

Teacher Toolbox



Teacher Toolbox – February 2025

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The Power of Positive Behavior Support: "BRIBERY" or "REINFORCEMENT"?!

As we discussed during January's live-virtual workshops **"ASD Toolbox Series: Challenging Behaviors Toolkit – Parts 1 and 2"**, challenging behaviors are... well, *challenging*! We learned that behavior always has a purpose (i.e., function) and may develop due to a variety of reasons, such as physical pain or discomfort (e.g., headache, hunger, or bathroom needs), difficulties with processing information, changes in the daily schedule, sensory sensitivities or aversions, or a hard time unexpectedly ending or transitioning between activities. All children experience difficult behaviors at some point. However, some kids seem to have a more difficult time and go on to develop more frequent and sometimes more intense behaviors ranging from destruction of property to aggression toward themselves and/or others. Individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) demonstrate communication challenges that often prevent them from expressing their needs and feelings, which often lead to behavioral outbursts that have a significant impact on the individual as well as their families, classmates, and teachers.

Regardless of whether a student receives general education or special education, ALL students require ongoing behavioral management from parents, teachers, and other adults to learn and grow. Therefore, if a student receives special education, this categorization does not guarantee, nor exempt, a student from experiencing additional behavioral support needs. We must remember that a student is a child first – before they are a child with "X", which may be any of the following 13 categories as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), under which 3- through 22-years-olds may be eligible for special education services if the disability impacts their educational performance such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Emotional Disturbance, Hearing Impairment, Intellectual Disability, Other Health Impairment (e.g., ADHD), Specific Learning Disability, etc.

There are a variety of positive behavior tools that are instrumental in helping us teach students ways to learn, grow, mature, and eventually begin to self-regulate and, for some individuals, become an active participant in monitoring and managing their own behavior. Amanda Morin from www.understood.org mentions many of these research-based positive behavior strategies, such as:

- Create a classroom layout that supports students (i.e., Organize your furniture, materials, and students in a way so as to increase the likelihood of order & structure, which increases positive behaviors). Be sure to check out "Classroom Fixer-Upper" in the webinar library for an in-depth look at this important topic!
- Post and define positive behavior expectations (i.e., Create clear classroom expectations that are observable, measurable, positive, and understandable).

- Explicitly teach behavior expectations (i.e., Plan, teach, practice, and **reinforce** expected behaviors, routines and procedures).
- Have systems to respond to behavior (i.e., Acknowledge positive behavior when you see it and provide rewards, when appropriate, for demonstrating positive behavior – also known as **positive reinforcement!**)
- Partner with families (i.e., Gather information about students from families and caregivers, engage the family when a student demonstrates challenging behavior, and follow up with families to share when a student is demonstrating positive behavior).
- Request support from others with special expertise and experience. (i.e., Meet with colleagues and specialists to discuss behavior challenges when you have used all the strategies that you know. They may have additional tools in their toolbox to suggest, such as how and when to collect data to look at the causes of the unexpected behaviors and how to create individualized supports for students in need of this level of attention).

In “Positive Behavior Supports – A Guide for Teachers” (Ruef, Higgins, Glaeser, & Patnode), the authors describe how positive reinforcement has been studied in great detail in the last 25 years and has proved to be an important part of the learning process (Repp, Dietz, & Dietz, 1976; Wolf, Hanley, King, Lachowicz, & Giles, 1970). According to dictionary.com, positive reinforcement is “the act of rewarding a positive behavior in order to encourage it to happen again in the future, as in Getting an A on the test was the positive reinforcement I needed to continue studying.” In other words, if an individual is rewarded for an action (i.e., their “behavior”), it shapes their future choices by encouraging the person to act in that way again, thereby increasing the frequency of that behavior, whether it’s negative or positive.

Consider the following actions of a child who is trying to gain someone’s attention to gain access to what he wants, in this case, a crayon:

Monday: Johnny hits Sue to get her attention because he wants to use the red crayon, says “Gimme!”, and Sue gives him the red crayon. Johnny’s unexpected (“inappropriate” or “negative”) behavior was just reinforced, so, the next time Johnny wants something, he will likely choose “hitting and demanding” to get attention, so he can get what he wants. Why? Because it worked... Johnny got what he wanted.

<<< The teacher intervenes and spends some time with Johnny. >>>

Tuesday: The same student, Johnny, taps Sue on the shoulder and asks, “May I borrow the red crayon please?”, and Sue gives Johnny the crayon. Johnny’s expected (“appropriate” or “positive”) behavior was again reinforced, so now he’s going to choose “tapping and requesting” the next time, right? Maybe – maybe not. We sure hope so! However, Johnny’s next move depends on many factors, including the function of Johnny’s initial “hitting” behavior and what other challenges he experiences (e.g., communication deficits, sensory issues, etc.), which should be further explored, if this was a real-life situation.

Let us consider the following question:

***What did the teacher do to change Johnny’s behavior?
Put him in time out? Keep him in from recess? Call his parents?***

Answer: Nope... The teacher gave Johnny a reward.

Wait, what?! You mean, the teacher BRIBED him?! Hold on for just a minute. Let's not jump to conclusions. I didn't say that's ALL the teacher did. The teacher DID indeed give Johnny a reward. However, we need to determine WHEN that occurred before we convict this teacher of bribery. We need to first learn the difference between bribery and reinforcement. Let's forget about Johnny for a moment and consider the following definitions:

Bribery is when something powerful such as money or an object (including an edible item) is given to a person to encourage them to engage in a specific behavior or complete an activity or task. Bribery is given before a person exhibits that desired behavior.	Reinforcement occurs when something (i.e., a "reward") is given or said to a person immediately after a specific behavior is exhibited that increases the future likelihood that that behavior will occur again in the near future.
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Think of it this way. I will confess a less-than-stellar parenting moment that happened back in 2001. Squeezed in between two unfriendly individuals that apparently were not fond of children, I had to endure a long flight with my 18-month-old daughter who had just learned to walk and wanted nothing more than to walk up and down the aisle, which was of course against the rules. Therefore, I gave her M & M's to distract her so she wouldn't wriggle away, climb over our less-than friendly neighbor, and toddle down the aisle, careening into the busy flight attendants. Was this bribery or reinforcement? I can check to see if this was a bribe or reinforcement by asking myself, "Did I give the candy before my daughter was sitting calmly on my lap or after?" If given beforehand, it would be considered a **bribe**. If given after she was sitting down, it was **reinforcement**. In this instance, it was a bribe. Don't judge me – it worked – we survived the flight. Had I summoned the strength in that moment to teach her the desired behavior of sitting calmly on my lap and THEN given her the candy as a **reward**, I would have reinforced the expected behavior, making it more likely for that behavior to happen again.

So, whatever happened to our student Johnny and his teacher who we accused of bribery? Now you may be wondering, "When DID the teacher give Johnny the reward?" As it turns out, **AFTER** Johnny displayed the expected behavior, the teacher **smiled, gave Johnny a "High-5", said "Way to go using your words, Johnny!" (genuine praise), and he earned a star on his behavior modification chart** to reward the desirable behavior of tapping Sue's shoulder and requesting the crayon (instead of hitting her to get her attention AND the crayon). All the teacher's intentional choices are considered **rewards** (a.k.a., **reinforcement**), since they occurred after his desired, expected behavior. As I mentioned earlier, that's not ALL the teacher did, of course. The teacher's intervention also involved explicit teaching of the desired behavior, including teaching Johnny how to communicate more effectively with a polite verbal request and gentle shoulder tapping, instead of an aggressive demand and hitting. Explaining to Johnny the reason WHY he should choose this expected behavior (e.g., it gives others calm and safe thoughts and feelings about him) was a critical step as well. As previously stated, behavior challenges are CHALLENGING! Therefore, let us remember to frequently apply the crucial tool of **positive reinforcement** and witness our students' positive behaviors soar!

References and Resources

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/distressed-behaviour/all-audiences>

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/7-ideas-for-using-rewards-and-consequences>

<https://www.understood.org/en/articles/what-are-positive-behavior-strategies>

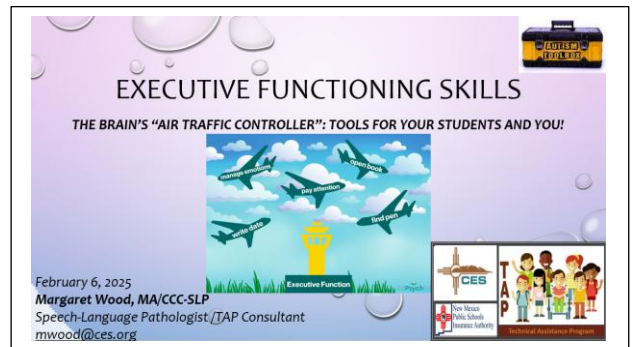
Read on to find out the next topics in the Autism Toolbox Series...

**Be sure to register for the next complimentary live virtual AUTISM TOOLBOX SERIES TOPICS:
Executive Functioning: The brain's "Air Traffic Controller" – Tools for your students and YOU!
Thursday 2/6/25**

And

Sensory Self-Regulation

Go to <https://www.ces.org/> to register!



The flyer features a purple background with white bubbles. At the top right is a small 'Autism Toolbox' logo. The main title is 'EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS' in white, with the subtitle 'THE BRAIN'S "AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER": TOOLS FOR YOUR STUDENTS AND YOU!' below it. The central graphic shows a blue sky with green airplanes flying in a circular pattern around a yellow lighthouse on a green island. Labels on the airplanes include 'Working Memory', 'Attention', 'Inhibition', and 'Flexibility'. A yellow arrow points from the lighthouse to a green box labeled 'Executive Functioning'. In the bottom left, the text reads: 'February 6, 2025', 'Margaret Wood, MA/CCC-SLP', 'Speech-Language Pathologist/TJAP Consultant', and 'mwood@ces.org'. In the bottom right, there is a logo for 'CES' (Communication and Symbolic Skills) and a small illustration of a diverse group of children.