

Identifying Evidenced-Based Strategies for Challenging Behavior Using Function-Based Thinking



A-B-Cs of Behavior

This specially designed (SDI) behavior resource was developed to assist educators in creating function-based behavior supports that can address the individual needs of students. Rather than viewing behavior as something to be managed or controlled, this document reframes behavior as an indicator of an unmet skill. It provides a structured process for identifying behavioral function in order to increase student motivation, implement preventative practices, and prioritize the teaching of appropriate replacement skills. These skills are aligned with effective, evidence-based behavioral strategies and are intended to be used in conjunction with high-quality instructional and classroom practices.

Function-based thinking starts with understanding the ABCs of Behavior – a quick framework that helps us look at what happened before, what the student did, and what happened after. When we understand these pieces, we can support students in more effective ways.

This resource is designed to support educators in planning and delivering Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) for students whose behavioral needs interfere with learning or engagement. Effective SDI behavior goes beyond responding to challenging behaviors. It involves intentionally designing instruction that addresses the underlying skills students need to successfully access, participate in, and make progress within the general education curriculum.

Behavior is a form of communication and often reflects an unmet skill, unmet need, or a mismatch between environmental demands and available supports.

To design effective SDI, educators must first understand why a behavior is occurring so they can explicitly teach replacement skills, modify instruction and the learning environment, and provide individualized supports that match the student's unique needs.

This resource guides teams through a function-based problem-solving process to identify the purpose a behavior serves for a student and align instructional responses with evidence-based behavioral practices. The strategies included are intended to help educators:

- Identify the function of challenging behavior using the ABC (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence) framework.
- Develop specially designed instruction that teaches appropriate replacement skills.
- Select evidence-based interventions that proactively address behavioral needs.
- Increase student engagement, independence, and successful participation in instruction.

Function-based thinking begins with understanding the ABCs of Behavior by examining what happens before the behavior (Antecedent), the behavior itself, and what happens after the behavior (Consequence). By identifying patterns across these three components, educators can develop individualized instructional supports that address the function of the behavior rather than simply reacting to it. This approach ensures that behavioral supports are instructional, preventive, and aligned with the principles of high-quality specially designed instruction.

A = Antecedent

The trigger – What happened right before the behavior?

Think of this as the setup of the situation. The antecedent doesn't cause behavior, but it can strongly influence it.

Examples:

- The teacher gives a direction ("Start your math worksheet.")
- A peer takes a student's pencil
- The classroom becomes loud.
- It is time for a transition.
- A student is told "no."

Why it matters:

If we understand what triggers a behavior, we can change the environment, our instructions, or our support to prevent the behavior from happening.

B = Behavior

What did the student do or say?

The observable action- what the student did or said. This is the part we can see or hear and describe without interpretation.

Examples:

- Putting head down.
- Leaving the seat.
- Yelling
- Throwing items
- Tearing up materials
- Stating "no, I am not going to do that."

Why it matters:

Clear descriptions help everyone understand the same thing.

- "Became disruptive" is vague.
- "Made loud animal noises during instruction" is observable and measurable.

C = Consequence

What happened right after the behavior?

A consequence is not necessarily a punishment. It is simply whatever follows the behavior.

Examples:

- The teacher talks to the student.
- The student gets attention from peers.
- The task is removed or avoided for a period of time.
- The student is sent to the office.
- The teacher helps them with the assignment.

Why it matters:

Consequences shape future behavior. If a consequence gives the student something they want or need, they are more likely to do that again.

What's the Function?

This chart serves as a guide to help educators understand the four primary functions of behavior – **Escape, Attention, Tangible, and Sensory (Automatic Reinforcement)**. It includes guiding questions and observable indicators (“look-fors”) to support educators in identifying the most likely function of a student's behavior to assist with selecting effective, function-based strategies and supports.

<i>Function</i>	<i>Ask these Questions</i>	<i>“Look-Fors”</i>
Escape – An individual may escape, avoid, or delay difficult or non-preferred tasks, activities or interactions by engaging in challenging behavior.	• Was the student instructed to do a task before the behavior occurred? • Was the task removed or avoided after the behavior occurred?	• Refusing to work or saying “no.” • Pushing work away or ripping it. • Asking to use the bathroom, seeing the nurse, going to the office, etc.... frequently. • Taking a long time to get started on an assignment or activity. • Engaging in something other than the assigned activity. • Engaging in behavior that is known to cause removal from the classroom. • Behavior escalates quickly when removal does not occur.
Attention – An individual may engage in challenging behavior to gain social attention or reaction from peers or adults around them. This can be both positive or negative attention/interactions. • Reprimands are also a form of attention.	• Did attention or interaction from someone before the behavior occurred stop? • Was the student able to obtain a response from others (peers or adults) after the behavior occurred?	• Looking around before, during, or after the behavior to check the reaction of others. • Smiling, laughing, or making eye contact while engaging in the behavior. • Asking for more assistance than is actually needed on tasks. • Seeking reassurance or interaction. • Telling others to watch the behavior • Behavior occurs primarily when others are around.

Function	Ask these Questions	“Look-Fors”
Tangible – An individual engages in challenging behaviors to obtain access to desired items or activities.	• Was a preferred item or activity taken away or denied before the behavior occurred? • Was the student told “no,” or “wait?” • Was the student able to access a preferred item or activity after the behavior occurred?	• Reaching for or trying to move toward a certain item. • Verbally convincing or negotiating for an item or activity. • Behavior happens in certain locations or with specific people who have access to preferred items and activities. • In young children, behavior seems to be related to getting food, electronics, etc.
Sensory (Automatic Reinforcement) - An individual may engage in behavior because of the way it makes the person feel. The function may be to add something pleasing or remove something displeasing. These behaviors can occur when no one is around.	• Does the student engage in behavior in a variety of settings and activities? • Does the behavior seem to help the student self-regulate? • Would the student engage in behavior if others were not around?	• Repetitive movements • Seeking out specific textures or sensations • Avoiding specific environments or sensory input • Covering eyes or ears • Struggling with transitions • Behavior occurs across environments regardless of people • Focusing on a specific part of an object • Running, crashing, or seeking extreme movement.

Evidenced-Based Strategies for Behavior Matched with Function

Function	Goal	Strategy	Resources
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Motivate	Building Rapport (Pairing)	• Mastering Rapport Building for Effective Educational Communication Teachers Institute • IRIS Center Module - Create a Positive Climate • Building a Positive Classroom Environment: 15 Strategies • AutismServices_PairingHandout.pdf
Escape Tangible Sensory	Motivate	First/Then (Premack Principle)	• Autism Center Grab and Go Resource Gallery of Interventions OCALI • Premack Principle: A Guide to Using the First/Then Rule
Escape Sensory	Motivate	Providing Choices	• How to engage students by providing more freedom of choice - Teach. Learn. Grow. • Easy Ways to Give Student Choice in the Classroom • Strategy_Handout_Providing-Choice.pdf
Escape Tangible Sensory	Motivate	Whole Class Reward System (Group Contingency)	• FLPBIS Enhancing Reinforcement Strategies 0611.pdf • Group Contingencies in ABA: Types & Benefits • Group Rewards for Positive Classroom Behavior\
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Motivate	Reward Options (Differential Reinforcement)	• Information Brief - IRIS CENTER DRA • IRIS Differential Reinforcement Other Behavior DRO InfoBrief.pdf • Differential Reinforcement in ABA DRA, DRO, DRI, DRL Guide
Escape Tangible Sensory	Motivate	Token Boards (Token Economy), Individualized Points Plan (Point System)	• Autism Center Grab and Go Resource Gallery of Interventions OCALI • Token Economy in ABA: Complete Guide to Motivating and Teaching Learners • ABA Token Economy Systems and ABA Reinforcers - ABA Resources - Autism ABA Free Resources
Escape Attention Tangible	Motivate	Range of Rewards (Differential Reinforcement for Response Effort)	• Response Effort Intervention Central
Escape Attention Tangible	Motivate	Check-In Check-Out	• Check-In, Check-Out Guide • RethinkED Check in Check Out

Function	Goal	Strategy	Resources
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Prevent	Classroom Set-Up (Environmental Arrangement)	• Iris Peabody Environment • Iris Peabody - Create a Structured Classroom • Designing Safe and Supportive Physical Classroom Environments: A Checklist
Escape Tangible Sensory	Prevent	Priming	• Unleashing the Power of Priming in the Classroom - The Advocate • How Priming Sets the Stage for Skill Building in Applied Behavior Analysis • Three Ways to Prime Students for Learning Faculty Focus
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Prevent	Power Card	• Autism Center Grab and Go Resource Gallery of Interventions OCALI • Power Cards - An Overview
Escape	Prevent	Easy, Easy, Hard (High probability, Low Probability sequence, behavior momentum)	• Fundamental Skill Sheet: High-Probability Requests • Behavioral Momentum in ABA: Supportive Strategies for Non-Negotiables and Hard Moments • High-Probability Request Sequences & Behavioral Momentum
Tangible	Prevent	Accepting “no” Tangible	• Teaching Children to Accept No: ABA Strategies • A Story to Teach Kids to Calmly Respond to the Word “No!” • How to Teach Tolerance to Delays and Delayed Gratification Using ABA
Escape Tangible Sensory	Prevent	Visual Schedule	• 5 Free Visual Schedule Templates (Plus How To Use Them) • How to Make a Visual Schedule + Use it Well - Your Kid's Table
Escape	Prevent	Requesting a Break	• Teaching-a-Request-for-a-Break.pdf • Effective Strategies Module 8- Break Systems • (Printable) Break Cards: How to Use Break Card Visuals at Home, School and Special Education - Very Special Tales
Escape	Prevent	Scheduled Breaks (Non-contingent reinforcement)	• Effective School Breaks: 7 Research-Backed Strategies to Refresh Young Minds • ABCR IG STAR Guidelines Using Noncontingent Reinforcement.pdf

Function	Goal	Strategy	Resources
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Modeling	• Stemed Research SIU - Modeling • Modeling Brief Packet
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Shaping	• Shaping Behavior: A Step-by-Step Teaching Strategy for Complex Skills • Teachers Institute • Behavior Shaping: Positive Change Through Small Steps
Add on with other strategies	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Prompting and Fading	• Prompting-Introduction & Practice • Pattan - Independence Skills and Fading Supports Protocol • KSDE TASN - Fading
Add on with other strategies	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Breaking Down Skills (Task Analysis)	• Understanding Task Analysis: A Guide for Educators and Families - Learning For A Purpose • Task Analyses: An Overview
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Choice Mapping (Contingency Mapping)	• FACT SHEETS - Contingency Mapping • BehaviorContingencyMaps.pdf • Autism Center Grab and Go Resource Gallery of Interventions OCALI
Add on with other strategies	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention (PMII)	• PMII_EBP_Tip_Sheet.pdf • TIES Peer Engagement Practice Guides A Guide to Implementing Peer Network Interventions Institute on Community Integration Publications
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Teaching to Request/ Building Better Behaviors (Functional Communication Training)	• https://masteraba.academy/post/functional-communication-training-fct-aba • https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/Functional-Communication-Training-Brief-Packet-Griffin-AFIRM-Team-Updated-2025-1.pdf
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Problem Solving	• Teaching Problem-Solving Skills: Effective Strategies • Problem-Solving in Education: Comprehensive Teaching Guide

Function	Goal	Strategy	Resources
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Self-Advocacy	• Self-Advocacy Lesson Plan • Self-Awareness for Self-Advocacy: Educator Resource
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Teach (Replacement Behavior)	Self-Regulation	• Self Regulation for Educators- Video • SCRED Life Skills - Be Good People Curriculum • Teaching Behavioral Coping & Self-Regulation Skills to Learners
Escape Attention Tangible	Respond	Redirection	• Pause, Redirect, Reward Strategy BIP Visualized • Quick Behavior Redirects for the Classroom: 12-Second Scripts That Keep Teaching Moving Zen Educate • Redirecting Behavior: A Guide for Early Childhood Educators
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Respond	Blocking unsafe Behaviors (Response Block)*	• Blocking Unsafe Behaviors Strategy BIP Visualized What is response blocking in ABA
Escape Attention Tangible Sensory	Respond	Managing Self-Injurious Behaviors (Response block, response interruption and redirection)*	• FACT SHEETS- Response Interruption and Redirection Response Interruption & Redirection Brief Packet

*In order to use these interventions, you must be trained in a crisis prevention program (e.g. CPI, Safety-Care, Ukeru, etc.)

Additional Resource: [Behavior Blueprint: Crafting Strategies for Supporting Your Classroom](#)

References:

Van Diepen, M., & Bedoyan, J. (2024). *Behavior essentials visualized: A teacher's guide to supporting students with diverse needs*. ABA Visualized.

≡ CAN'T VS. WON'T ≡

★ Teach a skill or adjust motivation? ★

SKILL

can

can't

want

MOTIVATION

won't

Engaged



I want to
AND I can!

Reinforce and extend.
Challenge with next-
level skills, encourage
independence.

Frustrated



I want to,
but I CAN'T!

Teach the missing skill.
Scaffold tasks, model,
and celebrate small wins.

Avoiding



I can, but
I WON'T!

Boost motivation.
Use choices, make
tasks meaningful,
add reinforcement.



Resistant



I don't want to,
but I can't
anyway!

Start small. Build trust,
pair learning with fun,
teach pre-skills,
reduce demands.



Behavior = Skill + Motivation. Find the quadrant, then choose your strategy.