



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

Behavior and Discipline Issues for Students with ASD

Introduction

Most students with ASD want to behave appropriately and follow the rules, but have a great deal of trouble applying their rote memory of rules to real situations, especially when they are anxious, impulsive, or confused. Students with ASD have trouble understanding how to apply school and social rules even though some students with verbal language and good memory may be able to recite the very rules they seem to break. In some cases these students may correct others who break the rules - at least the rules that are very specific and concrete. Because of this variability in understanding rules and actual performance of appropriate behaviors educators, family, and peers often are unsure about the area of discipline as it applies to students with ASD. This issue will discuss typical questions related to behavior and discipline for students with ASD including:

- How do you develop appropriate behaviors for students with ASD?
- What do we do when a student with ASD engages in inappropriate behaviors?
- Are the standards of discipline applied to students who are not disabled also applied to a student with ASD?

Developing Appropriate Behaviors for Students with ASD

It is the responsibility of the IEP Committee to determine the specific goals, objectives, and specially designed instruction related to behavior that will enable the student with ASD to be successful in learning environments. The decisions concerning behavior development will be reflected on the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP). The IEP Committee and the multidisciplinary team determine which strategies will support the development of appropriate behaviors based upon the goals. Understanding ASD is imperative to providing the supports necessary for a student to be successful at home, school, work and in the community. Each student with ASD will have unique needs in relationship to behavior and discipline. However, there are likely to be similarities in the types of problems. One way to get started developing or improving student behavior is to plan ahead for every student to understand behaviors, expectations and rules. Some students will catch on to the expectations and rules while others will need time and practice to get their behavior skills aligned with expectations and rules. The best place to begin in developing appropriate behaviors is with a plan.

Behavior Plan Key Idea: Use a PROACTIVE Approach

Using a proactive approach means setting the stage for all students to be successful. It requires building an environment where the students learn the right behaviors before they have a chance to ever get them wrong. The proactive approach means teaching the students the precise behaviors expected for each rule. For example:

Every year Mrs. Wolf starts the first day of school teaching the students certain rules. One rule she teaches is: sit in your seat. She demonstrates for the students what she means by “in your seat”. She explains that “sit” in your seat has three parts: 1. feet flat on the ground, 2. back against the back of the chair, and 3. hands on top of the desk. She lets each student practice the three steps and reinforces them for every step. Mrs. Wolf also provides a picture sequence of the three steps for each student. Some students tape the pictures on to their desk to remind them of the three steps. Because she puts the behavior into three steps she can reinforce a student if they have at least one of the three behaviors happening and then guide them to completing all three steps.

To create a proactive approach to behavior development consider these steps.

1. Determine the specific rules that must be in place for learning to occur.

Classrooms teachers will need to identify what basic rules must absolutely be part of the expectations in the room for learning to occur. For example: One teacher lists out five specific expectations or rules she always has in place in her room:

- A. Keep your hands, feet, and materials within your personal space.
- B. One person talks at a time.
- C. Use a quiet, or three inch voice when talking with partners.
- D. Listen to the teacher (or whoever is speaking to the class).
- E. Use the polite words (e.g., please, thank you, may I).

To help Bruce understand those rules the classroom teachers provides pictures of each rule for the class and particularly for Bruce. In addition, the teacher teaches each rule and helps the students practice each rule.

Family members will need to identify what basic rules must be in effect at home to meet expectations. For example, Bruce’s family has three general rules:

- 1. Get along with others
- 2. Do your job without being asked.
- 3. Clean your room.

While these rules might be clear to the other children in the family, Bruce will likely need a more functional definition of what the rules mean for him. The family has further defined, in more specific terms what these rules mean for Bruce. For example, Bruce learned that rule number 1 means no hitting or taking toys, rule number 2 means taking out the trash bag after dinner each night, and rule number 3 means putting every toy into his blue toy box before bed.

A list of potential questions to ask for determining essential behaviors includes:

- What behaviors are absolutely essential for the student's safety and for the safety of others? (e.g., stay within boundaries, walk beside someone, hold someone's hand, keep inedibles out of the mouth)
- What behaviors are essential to the well being of others? (e.g., use words or gestures rather than yelling, hitting, or kicking)
- What behaviors are needed to be successful with peers? (e.g., attend to things that other students attend to, awareness of others, be near others, sit with others, play with others, communicate with others)
- What behaviors are needed to take part in school activities? (e.g., walk in a line, organize belongings, take turns, ask for help, tolerate noises, make changes)
- What behaviors will help the student continue to learn? (e.g., attend to certain activities and things, be toilet trained, use instruments, work independently, finish work)
- What behaviors will build self esteem in the student? (e.g., paint a picture, climb and go down a slide, help, pass out the snacks, learn something that is exciting, be in a play, get all the spelling words right)

2. Understand the student in relationship to his or her unique qualities (strengths and weaknesses).

Once specific behaviors or expectations have been determined it is important to analyze the student(s) strengths and potential problems that may interfere with their ability to meet the expectation. Knowing potential problem areas gives guidance toward how the expectations should be taught. In the case of a student with ASD, use the competency model to outline the personal and environmental challenges along with the personal resources and environmental resources. The information collected using the model will serve as a guide to understanding student behaviors. Once the specific expectations and the capabilities of the student are known decisions can be made concerning what must be taught and how it should be taught.

Students with ASD face certain Risk Factors which, if unaddressed, can pose problems related to behavior and discipline. The first risk factor to assess is personal challenges. For students with ASD appropriate behavior may be impeded by problems:

- understanding social interactions patterns; perspective, motives, and thinking of others; perspective taking and inappropriate or misinterpreted behaviors
- learning sequentially
- understanding language, especially abstract language, long sentences, and questions
- expressing basic wants, needs, and feelings (especially when put on the spot)
- understanding the passage of time or thinking through future events without support and rehearsal
- processing and integrating problems that may make multi-sensory environments difficult and stressful
- taking longer than their peers to process, organize, and retrieve information
- developing inconsistently within and across domain and skill areas
- applying learning across settings and people
- using motor planning or other motor problems
- paying attention; may not shift attention, engage attention, or disengage attention easily
- becoming anxious and upset when they do not understand a situation or feel they are not succeeding
- taking a rule stated in the negative and knowing what to do

Certain environmental challenges, if not addressed, can pose problems for students with ASD. These challenges include:

- People who misunderstand the student's challenges
- Inconsistency.(e.g., different rules and approaches from day to day, place to place, person to person; abstract, non specified rules that are not applied across teachers and settings)
- Confusing, disorganized environments.(e.g., too much movement, clutter, loud music, noise, and chaos)
- Punitive approaches to behavior management.(e.g., abstract connections between negative punishment and student behavior; consequences that heighten the inappropriate or other behavior)
- Abstract guidelines for behavior.
- Negative rules. (e.g., rules that state what not to do instead of what the student should do like: Do not get out of your seat.)

Once the personal and environmental challenges that may interfere with a student's appropriate behavior are identified, it is important to look at the Protective Factors (personal resources and environmental resources) for developing and sustaining positive behaviors.

Personal resources are one part of the key to developing positive behaviors in students with ASD. Educators, family, and peers must be aware of what the student knows, likes, and can do that will set the foundation for appropriate behaviors. A few simple steps for identifying and building personal resources follow.

- Identify, develop, and expand the student's strengths, interests and preferences.
- Start with the skills the student has and gradually build their behavior repertoire.
- Take time to help student adjust to new situations and activities.
- Encourage students to engage in activities that peers are doing and that the family does with individualized expectations and supports.

Not only is it important to understand and build upon a student's personal resources it is equally important to develop the environmental resources that will support the student in developing and using positive behaviors.

Environmental Resources provide the second part of the key to developing positive behaviors for students with ASD. Once the potential problems are identified and the potential strengths of the student are determined attention can turn to the environment. At this point it is important to determine what can be changed within the environment to support student learning. Questions to ask include:

- What in this environment is making this behavior or rule so difficult to follow?
- Are there any unexpected triggers (e.g., noise, smells) within the environment?
- Does the environment consistently require this behavior or is there inconsistency in expectations?
- What supports need to be in place to create success (e.g., time, pace, size, participation, difficulty, materials)?
- What are the least intrusive supports (easiest to implement) that will produce success? (e.g., put pictures of the behavior on the student's desk and provide menu of reinforcers for appropriate behaviors)
- What are the more intrusive supports that may be needed to produce success? (e.g., new and complex behavior management system)

3. Develop a plan to teach positive behavior.

It is important when preparing to teach a new expectation that the specific behavior is clear, concise and stated in a positive way. In addition to the clarity of the behavior or expectation it is important the plan to teach the behavior a variety of ways to learn the behavior. For example, some students will learn best by watching another student or teacher model the behavior, others may learn best by practicing the behavior, still others might learn best when the expectation is written or drawn with specific steps. If a behavior or expectation has abstract implications the plan must include teaching the behavior from concrete to abstract. Many students will not immediately understand abstract concepts and may need multiple practice sessions before the behavior expectation is understood. Any plan to teach a new or desired behavior should include these steps:

- A. Identify the appropriate behavior.
- B. Teach the behavior using methods that match the student's learning style and needs:
- C. Teach the cues for the behavior (e.g., when the teacher raises her hand with the palm out it means to be silent/stop talking).
- D. Practice the behavior (e.g., let students demonstrate for, or critique each other). Allow time to get used to a situation through repeated trials and short exposure.
- E. Reinforce the behavior (e.g., provide verbal praise, award points).
- F. Practice and reinforce the behavior across multiple settings

4. Create a consistent, predictable, organized environment.

Once the behaviors have been taught, practiced and reinforced across multiple settings it is essential the learning environment keep the expectations of behavior consistent. When a learning environment is organized and predictable students will be better able to follow specific rules and understand the expectations within that environment. Consistency and predictability are essential for students with ASD to learn and succeed in any environment.

5. Keep ongoing data related to behaviors.

Data collection is important for two reasons. (1) When specific behavior goals are written on an IEP the implementers are responsible for collecting data about when and how often behaviors are occurring. Keeping specific data allows the multidisciplinary team to evaluate the student's progress objectively. Information on the student's progress allows the team to make decisions for continuing or changing the goals of the student's IEP. (2) Data collection provides a view of the actual behaviors and progress the student makes on a daily and weekly basis. The data collected can provide the multidisciplinary team the information necessary to provide appropriate supports for the student to be successful in daily learning.

What to do when a student with ASD engages in inappropriate behavior

The course of action to take when any student engages in inappropriate behavior depends upon the severity of the behavior. If the behavior threatens the physical well being of the student, other students, or adults (e.g., stabbing with a scissors) it may be necessary to intervene immediately to stop or prevent injury. If the behavior is not threatening (e.g., getting out of seat, taking others toys) there are several options for action.

When a student with ASD engages in an inappropriate behavior it is important to understand the purpose of the behavior. Refrain from getting into power struggles with the student. The student with ASD often seems to be irrefractable when engaged in unacceptable behaviors. Using the Competency Model can assist the team in understanding the behavior. Personal and

environmental challenges can have a big impact on student behavior. The behavior should be analyzed to determine possible personal challenges and environmental challenges contributing to the behavior.

Determine the appropriate behavior.

Ask questions such as:

- What behaviors are absolutely essential for the student's safety and for the safety of others? (e.g., stay within boundaries, walk beside someone, hold someone's hand, keep inedibles out of the mouth)
- What behaviors are essential to the well being of others? (e.g., use words or gestures rather than yelling, hitting, or kicking)
- What behaviors are needed to be successful with peers? (e.g., attend to things that other students attend to, awareness of others, be near others, sit with others, play with others, communicate with others)
- What behaviors are needed to take part in school activities? (e.g., ride a bus, walk in a line, organize belongings, work quietly at times, take turns, ask for help, tolerate noises, make changes)
- What behaviors will help the student keep learning? (e.g., attend to certain activities and things, be toilet trained, use instruments, work independently, finish work)
- What behaviors will build self esteem in the student? (e.g., paint a picture, climb and go down a slide, help, pass out the snacks, learn something that is exciting, be in a play, get all the spelling words right)

Analyze the purpose of inappropriate behavior

Try to figure out what the behavior means from the student's point of view. This is not easy because individuals with ASD learn and view the world differently. Ask questions related to the risk factors and protective factors of the student. Here are just a few of the questions to ask:

- Is the student missing information that would enable them to perform the behavior?
- Has this behavior been taught in a concrete, sequential manner?
- Has the student practiced the appropriate behavior with success in this environment?
- Has the behavior been practiced in a variety of settings?
- What are other students doing when this behavior occurs?

Sometimes the answer lies between the students challenges and the environment. One strategy to use when a new inappropriate behavior emerges is the ABCs of behavior management. The ABC method requires that the student is observed in the environment where the behavior has been occurring.

Three elements of the behavior are analyzed:

A = antecedent - what happens just before the behavior occurs?

B = behavior - what is the exact behavior of the student?

C = consequence - what happens just after the behavior?

For example:

Bobby is making noise that bothers the student with ASD. Jamal (the student with ASD) wants to ask him to stop, but doesn't know how other than to hit Bobby. Bobby complains to the teacher and then Jamal gets punished - made to sit alone.

- The antecedent is: Bobby making noise.
- The behavior is: Jamal hits Bobby
- The consequence is: Jamal gets punished* (which inadvertently rewards the student because it removes him from the noise!)
- Potential long term consequence: student learns that hitting the peer gets him removed from annoying noise.

It is important to understand that many behaviors are forms of communication. If educators, family, and peers can determine the antecedent, the behavior - or intended message, and the common consequence, specific plans can be developed to teach the student the appropriate behavior when the antecedent happens again. Sometimes the antecedent is not easy to identify (e.g., student reacts to a certain smell or sound which is undetected by the observer). In the case of the example with Bobby and Jamal, the teachers identified the antecedent. Knowing the antecedent, the teachers could design a plan to teach Jamal the specific behavior of asking Bobby to stop making the noise (replacing the hitting behavior) and later teach the behavior in relationship to other students who make noise.

Most behaviors can be analyzed using the ABC technique. However, given the characteristics of ASD there may be some behaviors that might be considered inappropriate, but do not readily fit into the ABC method of analysis. Such behaviors should be analyzed in relation to the student's perspective. Knowing the student's perspective or message of the behavior will help define what the student needs to know and be able to do for positive behavior. For example:
Student refuses to enter the auditorium.

Possible reasons: The student is sensitive to noise, crowds, being closed in, or new situations. The student doesn't understand the change or associates the auditorium with a bad/frightening experience.

Student with ASD stays on the edge of groups, not joining in.

Possible reasons: The student has trouble initiating, especially with groups of people and is not comfortable with the changing interaction patterns.

Teach the appropriate replacement behavior.

It is important, when attempting to stop an inappropriate behavior that students are also taught the replacement behavior. Most students will continue to demonstrate inappropriate behaviors unless taught the appropriate behavior to replace the inappropriate one. It is important to teach the student self-monitoring strategies and to help diffuse situations so that learning can take place. Students with ASD need to learn relaxation routines, to ask to be alone, have their mentors and advocates identified, and need help to access the supports that work.

Specific Behaviors of Concern

There are three specific behaviors sometimes demonstrated by students with ASD that are of concern in any learning environment: aggression, noncompliance, and tantrums. Each of these behaviors can be analyzed using the ASD Competency Model. However, it is important to understand that the reason or purpose for the behavior will be different for each student due to the uniqueness of risk factors and protective factors.

Aggression (e.g., hitting, kicking, biting, and shoving)

Aggression is of major concern to everyone. In society a person who is aggressive is at risk of

being labeled as noncompliant, may be misunderstood, and even incarcerated. Aggression towards others is not permissible. However the aggressive behavior of a student with ASD must be analyzed and the meaning of the behavior hypothesized from the student's perspective. Ask: "Why did the student use this behavior?", "What message is the student trying to convey?", and "Why did he use this behavior to convey the message?"

Sometimes a student has used various methods in an attempt to have people understand that he did not like something, wanted someone to move, or someone took something from him. In this case the aggression was used as his last resort. At other times, aggression is the first and only means the student uses to convey a message. Here are critical questions to initially ask:

- What are the primary challenges for this student that hinder development of more appropriate means to have his messages understood?
- Does the student have sensory problems that are beyond tolerance level?
- Does the student need to finish something and becomes upset if interrupted?
- Does the student have the means to communicate wants and needs so everyone understands?
- Do the people in the environment respond to the appropriate means of communication?
- Are there positive interaction patterns established with the student and peers?
- Are there activities the student can do with others?
- Are there lots of negative messages delivered to this student?
- Can this student entertain himself or herself?
- Can the student defend himself or herself?
- Does the student see others engage in this type of behavior?
- Are there clear expectations and consistency in application?
- Are there health problems?

What is the replacement behavior this student needs to learn rather than engaging in this behavior?

- To ask someone to stop or move?
- To ask someone for help?
- To tell someone "No"?
- To learn what activities and rules are negotiable and which are not?
- To learn to wait?
- To learn to take turns?
- To learn when some things aren't possible?
- To accept changes with accurate prior information?
- To accept the answer of others?
- To tell someone he does not feel well?

How can the student be taught new behaviors?

- Decide on the exact words and cues that will be used to teach the student.
- Provide multiple opportunities to model the new behavior.
- Reinforce the student for using the more appropriate behavior.
- Respond and react positively to the new behavior.

What to do when the behavior occurs?

- Set a plan that everyone uses when the behavior occurs.
- Avoid giving the behavior too much attention.
- Show what behavior is appropriate.

Noncompliance

Noncompliance is defined as when a student does something he knows he should not do or refuses to do something that someone wants him to do. This is a behavior that is very difficult and annoying. However, it is often part of the student's attempt to exert independence and gain control. Adults need to avoid battles by making the "rules" absolutely clear. It should be clear to the student which rules are negotiable and which rules are not negotiable. To do this educators, family, and peers must be sure of these rules themselves.

Consistency in applying the rules is vital. When new rules and expectations are imposed, the student must be taught, desensitized, and rehearsed when necessary. Accurate, prior information that is understandable must be provided.

To understand the noncompliance behavior and determine the appropriate replacement behavior ask:

What is the purpose of the behavior from the student's perspective?

- Does the student know the rules or do rules change depending on the person and the situation? Is there really consistency?
- Can the student do what is being asked ? What will help?
- Is the student using this behavior as a way to interact?
- Does the student have choice and control over parts of the day at school?
- Is the student reinforced for following rules and doing as someone wants him to do?
- Does behaving get attention and what the student needs or is behaving overlooked and expected?
- Are there sensory issues involved?
- Does the student know and feel comfortable about what is going to happen next?

What puts the student at risk for being able to learn appropriate behaviors?

- Not understanding interactions and being successful with them?
- Not being able to communicate his wants and needs well?
- Not being understood and listened to?
- A small repertoire of activities and interests?
- Sensory issues?
- Learning and attention problems?
- Anxiety and fears?

What does the student need to learn instead of engaging in this behavior?

- To get attention in a more direct way?
- To learn and practice the rules in a consistent way?
- To communicate his wants and needs directly - to have choices?
- To have more interesting things to do?
- To learn to wait?
- To learn to follow a visual sequence and predict what is coming next?
- To have more activities and interests to be redirected or directed to do?

What to do when the student engages in the behaviors

Follow a set plan with well established procedures. When a student refuses, a set format can be put in place. (e.g., Move closer, say student's name, keep voice calm and direct, repeat direction then pause. Do this one more time, but add, "I'll count to 3, then I'll help you." Count at a set pace, using numbers that are visual, then help. Make sure the student knows the rule by practicing the rule several times.

Tantrums

Tantrums are behaviors that can disrupt the flow of learning and simple procedures such as moving through a lunch line. Typically tantrums are used by students to refuse a request, a person or an item. For example a student may throw a tantrum when asked to work with a student he or she does not like. Tantrums, like other behaviors are messages from the student. As with aggression and noncompliance, tantrums can be analyzed using the competency model by asking:

What does the behavior mean from the student's point of view?

- Why is the student refusing?
- Is the student afraid, overwhelmed, or overstimulated?
- Is the pace too fast for the student or too slow?
- Are there too many demands?
- Are there sensory issues? Is the student tired or sick?
- Is the student lacking the necessary skills?
- Does the student have more appropriate means to refuse and are they "allowed" and responded to? Is the student responding to refusal?
- What does the student need to learn?

A more appropriate way to refuse.

- Will "NO" from the student be acknowledged or does the student need to use stronger behavior to get a point across?
- Will an appropriate way to refuse be acknowledged and honored?
- Consider how to make refused activities more acceptable and motivating.
- Which activities are choices and which are not? Is this clear?
- Can the student make choices and are there opportunities for choice?
- What is the value or motivation to comply?
- Are there too many rules?
- Are the rules clear and appropriate?

Other Possible Reasons for Problem Behaviors

Health Issues

Since many students with ASD are not able to accurately convey that they are not feeling well this factor must always be considered. Constipation, toothaches, headaches, colds and flu, earaches, seizures, ulcers, allergies, appendicitis, and other conditions must be investigated and ruled out. This is especially true if there is a sudden change in the student's behavior or there doesn't appear to be any logical message behind the behavior. Sometimes students use having a stomach ache or not feeling well as an escape. They have learned that this is an acceptable way

to get help from anxious situations. If this appears to be the case, analyze the source of the anxiety carefully to address the support needed.

General Everyday Issues

Being tired, hungry, needing to be hugged, or to be alone can also cause problems for a student who can not initiate or negotiate well and does not do well with the interaction patterns.

Sensory Issues

Most students with ASD have reactions to sensory stimuli that are different from other people. Their reactions may vary from time to time. They may tune in to some things that the rest of us do not. They may need to explore their environments in various ways. They may have some problems knowing how their bodies relate to the environment or may need to move more. Whatever it is, they often are not able to advocate for this need directly so it is important to pay attention to their reactions.

Are the same standards of discipline that are applied to students who are not disabled applied to a student with ASD?

The IEP Committee determines, on an individual basis, if a student with a disability will follow the school's standard discipline codes. If the IEP Committee determines that the student will not follow the standard discipline codes a unique set of discipline codes are developed and this is noted on the IEP and within the conference summary report. The IEP Committee describes precisely what discipline codes the student will be held accountable for while in school.

Given the nature of ASD it is likely that some students will have discipline codes that vary from the school's code to some degree. However, it is important to understand that the decision of discipline is made by the IEP Committee on an individual basis for each student. There is no alternate discipline code that works for every student with ASD. Just like every other aspect of the student's learning environment discipline will be unique and based upon the strengths and needs of the student.

Summary

Each student with ASD is unique, and as the student grows up there will be unique challenges. Teaching appropriate behavior is vital to the person's quality of life. However, the uniqueness of each student requires people to accept some behaviors that may seem a bit "odd" at times. The student may have unique ways to calm down and keep anxiety levels in check. The student may engage in these behaviors without regard to who is around or location. This case would require teaching the student where to engage in the behaviors, how not to be quite so conspicuous while engaging in the behaviors, or to teach a more acceptable behavior to accomplish the same purpose. The need for and the purpose of the behavior should be accepted and acknowledged. Tolerance of differences and acceptance of behaviors that are unique should be fostered. A student with ASD is often corrected so much that the world seems rigid and intolerable. Channeling behaviors, accounting for special needs, and fostering strengths and interests while building skills and successful experiences are the cornerstone of helping the student grow and learn successfully. Emphasis on cooperative, rather than competitive activities and cherishing the strengths of each student will build a "community of learners" who help one another.

As a team parents, educators, and peers hope to broaden the student's world and people's understanding of ASD. The more people who understand ASD the better the supports will be which will help appropriate behaviors and the student flourish.