

Positive Behavior Support for Students With Autism

Find out the needs of students with autism to keep them in class and out of the principal's office. *By Janet Fisher*

SOREN KIERKEGAARD, A NOTED PHILOSOPHER, described the reality of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) years ago when he said, "People understand me so poorly that they don't even understand my complaint about them not understanding me." Likewise, many students with ASD don't know how to convey their feelings or complaints about how little we understand them.

Due to atypical neurological development, students on the spectrum are affected by a range of issues on a daily basis—physical pain, confusion about requests, difficulty communicating wants and needs, and sensory issues—that might trigger behavior that interferes with teaching and learning.

In addition, students on the autism spectrum struggle to understand the thoughts and feelings of others in addition to their own. As a result, adults often respond to their behaviors without seeking to understand the student's needs. For example, a student covering his ears might be experiencing auditory overload caused by computer monitors, noise at a school assembly, or excessive verbal instructions from a teacher or paraprofessional. When a student with ASD strikes at a person, the student might be expressing that he needs more space, that he would like to play with that person, that he is in physical pain, or that he can't do what is being asked. A student with ASD who continually repeats what has been said, known as echolalia, often is trying to indicate that he or she needs time to process the repeated phrase in order to formulate an appropriate response. Once educators recognize that their behavior *is* communication, and that every behavior is an attempt to meet a need, we are able to support students in new and powerful ways.

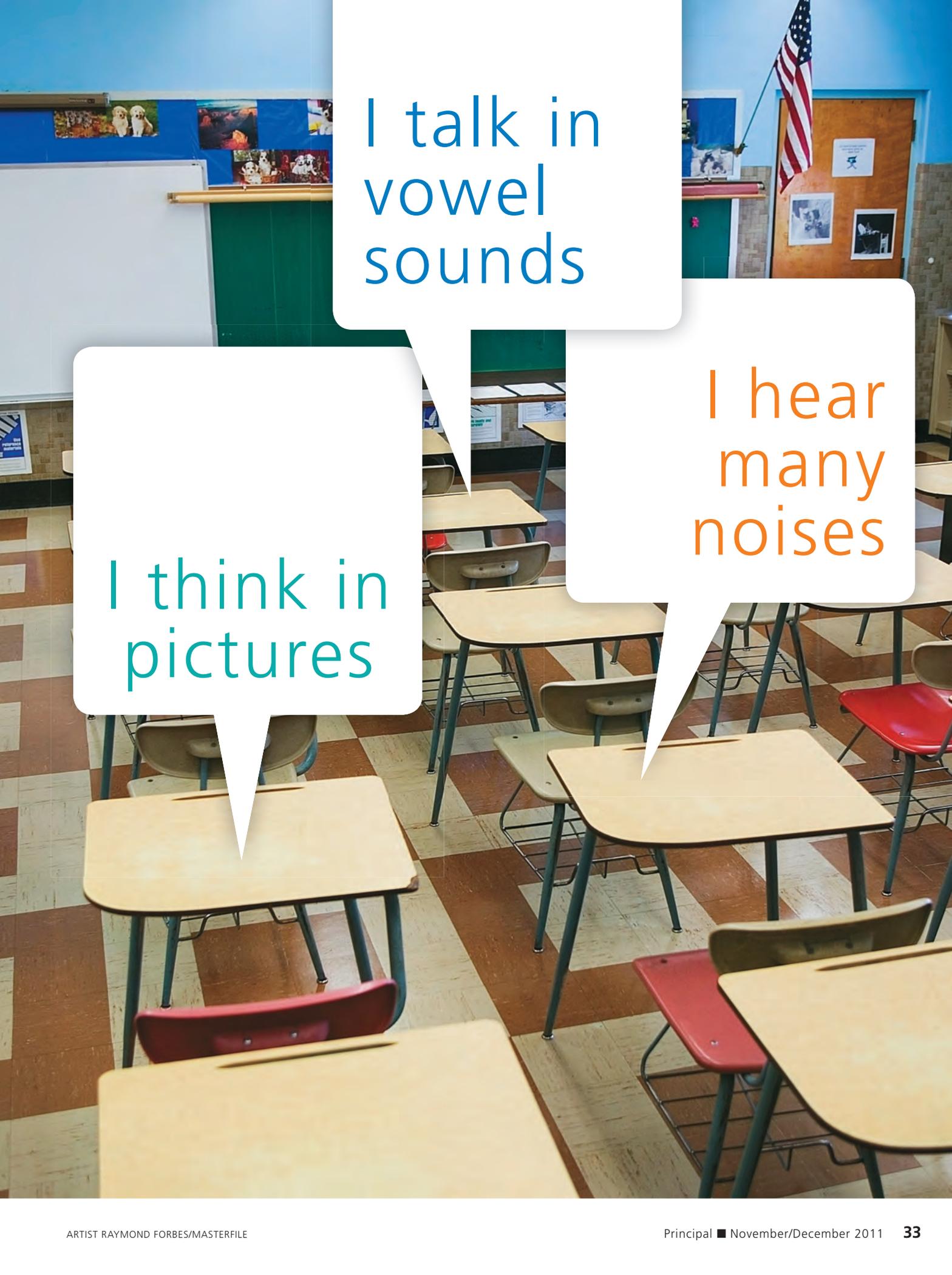
Interventions

Response to intervention (RTI) has proved to be a successful strategy in addressing learning difficulties associated with ASD. RTI includes high-quality instruction that is responsive to the needs of the learner, assessment of the instruction, and evidence-based intervention developed in conjunction with assessment results. RTI provides all students with optimal opportunities for achievement and involves a three-tiered prevention system.

Tier I, the primary prevention that includes high-quality instruction for all students, is successful for 80 percent of learners. The National Autism Centers' 2009 National Standards Report recommends strategies—such as the use of visual schedules, graphic organizers, prompts, choices, and modification of tasks—to promote achievement and reduce behavior challenges for students with ASD.

Tier II is the secondary level of prevention for 10 percent to 15 percent of learners who need more intense instructional strategies and might include tactics such as working in smaller groups, one-to-one direct instruction, self-management and self-monitoring, and working with peer buddies.

Up to 7 percent of students do not respond to Tier I or Tier II interventions and might require Tier III intervention, which is reserved for students who have shown minimal progress in earlier tiers and includes

A photograph of a classroom with rows of wooden desks and chairs. In the background, there is a whiteboard, a green chalkboard, and an American flag. Three speech bubbles are overlaid on the image, each containing text.

I talk in
vowel
sounds

I think in
pictures

I hear
many
noises

a functional behavior assessment (FBA) and a positive behavior support (PBS) plan. The FBA, which is used during the problem-solving process to determine causes for a student's challenging behavior and ways to address it, identifies social, emotional, cognitive, and environmental characteristics that might contribute to behavior occurrences. FBAs include descriptions of what happened before the behavior occurred, what the undesirable behavior looks like, and consequences of the behavior.

The FBA also determines the function of the behavior, which most often is to seek or avoid an outcome. For example, helping another student and yelling out answers in class might both get attention from the teacher, but the former is an appropriate behavior to be reinforced while yelling out answers in class is a behavior that needs to be eliminated or replaced with positive behavior.

The FBA informs the PBS plan, which focuses on strategies to address the targeted behaviors. Successful techniques that frequently appear in a PBS plan include teaching alternative replacement behaviors, controlling what happens prior to the behavior (antecedents) or what happens after the behavior (consequences), altering curriculum and instructional strategies to ensure success, and adjusting environmental surroundings.

Principal ONLINE

Access the following web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/NovDec11

↙ The **Association of Positive Behavior Supports website** describes how positive behavior support is being implemented in different communities and includes information about developmental disabilities and emotional and behavioral disorders.

↙ The **National Autism Center** provides reliable information and best practices for educating students with autism and offers comprehensive resources for families, practitioners, and communities.

TABLE 1
Michael's Skill Acquisition Progress

	Work Production	Math	Compliant Behavior
Week 1 & 2	n/e	n/e	n/e
Week 3	em	n/e	n/e
Week 4	em	em	em
Week 5	em	ev	em
Week 6 & 7	ev	ev	em
Week 8	ev	ev	ev

Source: Fisher (2006)

Specialized instructional strategies might consist of presenting assignments in smaller chunks and using visual prompts and supports for students who feel overwhelmed by task requests and have difficulties processing information. Because students with ASD often experience fine motor coordination challenges that affect writing, providing a computer, a scribe (student or adult to help write out answers), or a tape recorder might give the student a reprieve from writing out all assignments.

Case Study

A case study of a student, Michael (Fisher, 2006), reveals guidelines for developing strategies that increase the prosocial behavior and achievement of a student with ASD who was fully included in a general education classroom setting. Michael was a 9-year-old second grader who had previously been diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) and had an individualized education plan (IEP) that included special education services of social work, resource room, and occupational therapy. He received the majority of his instruction in the general education classroom.

Prior to the study, Michael generally did not display educational or social engagement and he was typically unengaged in tasks, whined, and walked around the classroom when he was frustrated by task requests.

Michael began the school year showing effort in assigned tasks, but by January his disruptions were fre-

quently impeding classroom learning and he was being sent to the principal's office almost daily for 30 minutes to two hours.

Michael's teacher, Mrs. Stewart, had been teaching elementary students for 34 years. She was an enthusiastic and affirming educator who set high expectations for her students. However, Michael presented behaviors that Mrs. Stewart had never experienced and she felt frustrated and helpless when she had to remove him from her classroom.

As a result, Mrs. Stewart and the school principal recognized Michael as one of the top three students with challenging behavior in the school district and nominated him to participate in an intensive case study to receive specialized behavioral interventions.

The procedures the school used to turn around Michael's behavior and academic performance within 10 weeks can be generalized to other students with ASD. The plan was dependent on a framework that prioritizes student's prosocial behavior. Effective teachers can help students with challenging behavior to achieve by:

1. Understanding student needs and behaviors;
2. Developing a positive student-teacher relationship; and
3. Using PBS strategies.

Five-Step Plan

The following steps can guide school staff in using PBS to help students who have a variety of behavior challenges

succeed. Using existing school staff makes this process feasible, considering current budgetary constraints.

Form a professional learning community to learn about and understand the student's needs and behaviors. If the student has special education eligibility, the existing IEP team is used. Michael's IEP team consisted of his mother, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a social worker, an occupational therapist, a psychologist, a speech pathologist, a teacher of students with ASD, the principal, and the district director of special education.

Developing a student profile assessment summary provides the teacher and other staff information to better understand student motivations and develop optimal learning conditions. The assessment summary also helps to identify supports that are necessary for the student to succeed in classroom settings.

The IEP team created a student profile, documenting information such as family birth order, likes and dislikes, the conditions when Michael learns best, Michael's greatest challenges, and long- and short-term goals for Michael, in addition to health care needs and diagnoses not detailed elsewhere. The student profile assessment provided valuable information that helped the team determine

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reinforcers, motivators, and supports that aided Michael's learning process.

Use district experts to assess behavior and develop plans. When behavior interferes with learning, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act stresses the importance of using FBAs and PBS plans. Principals have great flexibility regarding the substance of FBAs and PBS plans and several formats are available online.

Implement the PBS plan. Knowledgeable school staff, typically social workers and school psychologists, collaborate with teachers working with students with ASD regarding appropriate PBS strategy implementation. Each student must be treated as an individual with specific needs and challenges because all strategies determined to be effective with students with ASD will not necessarily work with every student on the spectrum.

After the strategies are implemented, evaluate the plan for effectiveness, making changes as necessary.

Develop a positive relationship with the student. Students' positive relationships with their teachers influence competent behavior with peers and future teachers in addition to creating a bond that encourages academic risk-taking and task engagement. Strategies for developing positive relationships include making eye contact and smiling, presenting a neutral stance, making personal inquiries, delivering a minimum of four positive remarks to each negative remark, and maintaining a calm voice and demeanor when correcting student behavior.

Organize data to chart behavioral and academic growth. Although isolating teachers' contributions toward student achievement can be challenging, it is possible. Michael's progress was charted using three descriptions of skill acquisition (see Table 1): not evident (n/e), emerging (em), and evident (ev). Michael's charted progress shows that all three skill acquisition samples became evident by the eighth week of intervention. It took 10 weeks of intervention for Michael to perform to ability in all academic tasks. It is impor-

tant to note that although it takes time for behaviors to change, once Michael learned a skill, he never reverted back to a lesser attainment.

Onward and Upward

In January, prior to intervention, Michael's teacher commented that she didn't know if general education was appropriate for him and that she didn't think he would be ready for third grade. Two months later, she felt that "we are going onward and upward," and by May she thought that Michael was definitely ready to enter third grade. Ultimately, Michael responded successfully to a total of 36 positive behavior supports while 12 attempted supports were unsuccessful. School staff planned a transition meeting prior to the start of the following school year to ensure successful strategies and achievement continued.

School staff and peers might misinterpret behaviors of ASD students as manipulative maneuvers rather than as authentic autistic neurological responses. Seeking to understand behavior as a form of communication in an attempt to meet a need allows educators to look more deeply into causal factors that prompt unexpected behavior. As we seek to understand and accept students with ASD, it becomes apparent that differences can be supported, accommodated, and appreciated. By treating students with respect, we dignify who they are and empower them to contribute their talents in significant ways. Quality of life is enhanced by meaningful relationships that encourage each of us to support one another along the path of self-discovery, learning, and contribution to others' achievement. ■

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Reference

Fisher, J. L. (2006). *Student prosocial behavior in selected elementary classrooms*. Doctoral dissertation. Eastern Michigan University.