Therefore, there will be competition between socially acceptable behaviors and those that are not (Robertson, 2015). As mentioned by Smith et al. (2006), a behavioral cusp may be an entry point for the development of a new behavioral repertoire, which will become incompatible with the student's former range of behaviors. Figure 1 presents a hypothetical representation of the influence of a behavioral cusp on the acquisition of new behavioral, social, and academic opportunities for students with externalizing behavioral problems.

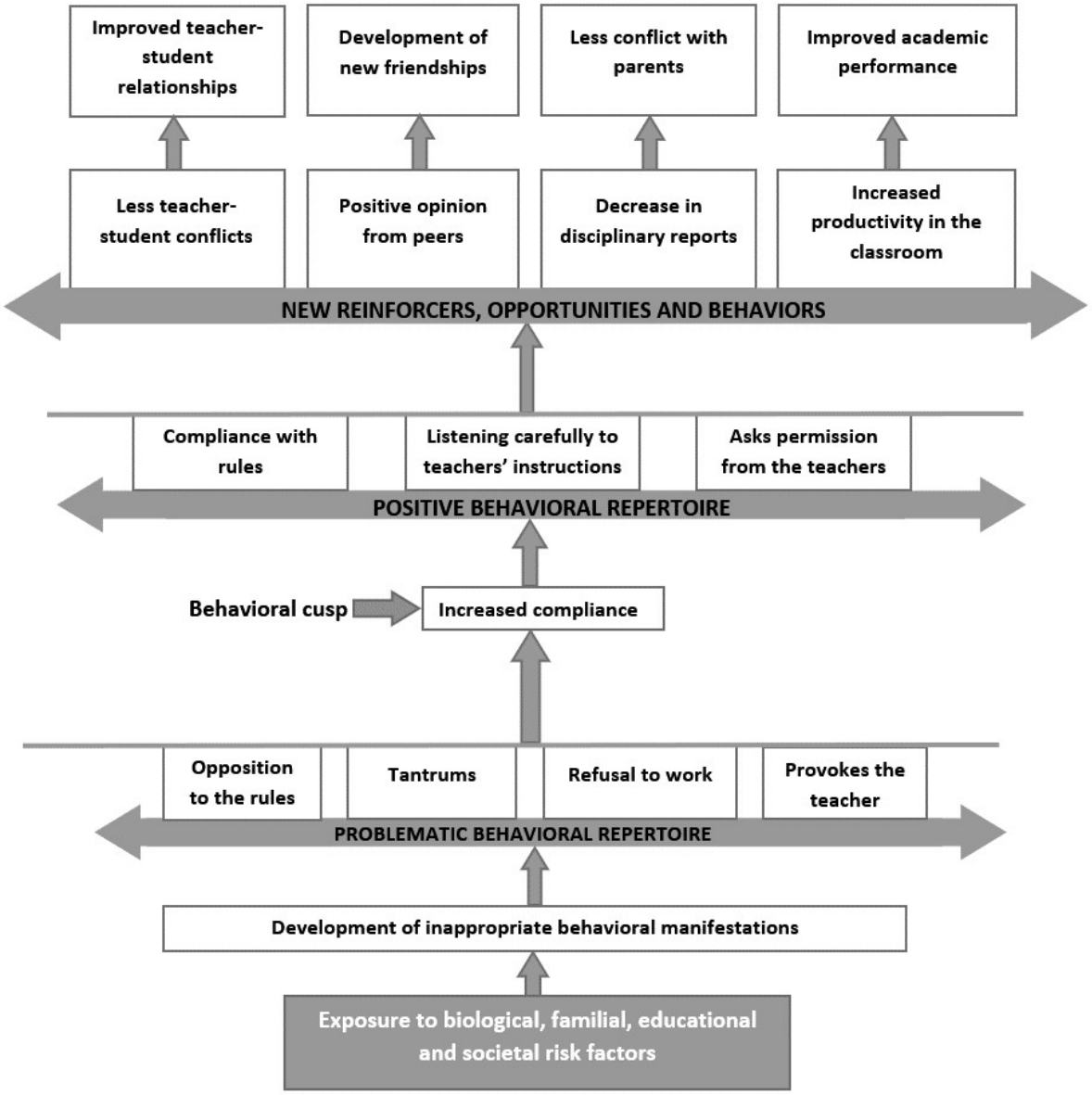


Figure 1: Hypothetical representation of the influence of increased compliance with rules and demands on a student.

Despite their potentially positive effects, the changes made by the development of a new behavioral cusp may not be permanent. That is, a behavioral change that does not offer new opportunities and reinforcers will soon be replaced by a behavioral repertoire that is more useful to the student. Consequently, to compete effectively against a problematic behavioral repertoire, the behavioral modification that needs to be targeted should provide the child with as many reinforcements and opportunities as the inappropriate one (Robertson, 2015). For example, a teacher who wants to increase a student's compliance with rules and demands, but does not give positive attention to the student when he or she completes the task, may see the student return to his or her old behavioral repertoire (Robertson, 2015). This behavioral change (compliance with rules and demands) will no longer be considered a behavioral cusp since it did not lead him or her to opportunities that would have changed his or her existing behavioral repertoire. To limit the risk of selecting behaviors that do not create a significant behavioral cusp, some researchers have identified criteria aimed at increasing the chances of an intervention's success.

## Identifying Key Behavioral Changes

Since a behavioral cusp is a functional process, a behavioral change does not necessarily lead to the establishment of a behavioral cusp, but, rather, merely to the possibility of a behavioral cusp. Thus, similar behavioral changes will not always produce the same results (Bosch & Hixson, 2004). Nevertheless, according to some researchers, there are behavioral changes that are more universal and have a significant developmental influence on a majority of students (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011). Moreover, it is not the complexity or difficulty of integrating a new behavioral change in students that makes it possible to judge the presence of a behavioral cusp, but rather its ability to create a significant developmental change in them (Rosales-Ruiz & Baer, 1997).

In order to identify the behavioral changes most likely to lead to the establishment of a behavioral cusp, some researchers have established a set of guidelines such as Bosch and Fuqua (2001) who have proposed five different criteria that prioritize behavioral changes (Robertson, 2015). Although it is not necessary for a behavioral change to meet all of the criteria presented below, the more the change is in line with these indicators, the more likely it is to have a decisive developmental importance (Robertson, 2015). The criteria identified are: 1) access to new reinforcements, contingencies, or environments; 2) generalizations; 3) incompatibility with inappropriate behavioral responses; 4) the number and importance of people affected by the changes; and 5) social validity. The role that access to new reinforcements, contingencies, or environments plays in the effectiveness of behavioral change involves the way it offers the student new opportunities either socially, academically, or behaviorally. The generalization criterion seeks to establish whether a behavioral change has the potential to facilitate or benefit subsequent learning, more precisely, will the behavior modify other desired behaviors? The third criterion measures whether the behavior modification is incompatible with behaviors harmful to the student's development, for example the promotion of on-task behaviors to reduce inattention in the classroom. The fourth criterion assesses whether others benefit from the student's behavioral change and whether this will foster a more positive relationship between them. Finally, the criterion of social validity seeks to determine whether behavioral change is perceived as desirable in the cultural environment in which the child develops.

## Significant Behavioral Changes

A number of behavioral changes that either fully or partially meet the behavioral cusp designation criteria have been identified to reduce externalizing behavior problems in students (Barkley, 2013; Ducharme & Shecter, 2011; McMahon & Forehand, 2005). Since the evaluation of all behavioral modifications capable of creating a behavioral cusp exceeds the scope of this article, in this section, we will focus on two behavioral changes : an increase in compliance and on-task behaviors. These behavioral changes have been targeted because they meet all of the criteria listed by Bosch and Fuqua (2001), are particularly suited to curb the problematic development of a wide variety of externalizing behaviors, and have the potential to influence other aspects of a student's social and academic development (Barkley, 2013; Ducharme & Shecter, 2011; McMahon & Forehand, 2005). The following section will briefly present each of the targeted behavioral changes and their significance to students.

## Student Compliance

Compliance is defined as a student's ability to carry out a request, a directive, or to follow instructions issued by a teacher (Owen, Slep,& Heyman, 2012).This includes whether or not a student can complete a task within a reasonable period of time, for example by starting the task immediately after the teacher has issued it. Compliance also includes how well the student follows the rules, for example by staying silent during an exam (Owen et al., 2012). Examples of noncompliance can be found in a variety of student behaviors, namely when he or she shouts, defies authority, has tantrums, is sarcastic, ignores the teacher's words, acts out, fights, or injures another student (Barkley, 2013).

Given the number of spheres it influences, compliance is one of the major behaviors to target and develop in students who exhibit externalizing behaviors (McMahon, Wells, & Kotler, 2006). For example, a student's inability to comply with a teacher's request has the risk of generalizing to other social rules, possibly causing the student to engage in problematic behaviors such as aggression, theft, or substance abuse (McMahon & Forehand, 2005). Research has shown that increasing compliance among students can reduce these other externalizing behaviors (Barkley, 2013; Danforth, Harvey, Ulaszek, & McKee, 2006). Moreover, increasing compliance has the potential to

improve school engagement and teacher-student relationships, reduce distractions during learning, and improve academic performance (Kalb & Loeber, 2003; Matheson & Shriver, 2005). A student's ability to follow rules also holds a high social acceptability among teachers who have been known to consider it an essential skill for school readiness (Lin, Lawrence, & Gorrell, 2003).

## On-Task Behavior

On-task behavior is defined as a student's active or passive attention to the task or work assigned to him or her (Amato-Zech, Hoff, & Doepke, 2006; Stipek & Miles, 2008). On-task behavior is thus different from off-task behaviors, which leads students to improperly complete their assigned tasks. Off-task behaviors can be characterized as motor (getting up without permission, turning around, constantly moving in his or her chair), verbal (talking, laughing, shouting), or passive (looking out the window, not doing the assigned task).

The benefits of increasing on-task behaviors are vast. First, a student's ability to be on-task is one of the most important factors in predicting future academic adjustment (Leflot, van Lier, Onghena, & Colpin, 2013). A student who has difficulty being on-task is at greater risk of rule-breaking and aggressive behavioral difficulties, but is also more likely to have poor academic performances (Morrison,Robertson, Laurie, & Kelly, 2002; Stipek & Miles, 2008). Off-task behaviors also increase the risk of affecting the rest of the students in the class, ultimately reducing the teacher's ability to teach adequately (Ratcliff, Jones, Costner, Savage-Davis, & Hunt, 2010). Finally, several studies have shown that an increase in off-task behaviors in students is linked with a more conflictual relationship with their teacher (Sutherland & Oswald, 2005).

## Educational Implications: Intervening by Targeting Behavioral Cusps

The theory of behavioral cusps provides interesting insights that allow us to better understand some of the mechanisms that contribute to the maintenance of externalizing behavior problems in students and identifying appropriate interventions (Roorda, Verschueren, Vancraeyveldt, Van Craeyevelt, & Colpin, 2014; Skalická, Stenseng, & Wichstrøm, 2015; Sutherland & Oswald, 2005; Zhang & Sun, 2011). The literature related to this theory is still very limited, but could provide an innovative framework for developing and planning an intervention program to reduce externalizing behaviors by recognizing that certain behavioral changes can have significant developmental impacts on a student's life (Bosch & Hixson, 2004; Smith et al., 2006). Despite the possible benefits of this model, its implementation in school environments is still limited. Further studies evaluating the feasibility and effectiveness of strategies to promote significant behavioral changes that can lead to behavioral cusps could encourage its implementation on a larger scale.

The development of a teacher-training program aimed at improving compliance and on-task behaviors among students is one avenue that should be explored (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011). Such training could provide teachers with the skills they need to implement intervention strategies and change targeted behaviors. To achieve this, a brief training program would be particularly suitable for transmitting strategies that effectively modifies teachers' practices and easily adapts to their workload (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011; Snyder et al., 2011). Brief training can provide teachers with the most impactful skills to manage externalizing behaviors until a more rigorous and comprehensive training can be provided.

This type of training program, combined with the use of positive educational strategies, can also offer an alternative to the use of punitive strategies by increasing the effectiveness of the strategies used and, in turn, reducing the time spent on behavior management. Maximizing the use of a positive behavior management approach allows the teacher to promote the maintenance and development of behaviors capable of becoming behavioral cusps (Gable, Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009; Simonsen & Myers, 2014). There are also several positive pedagogical strategies (e.g., behavior-specific praise, group contingency, self-monitoring) that can be used by teachers that have been proven to increase compliance and on-task behaviors in students (Kauffman, Mostert, Trent, & Pullen,, 2010; Owen et al., 2012; Solomon,Klein, Hintze, Cressey, & Peller, 2012; Webster-Stratton et al., 2008). For instance, it could be beneficial to use positive reinforcement in order to increase compliance behaviors by monitoring if the student complies with the teacher's request as well as reinforce the speed at which the student executes that request. This would allow the student to increase his ability to react quickly and in a much more fluid manner in order to carry out teacher's instructions. Regarding on-task behaviors, it might be beneficial to favor strategies also aimed at

increasing self-control such as self-monitoring strategies, thus making the student more capable of managing his behavior on his own when the teacher is absent. Those are only a few examples and the presentation of a complete guideline to improved targeted behavioral cups fall outside the scope of this article. At last, these programs would not only benefit students with externalizing behavior problems, but also the rest of the group. Indeed, strategies to improve compliance and on-task behaviors will contribute to the development of behavioral cusps that could be beneficial for all students by reducing the risk that the school environment will become favorable to negative behavioral changes such as externalizing behaviors (Robertson, 2015).

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