



## Cracking the Behavior Code

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**Here are some strategies teachers can use to get through to their most challenging students.**



October 2012

When, despite their best efforts, teachers feel defeated by a disruptive student, it seems they're fighting a losing battle. These students often have trouble regulating their emotions, become inflexible and have outbursts, and leave teachers feeling exhausted and incompetent.

Through our collaboration—one of us is a child psychiatrist who works with at-risk children; the other is a behavior analyst and special educator—we've developed an approach that helps teachers come up with practical interventions that can make a difference in students' day-to-day lives. It's built on the premise that teachers can only control a few variables—such as the classroom environment and their own behavior—in the lives of students with challenging behavior. Because of this, they must put preventative accommodations in place and recognize that how they respond to students' behavior has a huge impact.

### A FAIR Plan

To help teachers remember the steps involved in deciphering behavior and developing an effective plan, we've created the acronym FAIR: F is for understanding the *function* of the behavior, A is for *accommodations*, I is for *interaction strategies*, and R is for *responses*.

By adopting the FAIR plan, teachers can discover that inappropriate behavior is malleable and temporary—and that they can help their students thrive. In this article, we present strategies for helping kids who are oppositional, withdrawn, or anxious (see sidebars on strategies that work with the [oppositional](#), [withdrawn](#), or [anxious](#) child) because these students often experience failure and are the most misunderstood in school.

The FAIR plan has changed the behavior of students, many of whom were on the verge of being sent to a self-contained classroom or out of their district. It has also changed the perspective of teachers, who've come to realize that these students need to be taught the skills to behave and that they require even more compassion and flexibility from their teachers, even though they may seem to be pushing away.

Consider 3rd grader Ken, who currently lives in a foster home. He struggles with reading, and when he gets frustrated, he'll either hide behind a bookshelf in Ms. Silva's classroom or charge for the door and then lurk in the hallway. He often growls when reprimanded and throws books off his desk, screaming things like, "You hate me and school sucks!" Ken pushes other students so he can be first in line, and he has trouble sharing; he'll grab all the materials when working on a project with other students. One time when the principal reprimanded him, Ken exploded

and slapped the principal's glasses off.

## What's the Function of the Behavior?

When working with students like Ken, it's important to avoid power struggles that may escalate the consequences and inadvertently reinforce the negative behavior. Behavior happens for a reason and is a form of communication; determining the intent or *function* of the behavior—the F in our FAIR plan—enables us to better understand the behavior and decide how to intervene.

Behavior analyst Mark Durand<sup>1</sup> outlines four possible functions of behavior: to escape, to obtain a tangible thing, to engage in sensory activities, and to get attention. These functions describe the benefit students get from the behavior—a benefit they may not even be aware of—and help us understand how to intervene to help students change the behavior.

*Escape-motivated behavior* occurs when a student attempts to avoid a task, demand, situation, or person. This can be easy to recognize—for example, when Ken runs out of the classroom during reading. Sometimes it's less obvious—for instance, when kids argue to get out of doing an activity that makes them anxious. Common school procedures, such as time-outs or sending the student to the principal's office, can reinforce escape-motivated behavior because they remove the student from the undesirable activity—just what the student wanted.

We can understand *tangible behavior* in two ways: when the function of the behavior is to obtain a tangible object like money or food or, as in Ken's case, when the function is to attain a specific agenda. The student wants what he wants when he wants it. Students who are self-centered and have inflexible thinking often fall into this category. Some children with a history of abuse or neglect may have a low frustration tolerance and operate with the assumption that the only way to get their needs met is to grab the thing they want or overpower someone.

We see *sensory behavior* when a student is motivated by sensory input: Things feel good, look good, taste good, or sound good. Humming loudly while writing, chewing on the end of a pencil, or standing rather than sitting while working are all typical behaviors that fall into this category. These become problems when they interfere with learning, are disruptive, or make students look odd to their peers.

Finally, with *attention-motivated behavior*, the student tries to gain attention from an adult or peer. This can present as the student being belligerent, screaming, or continually interrupting the teacher. It can also work in the positive—that is, the girl who dresses up so a boy will notice her or a child who works hard on his reading so the teacher will praise him.

## Negative Is Better Than Nothing

Teachers are sometimes surprised that negative attention, such as lecturing or redirecting a child, can reinforce attention-seeking behavior. For some kids—including those with social deficits who may have difficulty recognizing more subtle communication—even negative attention is better than no attention. Kids may prefer negative attention because it's dramatic; efficient (easier and faster); predictable; and more obvious than positive attention.

Consider Rebekka, a 6th grader with Asperger syndrome, who comes from a stable home. She's often loud and interrupts others. When she enters her science class, she'll often shout out inappropriate things, asking certain students whether they're gay or telling the teacher that "this is BS!" and that he clearly never went to college. When she gets upset, she yells.

If Rebekka enters the classroom quietly, she may not be able to predict when the teacher will give her attention. But if she swears, she knows that the teacher is going to attend to her behavior immediately. Rebekka may have learned at home that the best way she can engage adults' attention is to act inappropriately. A familiar example is fighting with a sibling when a

parent is on the phone to get the parent's attention.

## **Taking ABC Notes**

When a student has a behavior incident, teachers document the incident either in their class notebook, in an e-mail to the principal or parent, or in a separate journal. Spending the time to take these notes is worthwhile because it contributes to a solution.

Taking notes in an ABC format<sup>2</sup> can help teachers see patterns in students' behavior. A is for antecedent (what happens immediately before an incident); B is the description of the student's behavior; and C is for consequence (the staff member's or a peer's immediate response to the student's behavior).

Ken's teacher, Ms. Silva, takes ABC notes to observe what's happening in the environment right before Ken's incidents of aggressive behavior and to look at the consequences to help her recognize patterns. She sees from her notes ([fig. 1](#), p. 21) that when she puts one glue stick on a table for three students (the antecedent), Ken hits other kids to get it first. When students line up for music class (the antecedent), Ken pushes a student so he can be first in line. The notes indicate what triggers him; they also highlight his skill deficits. In this instance, Ken has trouble waiting to be first and waiting to get an object. He probably also has difficulty with perspective-taking: He can't understand why someone else has to be first sometimes and why someone else may need the glue stick.

Ms. Silva can also see how effective her responses were. The notes show that Ken (1) successfully got the glue stick to himself, (2) was first in line and then was able to sit out during music, (3) was first in line going to lunch, (4) lost his library time, and (5) wasn't permitted to use dice during vocabulary bingo. In three of the five incidents, Ken achieved his agenda. Knowing this, Ms. Silva will think about responding in a way that's more likely to reduce Ken's aggressive behavior rather than reinforce it.

## **Which Accommodations Should We Use?**

Once we know the function or intent of the student's behavior, it's easier to create a plan to change the behavior. The A in FAIR stands for the *accommodations* teachers can make to help the student succeed. In suggesting accommodations, we want to reduce the triggering aspects of the environment as well as explicitly teach replacement behaviors and underdeveloped skills.

For Ken, these accommodations might include

- An assigned line order.
- A "waiting bag" (activities, such as a Rubik's cube, to occupy him while he waits).
- Lunch in the classroom with a couple of his peers instead of in the cafeteria. An adult should be present to remind Ken not to bully his peers or cheat at any games the students might play during this time.
- A 20–5 schedule (20 minutes of schoolwork followed by a 5-minute break) to help him build tolerance to handle more work.
- A safe, calming corner in the classroom Ken can go to, with Ken receiving points for using it.
- A calming box (a box of objects that calm the student down, such as a weighted ball, a stuffed animal, an action figure, a portable music player with music, and so on).
- The use of technology—such as spell check—to reduce Ken's aversion to writing.
- Instruction in self-regulation strategies, such as labeling his emotions in the moment,

and self-calming strategies, such as deep breathing or counting to 10.

- An aide from another room to help Ken practice self-calming techniques once or twice a day in the calming corner.

## **Replacement Behaviors**

During the time it takes for students to improve underdeveloped skills—such as Ken learning to wait, take another's perspective, share objects, self-regulate, and think flexibly—it's important to teach them how to get their needs met more appropriately. By providing a replacement behavior that's not too difficult to handle, teachers help students behave more appropriately while gaining the skills they need so they no longer want to avoid the task at hand.

For example, it will take time for Ms. Silva and the school counselor to address Ken's underlying learning disorder and skill deficits. In the meantime, Ms. Silva would like him to be able to ask for a break—an acceptable way to get his needs met—instead of throwing everything off his desk or walking out of the room.

The replacement behavior needs to be as easy to implement as the inappropriate behavior, or it won't stick. Ms. Silva gives Ken a "break card" to keep on his desk. When he needs a break, he can hold it up and then go to the room's reading corner to sit in plush seats and take deep breaths. This replacement behavior is appropriate because there's no requirement to use language or wait for permission—Ken doesn't have the skills to do either when he's upset.

## **Teaching Self-Regulation**

Teachers often recognize that students may have a low frustration tolerance and need help learning how to change their behavior when they're overwhelmed. But they may not be sure about the necessary skills to teach. Most students with challenging behavior lack the skill of self-regulation.

Just as they would do with all skill deficits, teachers need to explicitly teach this skill. This begins with teaching students to identify their own feelings. The teacher labels the student's emotion in the moment and then names specific behavioral attributes that can show the student what he or she is feeling (for example, "You're clenching your fists, your voice is loud, you're frustrated"). With practice, students can learn to assign themselves a self-calming strategy in these moments and avoid an explosive incident.

## **Which Interaction Strategies Work Best?**

The I in FAIR is for *interaction* strategies. Many students who have challenging behavior have a history of school anxiety, school failure, and difficult relationships with authority. Teachers need concrete, easy-to-implement strategies to nurture students and convey to them that they are liked, respected, and safe. Building such a relationship can enable students to take risks and move out of their comfort zone.

Teachers are often skilled at positive reinforcement (for example, saying "Good job!" when a student acts appropriately), but they may not frequently use noncontingent reinforcement. We call this "random acts of kindness": ways to recognize students for who they are rather than for what they've done. When students get stuck in a negative cycle with a teacher, if the teacher takes time to show she cares—by bringing in their favorite snack, giving them a thumbs-up sign of recognition, or offering them a sticker "just because I like you"—these gestures can be crucial in helping students stop their challenging behavior. They learn that the teacher likes them for who they are, not just when they behave well.

How a teacher gives initial directions and talks with students has a huge impact on their behavior. One strategy is to give students some choice in a direction. For example, for an

oppositional child, instead of saying, "Line up!" try, "Do you want to walk in the front or the back of the line?" You can also build a delay into the direction, giving students control over when they comply. Rather than saying, "You need to clean your desk right now!" which an oppositional student will resist, try, "You need to clean your desk before lunch."

Interaction strategies for Ken might include

- Avoiding yes-or-no questions.
- Using declarative language whenever possible (statements rather than questions or commands, such as "I see this is broken. We can fix it with some tape").
- Embedding choice in instruction.
- Using humor whenever possible.
- Offering extended time for compliance with requests.
- Offering positive and noncontingent reinforcement.
- Building on the relationship by having lunch together once each month.

## **What Response Strategies Should We Use?**

The R in FAIR is for *response* strategies. How a teacher responds to an agitated student can escalate, deescalate, or maintain his level of agitation. First of all, the teacher must avoid reinforcing the function of the behavior. If an attention-motivated student starts to argue and the teacher takes her into the hallway for a stern talk, the teacher has accidentally reinforced the behavior. The student is likely to argue again the next day.

If Ken starts to argue, instead of responding verbally and perpetuating the argument, the teacher might write him a note that says, "please start reading quietly" and then quickly walk away, busying herself in another conversation or task (preferably with her back to him). This response will not only deescalate a situation that could have become loud and explosive, it will also reduce the likelihood that Ken will argue tomorrow because the teacher didn't reinforce his behavior with attention.

## **It's FAIR**

As a result of his FAIR plan, Ken learned to count to 10, take deep breaths, and appropriately ask for breaks when he became frustrated. Ms. Silva noticed it took him longer to get frustrated and that he was better able to tolerate not being first in line. After only three weeks of being on the plan, he stopped being aggressive with his peers. Moreover, his mother reported he was better at doing his homework at home.

Although teachers may feel at times that they cannot control challenging behavior, there *are* variables they can control. By understanding what the student is communicating, figuring out replacement behaviors, and building a strong relationship, teachers discover that seemingly intractable behavior can diminish and students can thrive.

**FIGURE 1. ABC Notes for Ken's Aggressive Behavior**

<b>Date/Time/Duration</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Antecedent</b>	<b>Behavior</b>	<b>Consequence</b>
3/28 10:15 a.m. 1 min.	Making math pinwheels	Ms. Silva puts one glue stick on the table for the three kids.	Ken shoves Tanya as she reaches for the glue stick and grabs the glue stick, holding it under the table.	Ms. Silva has Ken work at a side table by himself.
4/10 1:30 p.m. 1 min.	Transition to music	Students walk in line to music class.	Ken pushes the student in front of him to be first in line.	Ms. Silva has him sit out during music class.
4/13 12:12 p.m. 30 sec.	Transition to lunch	Teacher tells kids to line up.	Ken races to the front of the line, pulls the leading student by the shirt, and says, "I'm first."	Student goes behind him in line.
4/20 9:30 a.m. 45 sec.	Library	Students have to wait in line to get their books checked out.	Ken pinches the student next to him in line.	Librarian sends him back to class.
4/29 2:20 p.m. 3 min.	Vocabulary bingo game	Teacher tells Ken he needs to wait his turn. It's Cameron's turn to roll the dice.	Ken grabs the dice out of Cameron's hand and rolls anyway.	Ms. Silva has him go back to his seat.

## **The Oppositional Child: Strategies That Work**

The oppositional child typically has frequent tantrums and angry outbursts, excessively argues or questions rules, and often blames others for his or her mistakes. He or she often purposely annoys others and may appear resentful of others.

### **Accommodations**

- Modify the schedule, if possible, so the student can alternate between classes he likes and those he may not like as much.
- Arrange an alternative recess with fewer students that involves a quiet, highly structured activity.
- Embed choice, such as allowing the student to pick the order of assignments, the materials to use, or the place to sit to work.
- Give open-ended, flexible assignments.
- Offer hands-on experiential lessons.
- Encourage daily self-calming practice.

### **Interaction Strategies**

- Use strength-based terminology to describe students (for example, instead of thinking they're stubborn, think that they're good at standing up for themselves).
- Avoid power struggles.
- Avoid yes-or-no questions or saying, "OK?" when making a demand.
- Give a demand and move away, avoid making eye contact or hovering.
- Give indirect demands (such as, "Oops! Some of you still need to put your names on your papers").

### **Response Strategies**

- Use natural consequences as a motivator (instead of saying, "Do your spelling," ask, "Oh, I wonder whether you'll do well on the quiz if you don't do your spelling today?").
- If a student asks a challenging question (such as, "Why do I have to do this stupid worksheet?"), set a limit (such as, "You need to finish this worksheet before you can play the math game").
- Set limits that are enforceable, reasonable, and clear and simple.
- Use incremental rewards and consequences (such as offering the student two free breaks per day).

## **The Withdrawn Child: Strategies That Work**

The withdrawn child has low energy, interest, or motivation to do work. He or she is often irritable, rarely expresses joy, and may be depressed. Young children with depression may experience headaches or stomachaches, refuse to go to school, act clingy with a teacher, or feel something bad is going to happen. Older children may sulk, act bored, lose interest in friends and activities, and get into trouble at school.

### **Accommodations**

- Initiate a buddy system during recess, facilitated by an adult.
- Use pictures to help the student think of and maintain a topic.
- Teach multisensory, experiential lessons.
- Use the student's own interests in the curriculum.
- Teach positive-thinking skills.
- Narrate the experience in the moment (for example, "You've done five math problems already, and three students haven't started yet").

### **Interaction Strategies**

- Be cautious in using humor, because the student may misconstrue it as sarcasm.
- Give positive feedback in a low-key way ("I like the way you helped your friend" rather than "You're a great kid!").
- Reframe the student's negative perceptions (in response to a student who says, "I can't write!" say, "Spelling was challenging today").
- Offer evidence to dispute negative perceptions (in response to a student who says, "I'm stupid!" say, "Ann got that question wrong, too. Do you think she's stupid?").
- Photograph positive social interactions.

### **Response Strategies**

- Avoid one-on-one talks.
- Avoid overhelping or overprompting the student.
- When a student misperceives a social situation, help him or her understand the situation using a comic strip strategy (for example, to illustrate your comment "She wasn't thinking you were stupid—she wasn't even looking at you when you dropped the ball," draw a picture, cartoon-style, that shows a ball on the ground and a student looking the other way, thinking of something else).



## **The Anxious Child: Strategies That Work**

The anxious child may be easily frustrated, startled, or upset. He or she may have difficulty completing work; have somatic complaints, such as stomachaches or trouble breathing; and exhibit fear, irritability, or anger. He or she may engage in ritualistic or repetitive behavior, have inconsistent patterns in what triggers problem behavior, or frequently express worry.

### **Accommodations**

- Provide a safe space in or out of the classroom for the student to go to when feeling anxious.
- Schedule regular breaks.
- Arrange an alternative lunch with at least two peers.
- Consider offering untimed tests.
- For schoolwork, try to present only a few problems at a time.
- Encourage daily self-calming practices—such as taking a break, reading, deep breathing, or progressive muscle relaxation—in or out of the classroom.
- Have the student create a self-regulation chart: "What to do when I feel. ..."

### **Interaction Strategies**

- Use concise language ("Computer time is over," as opposed to "You've already been at the computer 15 minutes, and Jennifer hasn't had a chance yet, so you need to get off").
- Use leadership-building and self-esteem-building activities.
- Apply noncontingent reinforcement (for example, "Hey, buddy, why don't you take an extra 10 minutes of computer time?").
- Work on explicit relationship building (for example, bringing the student with you when you make copies).

### **Response Strategies**

- Avoid responses that reinforce escape-motivated behavior, such as time-outs or removal from class.
- Allow the student to earn breaks for exhibiting appropriate behavior.
- Assign rewards or points when the student demonstrates a self-regulation skill.
- Clearly state for the student his or her level of anxiety when the student shows signs of becoming anxious.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Durand, V. M. (1990). *Severe behavior problems: A functional communication training approach*. New York: Guilford Press.

<sup>2</sup> We adapted the ABC notes concept from two sources: "A Method to Integrate Descriptive and Experimental Field Studies at the Level of Data and Empirical Concepts," by S. W. Bijou, R. F. Peterson, and M. H. Ault (1968). *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 1(2) and *Applying Behavior-Analysis Procedures with Children and Youth*, by B. Sulzer-Azaroff and G. R. Mayer (Holt, Rinehart, & Winston, 1977).

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