Breaking the Behavior

CODE

BY NANCY RAPPAPORT AND JESSICA MINAHAN

How to help teachers make a difference with challenging student behavior.

Principals and teachers recognize that just one severely disruptive student can quickly immobilize a classroom, or even the entire school. But they might not know how to most effectively intervene to help these students function better in school. Consider the following scenario:

While his students were waiting in line for PE, Mr. Tucker heard Becky scream. He rushed over and found Nelli squeezing Becky's arm. He escorted Nelli to the far end of the first-grade classroom, where she started to swing at him, tried to bolt from the classroom, and smashed a globe from Mr. Tucker's desk right next to his feet.
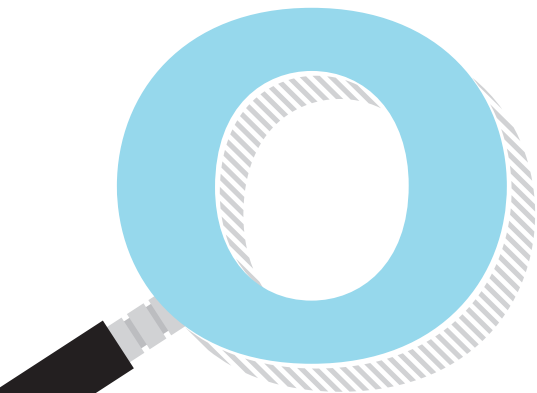
O verwhelmed teachers look to principals for help when a student's behavior persists despite their best efforts, especially if the bad behavior—like Nelli's—is explosive, disruptive, or disrespectful. As a child psychiatrist and behavior analyst working in schools, we've found that the most challenging behaviors that schools encounter are anxiety-related and oppositional behaviors. The principal has an opportunity to support preventive interventions, strengthen relationships with these students, and emphasize skill building so that students with even the most challenging behaviors can improve and succeed.

Scope of the Issue

It is key to have an effective approach since 10 percent of the U.S. school population—that's 9 million to 13 million children—struggle with mental health problems. Of those students who are identified in schools as having a severe emotional/behavioral disturbance, only 20 percent receive a high school diploma and 48 percent drop out in grades 9-12—twice as many as when you look at all students.

Suspensions and expulsions contribute to increased anti-social behavior in students, yet 13 percent of students with special needs (compared with 7 percent of those without) are being suspended annually, according to a new analysis from the Center for Civil Rights Remedies.

Ask Questions

Behavior is a form of communication, and understanding the function of a behavior allows us to teach new, more acceptable ways for the child's needs to be met. We encourage teachers to substitute "Why does he yell?" with "What is he trying to communicate?" In his book *Severe Behavior Problems*, psychologist Mark Durand describes four functions of behavior: attention, escape, tangible (e.g., attaining an object or getting your way), and sensory (e.g., feels or sounds pleasant). Each of these functions describes something that the student gets from his or her behavior—for example, whining to get attention or bolting from the room to escape a demand. Understanding the function allows educators to respond in ways that do not inadvertently reinforce problematic behavior.

When a teacher approaches you about a student's behavioral difficulty, it is helpful to first encourage the teacher to be a detective—to ask questions, gather data, and identify patterns. The easiest way to gather the data is to have the teacher take notes in an ABC format, which encourages teachers to collect information about the antecedents (what happens before the behavior), behavior (what the student does), and consequences (what happens after—generally how adults or peers respond to the behavior).

By looking at this information together, a hypothesis can be formulated about what the child is trying to communicate and what skill deficits need to be addressed. If Joey asks to leave the classroom or has a meltdown every time there is a math quiz, for example, it can be hypothesized that he is motivated by escape, and that he needs some interventions to shape his behavior during math and may even need more support because of an underlying math disability.

For some students, however, these data will not show any sort of pattern. If this is the case, students are usually anxious. Anxiety can be hard to identify because there often aren't consistent signs or patterns. When most students have an outburst, it's because of what happened right before, such as the computer freezing. But for students with anxiety, like Nelli, the behavior is due to her level of anxiety when the computer froze, as opposed to an inability to tolerate the computer freezing. If she was calm, the computer freezing may have only led to her shrugging and moving on.

What's Underlying the Behavior?

Students would behave if they could. If a student can't behave, it's often because he or she has not developed the necessary skills such as self-regulation (ability to calm one's self and manage frustration), social skills (e.g., perspective-taking or ability to take turns and share), and executive function skills (including flexibility, organization, and the ability to think before acting).

As we explain in our 2012 book, *The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students*, most behavior plans neglect to include explicit instruction in the student's underdeveloped skills. How and when to teach these skills needs to be tailored to the student's needs. Since teachers are strapped for time, the school psychologist, special educator, special education assistant, or social worker may provide weekly explicit instruction. Students need time and repetitive practice to gain the confidence to use new skills. Without this type of investment, students' challenging behavior can persist.

Effective Strategies

Teachers can become frustrated when they try strategies that have worked for many students but that fall short for students with oppositional and anxiety-related behavior. When principals understand that these students need a different approach, they can arrange staff training and allot staff meeting time to share effective strategies.

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Emphasize prevention. When a student's behavior has already escalated, the options for intervening effectively to support the student are limited. There will be greater success if educators provide the student with tools to manage his or her frustration or anxiety beforehand. It is essential to provide teacher training on how to prevent and manage common environmental triggers (see table below), set up the classroom with a space (such as a quiet corner with pillows) to encourage self-calming, form a positive relationship with a student with challenging behavior, and frontload some interventions to set the tone for the school year.

Be optimistic. Often when struggling with a student who is persistently oppositional, it might appear that the situation is never going to improve. But if teachers alter how they give demands, a power struggle can be avoided and the student can be set up to be more cooperative. If there's a child who always responds with "no," you can end up in a position where you don't have much room to negotiate. Teachers can bypass an oppositional moment by keeping a calm, neutral tone and using techniques such as:

- Providing controlled choice ("Do you want to sit in the blue chair or the red chair?" vs. "Sit down!");
- Giving a delay ("Please put your paper in the box by the end of the period." vs. "Give me the paper now!"); or
- Avoiding yes-or-no questions ("Are you ready for science?").

Work together. A teacher who is dealing with a chronically disruptive student can be very stressed and may look to the principal for critical support. This may mean reducing their extra responsibilities so that they have more time available to intensify their focus on the student for a while, or at times assigning the building substitute to help support the student. It's important to support teachers during these trying times.

Build a relationship. For both teachers and principals, investing the time to build positive relationships with students with challenging behavior is a crucial step. Two techniques are "banking time" and noncontingent reinforcement.

Developmental psychologist Robert Pianta uses the phrase "banking time" to refer to the idea of saving up positive interactions with a student.

Taking the time for one-on-one, relationship-building activities during calm times (never after the student acts out) makes a big difference. This might mean taking the student with you to make copies or eating lunch together on occasion.

Noncontingent reinforcement also can be referred to as random acts of kindness. This is doing something nice for the student "just because." It helps students to understand that you are on their side and that even when you don't like their behavior, you like and respect who they are. It is as simple as giving them a print-out of their favorite sports car with a note that you were thinking about them, or giving them a sticker.

View parents as allies. Building a strong alliance with parents is even more crucial for students with challenging behavior. The student's

Common Factors That Can Lead to Inappropriate Behavior	
STUDENTS WITH ANXIETY	**STUDENTS WITH OPPOSITIONAL BEHAVIOR**
Unstructured activities	Unfacilitated peer interactions
Transitions	Unstructured activities (recess, lunch)
Writing demands	Interaction with authoritative adult
Social demands	Asked to wait or told no
Novel events or unexpected changes	Demands placed
	Transitions
	Writing demands

From *The Behavior Code: A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students*

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behavior, we recommend using points and rewards that are earned by demonstrating the skills and strategies that students practice to help improve their responses to frustration or stress. For example, every time the student takes a deep breath, says "I'm frustrated," or asks for a break rather than running out of the classroom, he or she gets a point. With this type of incremental strategy that focuses on learning new skills, there is always something to work toward, which can minimize the student's frustration.

A Passion for the Possible

Principals have many roles in supporting students with challenging behavior, and perhaps the most important is to set the tone in the building. You can have a school culture where the student is blamed and eventually excluded. Addressing each behavior setback as a puzzle to be solved maintains a passion for the possible.

With appropriate support from the principal, as well as from the school social worker, special educator, psychologist, and behavior analyst, teachers can experience success with these students. Each success gives them more confidence as they see that they can turn students' behavior around and help them to reach their potential. **P**

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Principal
ONLINE

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↙ OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) provides an easy-to-search **catalogue of resources for educators**.

↙ Intervention Central features well-informed **plans for behavioral interventions**, with specific resources for motivation, rewards, and special needs.

↙ Visit the *Principal* **archives** to read "Problems on the Playground: A Different Approach to Recess."

potential success is amplified by setting up a communication system that works for the parent to share both successes and struggles. Parents can be experts about their child and can be a huge asset for understanding the student such as his or her favorite activities and how he or she calms at home.

Move beyond rewards and consequences. Consequences don't work for students with extremely challenging behavior. Instructions such as, "If you don't interrupt in math class, you'll earn five points toward your computer time" can often result in escalating bad behavior. Students may become resentful when they fail to meet expectations and receive negative feedback on their behavior.

Instead of this type of "all or nothing" plan that focuses on the child's