



Ten Steps Towards Supporting Appropriate Behavior

Contributed by: [Dr. Cathy Pratt](#), Indiana Resource Center for Autism; Stephen Buckmann, Chicago Public Schools

Challenging behaviors are frequently the primary obstacle in supporting students with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). While there are few published studies to direct educators towards the most effective behavioral approaches for these students, it appears most evident (given the heterogeneity among these individuals) that effective behavioral support requires highly individualized practices that address the primary areas of difficulty in social understanding and interactions, pragmatic communication, managing anxiety, preferences for sameness and rules, and ritualistic behaviors. While the specific elements of a positive behavioral support program will vary from student to student, the following ten steps will go a long way in assuring that schools are working towards achieving the best outcomes on behalf of their students.

Understand the characteristics of Asperger's Syndrome that may influence a student's ability to learn and function in the school environment.

It is important for those involved to understand the idiosyncratic nature of Asperger's Syndrome and to consider problematic behaviors in light of the common characteristics associated with this disability. Following are some general characteristics as described by Williams (1995):

- Insistence on sameness: easily overwhelmed by minimal changes in routines, sensitive to environmental stressors, preference for rituals.
- Impairment in social interactions: difficulty understanding the "rules" of interaction, poor comprehension of jokes and metaphor, pedantic speaking style.
- Restricted range of social competence: preoccupation with singular topics such as train schedules or maps, asking repetitive questions about circumscribed topics, obsessively collecting items.
- Inattention: poor organizational skills, easily distracted, focused on irrelevant stimuli, difficulty learning in group contexts.
- Poor motor coordination: slow clerical speed, clumsy gait, unsuccessful in games involving motor skills.
- Academic difficulties: restricted problem solving skills, literal thinking, deficiencies with abstract reasoning.
- Emotional vulnerability: low self-esteem, easily overwhelmed, poor coping with stressors, self-critical.

Acknowledge that behavior serves a function, is related to context, and is a form of communication.

Effective behavioral support is contingent on understanding the student, the context in which he/she operates, and the reason(s) for behavior. In order to effectively adopt a functional behavioral assessment approach, several assumptions about behavior must be regarded as valid.

- The first assumption is that behavior is functional. In other words, it serves a purpose(s). The purpose or function of the behavior may be highly idiosyncratic and understood only from the perspective of the individual with Asperger's Syndrome. It is important to remember that individuals with Asperger's Syndrome generally do not have a behavioral intent to disrupt educational settings, but instead problematic behaviors may arise from other

needs, for example, self-protection in stressful situations.

- The second assumption is that behavior has communicative value (if not specific intent). Remember that individuals with Asperger's Syndrome experience pragmatic communication difficulties. While they are able to use language quite effectively to discuss high interest topics and such, they may have tremendous difficulty expressing sadness, anger, frustration and other important messages. As a result, behavior may be the most effective means to communicate when words fail.
- Behavior is context related. Understanding how features of a setting impact an individual (either positively or negatively) has particular value for adopting preventive efforts and sets the stage for teaching alternative skills.

Use functional behavioral assessment as a process for determining the root of the problematic behavior and as the first step in designing a behavior support program.

The key outcomes of a comprehensive functional behavioral assessment should include a clear and unambiguous description of the problematic behavior(s); a description of situations most commonly, and least commonly associated with the occurrence of problematic behavior; and identification of the consequences that maintain behavior. By examining all aspects of the behavior, one can begin to design a program that can ultimately lead to long-term behavioral change.

Think prevention.

Too often the focus of a behavior management program is on discipline procedures that focus exclusively on eliminating problematic behavior. Programs that are reactive to problematic behavior do not focus on long-term behavioral change. An effective program should expand beyond consequence strategies (e.g., time out, loss of privileges) and focus on preventing the occurrence of problem behavior by teaching socially acceptable alternatives to problem behavior and creating positive learning environments.

Use antecedent and setting event strategies.

Antecedents are those events that happen immediately before the problematic behavior. Setting events are situations or conditions that can enhance the possibility that a student may engage in a problematic behavior. For example, if a student is ill, tired or hungry, he may be less tolerant of schedule changes. By understanding settings events that can set the stage for problematic behaviors, changes can be made on those days when a student may not be performing at his best to prevent or reduce the likelihood of difficult situations and set the stage for learning more adaptive skills over time.

In schools, there are many examples of antecedents that may spark behavioral incidents. For example, many students with Asperger's Syndrome have difficulty with noisy, crowded environments. Therefore, the newly arrived high school freshman who becomes physically aggressive in the hallway during passing periods may need an accommodation of leaving class a minute or two early to avoid the congestion which provokes this behavior. Over time, the student may learn to negotiate the hallways simply by being more accustomed to the situation, or by being given specific instruction or support.

Key issues to address when discussing these types of strategies are:

- What can be done to eliminate the problem situation (e.g., the offending condition)?
- What can be done to modify the situation if the situation cannot be eliminated entirely?
- Will the strategy need to be permanent, or is it a temporary "fix" which allows the student (with support) to increase skills needed to manage the situation in the future?

Make teaching alternative skills an integral part of your program.

It is critical that students with Asperger's Syndrome are taught acceptable behaviors that replace problematic behavior and that serve the same purpose as the challenging behavior. For example, a young child with Asperger's Syndrome may have trouble entering into a kick ball game and instead simply inserts himself into the game, thereby offending the other players and risking exclusion. Instead, the child can be coached on how and when to enter into the game. Never assume that a student knows appropriate social behaviors. While these individuals are quite gifted in many ways, they will need to be taught social and pragmatic communication skills as methodically as academic skills.

One particularly relevant skill to teach is the use of self-management strategies. Self-management is a procedure in which people are taught to discriminate their own target behavior and record the occurrence or absence of that target behavior (Koegel, Koegel & Parks, 1995). Self-management is an especially useful technique to assist individuals in achieving greater levels of independent functioning across many settings and situations. By learning self-management techniques individuals can become more self-directed and less dependent on continuous supervision and control. Instead of teaching situation specific behaviors, self-management teaches a more general skill that can be applied in an unlimited number of settings. The procedure has particular relevance and immediate utility for students with Asperger's Syndrome. For example, an important self-management skill may involve teaching a student with Asperger's how to practice relaxation or how to find a place to regroup when upset.

Effective behavioral change may require that all involved change their behavior also.

Since behaviors are influenced by context and by the quality of relationships with others, it is also important for professionals and family members to monitor their own behavior vigilantly when working with students with Asperger's Syndrome. For example, each time a teacher reprimands a student for misbehavior, an opportunity may be lost to reframe the moment in terms of the student's need to develop alternative skills.

Design long term prevention plans.

In the midst of problematic behaviors, it may be difficult to adopt a long-term approach to a student's educational program. However, it is imperative that plans for supporting a student over the long term be outlined right from the start. Many procedures and supports with the most relevance and utility for student's with Asperger's Syndrome (e.g., specific accommodations, peer supports, social skills, self-management strategies) must be viewed as procedures that are developed progressively as the child moves through school. These are not crisis management strategies but the very things that can decrease crisis situations from arising.

Discuss how students with Asperger's Syndrome fit into typical school-wide discipline practices and procedures.

A major issue to discuss is how students will fit into and respond to typical disciplinary practices. Many students with Asperger's Syndrome become highly anxious in the presence of practices such as loss of privileges, time outs or reprimands, and often cannot regroup following their application. Another issue relates to school-wide discipline procedures. Schools which focus on suspension and expulsion as their primary approach, rather than on teaching social skills, conflict resolution and negotiation and on building community learning, will typically be less effective with all students, including those with Asperger's.

Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate!

Educators, administrators, related service personnel and parents will all need to collaborate on a behavior support

plan that is clear and easily implemented. Once developed, the plan will need to be monitored across settings, and regularly reviewed for its strengths and weaknesses. Inconsistencies in our expectations and behaviors will only serve to heighten the challenges demonstrated by an individual with Asperger's.

References

Bambara, L.M. & Knoster, T.P. (1995). *Guidelines: Effective behavioral support*. Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education.

Koegel, R.L., Koegel, L.K., & Parks, D.R. (1995). "Teach the individual" model of generalization: Autonomy through self-management. In R.L. Koegel & L.K. Koegel (Eds.), *Teaching children with autism: Strategies for initiating positive interactions and improving learning opportunities* (pp. 67-77). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

Williams, K. (1995). Understanding the student with Asperger Syndrome: Guidelines for teachers. *Focus on Autistic Behavior*, 10, 9-16.

Pratt, C. & Buckmann, S. (2002). Ten steps towards supporting appropriate behavior. *The Reporter*, 7(3), 24-28.