

Unlocking the Mysteries of Children's Mental Health

An Introduction for Future Teachers

Lecture 4



Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health
1-800-528-4511 (MN only)

Prepared by the Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health

for the Minnesota Department of Education

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Creating Conditions for Classroom Success



Focus:

- Planning classroom accommodations that enable learning and support positive behaviors



Shifting Viewpoints

“The past 10 to 15 years have produced important changes in the understanding and management of behavior problems. Many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers now acknowledge that behavior problems can be conceptualized from a functional perspective and that **appropriate interventions** involve the development of **alternative behavioral repertoires**...and the establishment of **enriched and supportive environments** that serve to effectively prevent the occurrences of undesirable target behaviors...”

--Lee Kern



How Would You React?

- To a student with diabetes inattentive because of low blood sugar?
- To a student with asthma requesting a rest break?
- To a student “acting out” due to symptoms of a mental health disorder?



Supportive Classroom Climate

- A “no-fault atmosphere” lets you do what must be done with a minimum of disruption and without debating if the behaviors are “deliberate”
- When the overall classroom climate is supportive, the student feels secure and able to tackle academic challenges, and teachers are freed to do what they do best: **teach**



IDEA and Behaviors

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires a team to “explore the need for strategies and support systems to address any behavior that may impede the learning of the child with the disability or the learning of his or her peers.”

» 20 USC § 614(d)(3)(B)(I)



“Children do well if they can. If they can’t, we need to figure out why, so we can help... The vast majority of children do not get their jollies by making themselves and those around them miserable.”

– (R. Green 2001)



“My motto: ‘I only expect my kids to do their best and, at any given time, I believe they ARE doing their best;’ even when they are throwing a fit, they are telling me something and I need to help them find what that is.”

– (Parent of child with FAS, Thunder Spirit Lodge 1999)



4 Steps: Finding the Barriers to Learning

1. Document the times, activities, and circumstances before and after any outbreak of unacceptable behavior
2. Determine if there is an academic task the student fears or is attempting to avoid
3. Modify the curriculum, presentation, or the specific task; recheck whether optimum conditions for brain-based learning exist
4. Consult with the student's team, including parents



Functional Behavioral Assessment

“The process of identifying events that reliably predict and maintain problem behaviors.”

- Horner



Tools for the FBA

- Interviews
- Descriptive Observations
- Functional Analysis
 - Observation plus systematic manipulation of the environment to define what exactly determines the behavior



“Positive behavior support involves the assessment and reengineering of environments so that people with problem behaviors experience reductions in problem behaviors and an increase in the social, personal, and professional quality of their lives.”

Horner



Positive Behavior Supports

- A plan for how to use the results of the FBA
- The goal: **to prevent the behavior or intervene before learning is disrupted**
- Requires direct teaching of alternative, acceptable behaviors



General Accommodations

- Focus on breaking down barriers to learning imposed by the student's disorder and its symptoms
- Draw on scientific & psychiatric knowledge
- Work as a team; use parents as allies
- Partnering can render a troubling symptom manageable or overcome it altogether



Academics

- Be sure materials are matched to the child's achievement level; modify if needed
- Allow oral responses or computer use for children with handwriting problems
- Allow manipulatives, word banks, number lines or calculators as needed; test for concept understanding
- Modify the amount of work expected



Developmental Differences

- Students with mental health disorders may show delays in cognitive, behavioral, social and emotional skills development
- Peer relations, emotional control and decision-making skills may show deficits
- Memory and problem-solving skills may be damaged or show intermittent problems



A Calm Classroom

- Develop “secret” cues for a child who is escalating and a “safe” place to go
- Maintain a calm, impersonal voice
- Use positive directions: “Please walk away”
- Offer distraction or escape to “save face”
- Avoid adding any sensory input
- Do not allow teasing or putdowns in the classroom at any time



Reduce Classroom Stress

- Warn in advance if a student is expected to answer a question in class
- Teach and re-teach classroom expectations and expectations for special events
- Do not change daily routine without advance warning
- Seek an occupational therapy evaluation



Accommodations

Individual Modifications or Just Good Teaching?

- When a classroom includes children with educational, emotional, and behavioral challenges, understanding of the brain is essential
- These classroom accommodations will benefit the entire class, solving the problems of treating one child “differently” and finding the time and energy to modify “for just one kid”



Accommodations for Mood & Anxiety Disorders

- Reduce classroom stress
- Reduce environmental stimulation
- Encourage daily “check-ins” and decrease work demands as needed
- Use non-judgmental terms for feedback
- Make rules few, clear, consistent, and stated in the positive



An Important Note

- Children and adolescents with mental health disorders are especially susceptible to thoughts of suicide and suicide attempts
- Be alert to withdrawal, isolation, and statements of worthlessness
- Consult with other staff immediately if student behavior arouses concern



Accommodations for Social Skills Deficits

- Try working with Speech-Language Pathologist or School Social Worker
- Use videos or one-on-one “field trips” for guided observation of body language and emotions
- Use puppets, pictures, role-play
- Encourage development of splinter skills and interests to increase self-esteem and peer acceptance
- Consider implementing formal peer support programs like “Circle of Friends”



Accommodations for Acting Out & Defensiveness

Opposition and defensiveness are behaviors developed for self-defense against the judgmental attitudes of others

- Demonstrate alternatives by using “self-talk” aloud; make it “safe” to make mistakes
- Directly teach a new “reflex” reaction : curiosity and questions that maintain relationships (Why do you think so?)



Accommodations for Disinhibition

May be simple interruptions, mood shifts, or sudden, excessive opposition or rage

- Help student learn his or her warning signs and how to ask for help
- Reassure student of your regard & confidence
- Be creative and change rewards often
- Plan consequences to include remediation of any harm done



Accommodations for Meltdowns & Rage

A total meltdown is disruptive and frightening for teacher, classmates, and the student

- Take a deep breath and assess the situation; always use a calm reassuring voice
- Seek help if needed; document the incident thoroughly
- Hold the student responsible for repairing relationships or property after the crisis



Accommodations for Shifting Symptoms

- Reduce anxiety to prevent escalation
- Use advance warnings of change such as, “Tomorrow will be different”
- Maintain a calm attitude and give a lot of reassurance



Case Studies

- Read the description of each student and his or her behavior
- Develop 2-3 accommodations you would try; list any evaluations you feel necessary
- Review outcomes presented in the case history and discuss any differences



This presentation and the supporting materials can be downloaded from the following web site: www.macmh.org

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