

# Bringing Behavior Intervention Plans Into the 21st Century



By **Connie Persike, MS, CCC/SLP**

“When a flower doesn’t bloom, you fix the environment in which it grows, not the flower.”

This quote from Alex Den Heijer is a perfect summation of what a behavior intervention plan (BIP) should convey. As adults supporting children in schools today, we need to keep this quote at the forefront of our minds. Every one of our students can flourish, but only when they are provided with adequate support and an environment tailored to meet the needs of all individuals.

Our job is not to fix students; it is to support them and provide safe environments where they will be able to learn and thrive. As Kunc and Van der Klift (1995) shared, “Do not try to fix me be-

cause I am not broken. Support me. I can make my contribution to the community in my way.”

But, as a community of stakeholders, we must step back and ask: Is this the message our traditional BIPs send to staff, families, and students? In order to answer this question, we need to first think about what a traditional behavior intervention plan is. We also must address updates needed to bring these support plans into our evolved understanding of the field and align them with what we know about the field today, not what the originators of the field knew when they were writing these plans. By doing so, practical ideas will evolve that will help us meet the needs of our students in schools today.

Because what we are currently doing isn't working. While there was an overall two percent decrease in the use of exclusionary discipline practices in U.S. public schools from 2015-16 to 2017-18, three types of discipline practices actually increased:

- School-related arrests
- Expulsions with educational services provided
- Referrals to law enforcement

In addition, 2,822 preschoolers received one or more out-of-school suspensions, and a total of 11,205,797 school days were missed by K-12 students due to out-of-school suspensions (Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Education Department, 2021). The time is overdue to implement needed changes in how we address discipline and behaviors in our schools.

## The traditional behavior intervention plan

The BIP was included in the 1997 and 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It requires school personnel to develop and implement BIPs for students in special education who exhibit behaviors that interfere with learning (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The traditional components of a BIP include a hypothesis for why the behavior is occurring, based on a functional behavioral assessment, and identified replacement behaviors that will be addressed within the BIP (Dunlap et al., 2010). This is all based on the behaviorist belief that a child exhibits a behavior in order to achieve a function of seeking attention, receiving tangible items or activities, avoiding or escaping tasks, or receiving sensory reinforcement (Dixon et al., 2012). When staff identifies a replacement behavior to be taught, they should ensure it achieves the same function as the behavior did for the student (Dunlap et al., 2010).

Behaviors within a traditional BIP should be addressed using the following:

- **Prevention strategies**—what modifications and supports can be made to prevent the behaviors from occurring?
- **Teaching strategies**—what replacement behaviors can be taught to ensure the student receives the same outcome as the behavior of concern?
- **Reinforcement strategies**—how can the alternative behavior be reinforced and the behavior of concern no longer be reinforced (i.e., what consequences will be used)?
- **Crisis planning**—what will occur when the student becomes a danger to themselves or others (Dunlap et al., 2010)?

## Updates are needed to align behavior intervention plans with what we know today

Let's revisit the question: what message does the traditional BIP send to our staff, families, and students?

It sends three messages:

1. Students are using behavior to attain or escape something
2. The behavior is working for students, which indirectly sends the message that students are using behavior to manipulate the situation and/or those around them
3. Rewards and consequences will change behavior over time

But...haven't we learned so much about the deeper whys to behavior? We now know more about how the brain works, neuroscience, and our autonomic nervous system.

Our field has come to understand that behaviors can be a bottom-up response to a perceived threat. Our brain is constantly scanning the environment for cues of safety and of danger; this response is a subconscious one. It is an autonomic response that keeps us safe by activating the fight/flight/freeze system (Delahooke, 2019). We have learned rewards and consequences do not provide long-term behavioral change. In fact, offering rewards actually decrease interest and success. It takes understanding the deeper why, teaching, and commitment to help someone change a behavior for the long term, not rewards and consequences (Kohn, 2018).

As Mona Delahooke shares, "Fight-or-flight behaviors stem from activation of the sympathetic nervous system; they are a child's adaptive responses to stress. Using punishment or consequences in response to such behaviors only inflicts additional stress on the child's nervous system, worsening the behaviors rather than mitigating them." We now know behaviors are ways our students communicate their distress to us. They are signals to help us get to the root cause of the behavior, so we can provide them with support and strategies, which will decrease their distress. As Kunc and Van der Klift (1995) shared, "Be still & listen. What you define as inappropriate may be my attempt to communicate with you in the only way I can."

## Practical ideas for today—beyond the why

I want to leave you with four practical ideas to evolve your BIPs to match our present-day understanding of the field. First, we continue to make prevention strategies the primary focus. Second, we assume positive intent. Third, we become neurodiversity-affirming as we address behaviors. And last, we recognize behaviors are a stress response and use our keen observation skills to clearly describe how our students look as they move through their wave of distress, so we can offer them co-regulation and calming supports as quickly as possible.

One thing traditional BIPs got right was its focus on prevention strategies. Patterns of behavior that are repeated strengthen and become autonomic, while patterns of behavior that are





interrupted weaken and dissipate (BrainChat, 2021). We can use this knowledge of neuroplasticity when working with students and behaviors that interfere with learning. To do this, we must provide proactive supports to address our student's stressors and triggers. As we do this, we interrupt patterns of behavior, thus weakening and dissipating their neurological pathways. We learn about which people, places, activities, and sensory input provide cues of safety for our students, and we can then strive to increase access to those. We also assess our students' strengths and interests, so we can use that information to provide ample opportunities to embed interests and maximize their strengths to help achieve growth and increase calmness and happiness. By doing so, we are providing patterns of behavior that are repeated, thus building, developing, and strengthening neurological pathways to calm.

When we do the work of finding the why, let's aim not to think of behaviors as working for the student; rather, let's assume positive intent. We all do the best we can, given the situation in which we find ourselves. How can we support the student? What accommodations and supports do they need to feel safe in their environment? If students do not feel safe, their feeling brain, the lower regions of the brain responsible for the fight/flight/freeze system, will take over, and they will not be able to access their thinking brain, the portion of the brain responsible for problem-solving, abstract thinking, communication, and other higher-level thinking skills (Siegel & Bryson, 2016). Felt safety is essential for positive behavior and learning.

We need to stop thinking that certain behaviors need to be replaced and realize that perhaps our expectation of "appropriate" behavior needs to be adjusted, so all neurotypes feel welcomed and accepted in our school environments. This is about accepting students for who they are and realizing one neurotype is not "better" than others. As Cas Faulds shares, "Neurodiversity means that we diverge from typical. It doesn't imply that typical is right or superior, and we're wrong or inferior. It acknowledges that we diverge." We must work with students and families to make joint decisions about what skills to address. As Kunc and Van der Klift (1995) shared, "Do not try to change me, you have no right. Help me learn what I want to know."

Keeping in mind what we know about bottom-up behavior, we can realize behaviors are a stress response as students move from safe and secure to adaptive protection through action. When acknowledging behaviors as signs of distress, we offer calming supports and co-regulation as soon as dysregulation begins (Persike, 2021). Our crisis prevention can become a response support plan as we use our calm and relationship with students to de-escalate and soothe our students through their wave of distress, realizing this is a connected experience—what we do, how we look, and how we feel will impact our students. What our students do, how they look, and how they feel will impact us (Persike, 2022). Kunc and Van der Klift (1995) summarized this so well, "Be with me. And when we struggle with each other, let that give rise to self-reflection."

We have work to do. When we dig deeper to find the whys behind student behavior, we gain an increased understanding of our student's needs. This increased understanding helps us move beyond the why to adequate supports. It's only then we are able to provide intervention plans that are individualized to the student and reflective of their needs within their school environment (Armstrong, 2021). Let's update the tools we use so often in schools to do right by our learners of today. And as we do so, it's essential we remember the quote by Kunc and Van der Klift (1995), "Do not work on me. Work with me."

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