KATHY GOULD AND CATHY PRATT

Schoolwide Discipline and Individual Supports for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Consider the following scenarios:

A student with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has a behavior meltdown. In the hallway, he begins to scream and hit other students. An adult is able to redirect the student and thus eliminate the behavior. Afterward, the team meets to discuss behavioral approaches for the future and to try to find out what led to this behavioral incident. As the team discusses potential reasons for the behavior, it is discovered that the student has been the victim of intense bullying and teasing. In response, the team members question what they can do in the future to eliminate behavioral difficulties. The issue of dealing with the bullies is never discussed.

Another student has a history of behavioral challenges that were minimal during elementary school, but intensified during middle school. The team realizes that middle school presents special challenges because of changing classes and working with multiple staff members. Accommodations are discussed that may assist the student in making numerous transitions throughout the school day. Despite the team's efforts, behavior incidents continue to occur. The behaviors are most likely to occur in the cafeteria or in hallways, which are incredibly noisy. It is suggested that, in the future, in-school suspension is considered when there is a behavioral challenge. This is the approach used with other students, and the school has a strong zero-tolerance policy. The student is warned repeatedly, but despite these warnings the behaviors continue and actually escalate, resulting in removal from the educational setting.

Responding to Problematic Behavior

When a child with ASD engages in problematic behavior, a typical response includes trying to identify what is going on within the child that leads to this behavior crisis. Questions are asked, such as "Why is he exhibiting this behavior?" "Why is she hitting others?" or "What will stop this behavior?" All too often, this last question keeps us focused on consequence procedures that are student-specific. However, simply focusing on the student as the sole source of the behavior provides limited insight into potential solutions and problems. In these situations, there are multiple issues to consider.

First, the federal law guiding special education services, the 2006 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), requires special procedures and safeguards to be used when considering discipline for students with disabilities. These IDEA provisions regarding discipline were designed to ensure that children with disabilities maintain their ability to receive an appropriate education even though the symptoms of their disability may include behaviors that require interventions. These provisions consider the amount of time a student may be removed from class or school due to behavior, and require the school team to analyze whether the behavior is related to the student's disability. This process is called manifestation determination. If the behavior is determined to be due to the disability, the law requires that a functional behavior assessment is conducted that results in an individually designed behavior support plan. This plan should use positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports to address the behavior and teach alternative ways of responding.

When conducting a functional behavior assessment, professionals and family members are invited to examine setting events or triggers that may increase the probability of these behaviors. These setting events may not be readily apparent. For example, a student with ASD is ill, has had a difficult morning ride on the bus, or has not slept. These conditions will increase the likelihood that a behavior incident will occur. For most of us, stresses in life, changes in morning routines, or skipping our morning coffee may set us up to be moody and agitated. These are setting events. We often do not consider setting events to be related to the culture of the school. Schools that struggle with bullying, high rates of suspension or expulsion, or even high staff turnover may be settings that promote problematic behaviors. If this is the case, then schools should take a systematic approach in creating a school culture that is responsive to students and staff.

Using Positive Behavior Supports

Through the work of positive behavior interventions and supports, we have learned that schools that fully implement schoolwide positive behavior supports (SWPBS) have fewer discipline problems (*e.g.*, office discipline referral, suspensions, and expulsions)

IN BRIEF

Research indicates that students with significant needs, including students with autism spectrum disorder, benefit from participating in schoolwide positive behavior supports (SWPBS). Outlined here is how schools can fully implement SWPBS, thus providing a more supportive setting for students on the spectrum.

than those who do not (Horner, Sugai, Todd & Lewis-Palmer, 2005). Early research indicates that students with significant needs, including students with ASD, benefit from participating in SWPBS (See, *e.g.,* Freeman et al., 2006; Turnbull et al., 2002).

Positive behavior supports at the schoolwide level involve three levels of support: universal (schoolwide), secondary (group), and tertiary (individual).

Universal Support. Universal supports include proactive skills that are taught to all students in the school and act to reduce or eliminate many of the problem behaviors from occurring. Appropriate behavior is specifically taught to all students, staff is actively involved in regularly "catching" students performing appropriate behavior, and reinforcements are provided. An example of a universal support is: posting of three to five school rules that are operationally defined; holding assemblies and providing class instruction about expected behavior based on these rules; and having staff give tickets to students who are observed demonstrating one of the expected behaviors. These tickets are then entered into a daily drawing for a special acknowledgement or reward. Most students respond to this level of positive intervention and do not engage in problem behaviors.

Schools that take a schoolwide discipline approach often use data to identify those times of the day and month, areas of the schools, teachers, and activities in which problematic behavior is more likely to occur. For example, if it is found that bullying is more likely to occur in the lunchroom, then more staff would be placed there to monitor the situation. Likewise, in these schools, overall programming to minimize bullying would be used. Instead of focusing on "fixing" the

student who is being bullied, the focus would be on trying to ameliorate the underlying problem.

Group Support. Group support is provided to a smaller number of students who, despite universal supports, continue to exhibit problem behaviors. Typically, these supports increase the intensity of teaching rules, and may use smaller group instruction, provision of more examples, and continual checking by staff, group, or peers to ensure understanding.

Students with ASD can benefit from participation in these two less-intensive levels of support and become part of the overall school community and culture as a result of that participation. Some modification and tailoring of the presentation of the school rules may be needed to address the unique communication and learning styles of the student with ASD while ensuring understanding of expectations and incentives. Using the positive behavior interventions and supports framework, it is possible that we can address many behavior concerns of students with ASD and, through universal and secondary levels of support, reduce or eliminate some of the problem behaviors as well as the amount of more intensive, individualized, tertiary support needs. This also results in more availability of staff and resources to address the more intense behaviors.

Individual Support. Even as the student with ASD is involved in schoolwide and group support, there may be the continued need for additional and individualized support to address a smaller number of behaviors or a specific behavior across settings. In these cases, a functional behavior assessment is conducted, beginning with defining the behavior of concern, identifying its function, teaching alternative behaviors

and skills, and developing a plan to support the new behaviors. All too often these behavior plans focus on punitive consequences. Students on the spectrum who are threatened with expulsion and suspension may become anxious anticipating these consequences. This heightened anxiety may actually result in increased behavioral incidents.

Individualized supports needed for students with ASD to learn and integrate newly learned behaviors should include strategies in environmental organization, visual supports, sensory supports, communication/social supports, and curricular supports. It is critical that the needs of each student be individually assessed in order to determine how to address that person's unique understanding and communication. Individual supports may include, but are not limited to:

- Individually designed classroom and workspace according to the student's needs;
- An accessible individual daily schedule understood by the student;
- Changes in the student's schedule that are planned for ahead of time;
- Activity schedules or task organizers used throughout the day to assist in understanding;
- Individually designed instruction modifications and supports;
- Sensory programming and individually designed breaks, as needed;
- A positive and direct reinforcement system understood and used by the student, peers, and staff;
- A communication system that is readily available, understood, and used by peers and staff at all times;
- Social coaching and skill building embedded throughout the day;
- Strategies to assist with transitions and movement throughout the day; and

- Family members who are involved in planning, evaluation, and support.

Benefits of Positive Behavior Supports

The use of a three-tiered positive behavior support approach that includes students with ASD has multiple potential benefits. Including students with ASD at the schoolwide and group levels of support may decrease many problem behaviors. Fewer students and problems would then need to be addressed at a higher and more intensive level of support. While the IDEA offers additional requirements for the discipline of children with disabilities, research indicates that if teachers and other school personnel have the knowledge and expertise to provide appropriate positive behavioral supports and interventions at all levels in the school, behavior problems can be greatly diminished for all students, including those with ASD.

In Illinois, we are learning through the State Accountability for All Students data that students who are provided more individual accommodations spend a greater amount of their day in general education classes and have fewer behavior problems. Students who are in the classroom more and who have lower office discipline referral and suspension/expulsion rates make greater academic progress (State Accountability for All Students, 2004). Additional benefits include more involvement in overall school activity, an increased number of staff and peers who understand the social and communication styles of the student with ASD, and increased positive interactions between students with ASD and others in their school community.

Schools that are more effective in teaching positive behaviors and addressing behavioral issues, such as bullying, in a more systematic manner are going to be more supportive settings for students on the spectrum. In other words, when a student on the spectrum acts out, we must look beyond the student and examine what is happening overall in the school. Schools that are more effective for all students are going to be more successful for students with ASD. **P**

Kathy Gould is director of the Illinois Autism Training and Technical Assistance Program. Her e-mail address is **gouldkl@comcast.net**.

Cathy Pratt is director of the Indiana Resource Center for Autism and board chair of the Autism Society of America. Her e-mail address is **prattc@indiana.edu**.

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WEB RESOURCES

The Autism Society of America is the nation's leading grassroots autism organization. Its Web site is a helpful resource for learning more about autism, including information about what it is and its common characteristics.
www.autism-society.org

The Organization for Autism Research has published *An Educator's Guide to Autism,* which can be downloaded for free at **www.researchautism.org/resources/reading**.

Educating Children with Autism is an online book available for free through the National Academies Press. The book outlines an interdisciplinary approach to education for children with autism. It explores what makes education effective for a child with autism and identifies specific characteristics of programs that work.
www.nap.edu/openbook.php?isbn=0309072697