

# The "ABCs" of Behavior Modification

## SUMMARY

- The ABCs of Behavior Modification
- Modifying Behavior Using the ABCs
- Changing Antecedents
- Changing Consequences

Evaluating antecedents, behaviors, and consequences (ABCs) can help you identify patterns and cycles that contribute to disruptive behavior. By addressing an antecedent or consequence, you can often reduce the frequency of a disruptive behavior and increase the frequency of a positive behavior.

- **A**ntecedents (what happened before the behavior that triggered the behavior)
- **B**ehavior (the identified behavior)
- **C**onsequences (what happened after the behavior that affects the likelihood of the student repeating the behavior)

## MODIFYING THE BEHAVIOR USING THE ABCS

1. Select a target **behavior** you would like to change, for example:
  - Leaving seat
  - Off task
2. Identify **antecedents** to this behavior (context, time of day), for example:
  - Difficulty with independent seat work
  - Limited attention from teacher and peers
  - Transition to a difficult subject or a certain time of day
3. Identify the **consequences** of the behavior (what follows the behavior), for example:
  - Attention from teacher and/or peers
  - Student escapes from completing work

*Remember consequences can be positive (e.g. reward, attention) or negative (e.g., reprimands, punishment).*

## CHANGING THE ANTECEDENTS

Once you have identified the ABCs, you can use this information to help change behavior. A preventative approach to changing the behavior involves altering the antecedents. Think about how you can give the child what s/he is needing before the disruptive behavior occurs. For example, if a child received *negative attention following* a disruptive behavior (e.g., a reprimand), consider how you can *give the child positive attention before* the behavior occurs. Do so by:

- Reviewing rules before activities and transitions
- Offering assistance to the student earlier in the lesson
- Greeting the child upon arrival
- Using routines (e.g., morning routine; how to ask for help) to enhance predictability and reduce anxiety
- Using strategic seating to reduce problematic antecedent conditions
- Giving the student choice in a given activity to reduce oppositional behavior
- Using clear instructions
- Keeping close proximity to the student
- Arranging the classroom to facilitate smooth teacher and student movement
- Providing attention, praise or rewards

If there are multiple antecedents, consider if one is more strongly linked to the behavior than the other antecedents or select the one that is easier to change.

## CHANGING THE CONSEQUENCES

While altering the antecedents to the behavior is helpful, sometimes it may be necessary to provide consequences as well. Consequences following negative behavior can include:

- A loss (e.g., a class token, ClassDojo point, name on the board)
- A requirement to work during free time (to get work completed)
- Removal of attention (e.g., student can no longer sit with peers for the activity)
- Skills practice (have child practice the desired skill, such as raising hand and waiting to be called upon instead of interrupting) so that s/he can be successful in the future

Alternatively, you can change the *positive* consequences following positive behavior:

- Praise (verbally or non-verbally) or offer a small reward for desired behavior

## ABC IN ACTION

Often, the consequence of one behavior can act as an antecedent to another behavior, resulting in a cycle of ABCs. Addressing the first behavior can interrupt this cycle and prevent additional misbehavior. Read the example below and try to identify how the consequence of one behavior turns into the antecedent to the next disruptive behavior.

### **ANTECEDENT:**

The class is instructed to come to the carpet for circle time.

### **BEHAVIOR:**

Jaylen wanders over to the coat cubbies to get something from her coat.

### **CONSEQUENCE:**

The teacher's assistant follows Jaylen to the cubbies and gives her multiple instructions to get her to the carpet (adult attention).

### **ANTECEDENT:**

Jaylen receives attention from an adult.

### **BEHAVIOR:**

Jaylen sits quietly for 5 minutes in the circle. The teacher continues with the lesson and the teacher's assistant goes to the back of the room to prepare for the next activity.

### **CONSEQUENCE:**

Jaylen receives no attention from an adult.

### **ANTECEDENT:**

Jaylen lays down and begins to play with the rubber band she found in her coat pocket.

### **BEHAVIOR:**

The teachers says, "Jaylen sit up and pay attention or you will lose a class token."

### **CONSEQUENCE:**

Jaylen receives attention from an adult.

- ***For what behaviors did Jaylen receive adult attention?***
- ***For what behaviors did Jaylen not receive adult attention?***
- ***What behaviors of Jaylen's are likely to increase and not increase?***
- ***What could the teacher do to avoid this cycle?***
- ***What if the teacher positively attended to Jaylen's desirable behavior?***

*Although this may seem like an unlikely or contrived example, many negative behaviors receive unintentional attention and many positive behaviors go unnoticed. Challenge yourself to look for these patterns in your classroom and use antecedent modifications to correct them.*

If negative behaviors continue, ask:

- Does the child enjoy the reward provided?
- Are the consequences occurring immediately after the behavior?
- Can you modify triggers to prevent the behavior before it occurs?

Resources:

[https://tennesseebsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Torelli\\_antecedent-interventions.pdf](https://tennesseebsp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Torelli_antecedent-interventions.pdf)

<https://tinyurl.com/3dd9wey6>