Chapter 4

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Challenges often overshadow strengths. Keep a light shining brightly on those strengths and keep the momentum moving forward.

In the US Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), *least restrictive environment* (LRE) means that a student who has a disability should have the opportunity to be educated with non-disabled peers, to the greatest extent appropriate:

> to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (Sec. 612 (a)[5], IDEA, US Department of Education 2010)

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

In the field of special education, there are different types of disabilities that will qualify a child for special services. A child may be identified as having an emotional disability, or have an autism spectrum disorder, have a medical limitation or other such need.

Moreover, these difficulties are often derived from a neurological basis. The brain can be wired differently in ways that impact auditory, visual, and sensory processing.

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of verbal and nonverbal communication, social interaction, and the presence of repetitive behaviors or interests.

Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) is also a neurobiological disorder. Typically, children with AD/HD have developmentally inappropriate behavior, including poor attention skills, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. These characteristics arise in early childhood, typically before age seven, are chronic, and last at least six months. Children with AD/HD may also experience problems in the areas of social skills and self-esteem.

Emotional Disturbance is a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance in the following ways:

- an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors
- an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers
- inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances
- a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; or
- a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

The term includes schizophrenia.

For children with an identified disability, the following characteristics are found to be common:

- difficulty processing information
- difficulty in focus and attention
- difficulty in expressing wants, needs, feelings
- difficulty in interacting with peers
- difficulty in following directions
- difficulty in understanding abstract concepts.

While these difficulties are real and need to be addressed and supported, there are also strengths to be celebrated. Children with special needs often have any or all of the following strengths:

- resilience
- intelligence
- honesty
- artistic
- musical
- humor
- perceptive
- kindness
- generosity
- tolerance.

Always remember that children with special needs are children first. They may also happen to need a bit more support or something a bit different from their friends, families, and teachers. Keep the light shining brightly on strengths and interests.

DECREASE STRESS AND INCREASE SUCCESS

Due to the neurological differences present in many children with special needs, there is often more stress as a result of these differences. Too much incoming stimuli and different wiring can make simpler tasks much more challenging. Stress can interfere with the ability to focus and perform optimally and should be minimized as much as possible. The following components all work to decrease stress in educational settings:

- Create physical and organizational structure.
- Break information down into smaller chunks.
- Present the information in a visual format.
- Incorporate an interest when possible.
- Meet sensory needs.

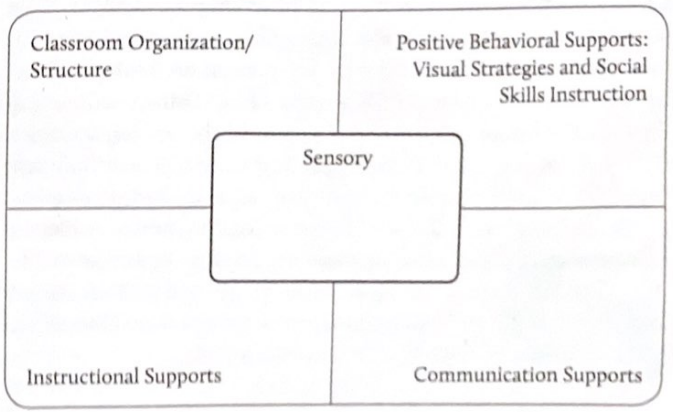
The form in Table 4.1 will help to describe the target behavior and antecedents and then develop a proactive plan for prevention.

Table 4.1 Plan for Prevention

Student _____ Grade _____

Teacher(s) _____ Date _____

Target Behavior:	Frequency: Duration: Intensity (1–5):
Antecedents:	
Student Strengths: Student Needs: Interests:	



Prevention: Incorporate Student Interests

Interests can increase focus, attention, and motivation. For individuals with special needs, the interests they have may even serve to decrease stress and anxiety. Almost any interest that a person has can be incorporated within a specific visual tool or behavioral strategy. By doing so, the likelihood that the tool or strategy will be effective when it is needed is increased.

One way to incorporate an interest is to simply decorate a strategy with a picture of the interest. You can put a picture of a bird, or Batman, or even a sports figure in the corner of a breathing chart and the student may be more likely to use and follow that strategy when it is time to calm down. I have seen a small decoration of an interest help a student use their schedule more successfully. By sprinkling interests across different visual strategies, the student does not have to wait for a specific time to experience that interest. This can help with the intense preoccupation with that interest and the ability to transition away from this preferred time to less preferred activities.

As an example, a student with multiple strategies had a great love for dinosaurs. The teacher was very creative in all the ways that she incorporated dinosaurs throughout these strategies in addition to specific dinosaur time...five minutes at the end of each subject area with a box of miniature dinosaurs. The teacher set a timer for five minutes to indicate how long the student could play with the dinosaurs. He also had a picture of a dinosaur on his transition marker, on his surprise card, and on his "chill pass." She added dinosaur books to the library and allowed him to write about dinosaurs in his journal every day as part of the writing activities. Before sprinkling interests throughout the strategies, the student was very resistant to following directions or completing any assignments. Once his day was dinosaur-friendly, he was successful in all academic areas. An added and unplanned result was that he started to ask for less "dinosaur time" at the end of each subject area. Perhaps the more that dinosaurs were sprinkled throughout his day, the less he felt a need to hold on so tightly.

Prevention: Classroom Organization

Classroom organization and structure is essential to a positive learning environment. This is true for all students, and especially so for students with special needs. The clearly defined and labeled areas that we discussed earlier still need to be in place in a general education or a special education setting. However, there may need to be some additional layers for students with special needs. For instance, some students may benefit from an area that is highly structured for independent work—a very separate area with very clear boundaries and labels that set a student up for success.

A student may also be more successful if there is an added layer of information to help them know how much work they need to do while in this area and what they have to look forward to upon completion. This added layer of information is often referred to as a work system, and has the same components as a mini-schedule or mini-map. A work system represents the amount and sequence of activities expected to be completed. The work system will also include what will happen when the activities are completed. This may be a reinforcing activity, the next thing on the schedule, or a transition marker that will take the child back to the schedule.

In other words, a work system accomplishes the same goals as a mini-schedule or mini-map by breaking down a section from the schedule into smaller steps or chunks which often feel more doable, increasing student willingness to engage in academic tasks.

As an example of the critical role of the classroom organization, creating clear physical boundaries in the environment can help a student self-regulate their own behaviors within each of those environments. Think of how your behavior changes from work to home, from shopping at a store to driving in your car. The environment itself guides your behavior based on the varying expectations within each of those environments. Think of this same principle and apply it to each area within a classroom. That is why having a clearly defined break area may be extremely beneficial to help transition between work and break activities more successfully. For one student who had a sensory need for roaming throughout the room for a large part of the day, the teacher created a clearly defined break with low shelves and a carpet and put down outlines of feet around the perimeter of the break area to indicate

more clearly that walking or "roaming" was appropriate in the break area. The student quickly learned to self-regulate by walking in the break area and sitting in the instructional areas throughout the class. For yet another student with a sensory need for playing with water, an area was created to help meet that sensory need. By defining and labeling that area specifically for water play, the student learned to limit his water play activities to this specific area. The classroom organization can be a powerful tool for prevention for almost any behavior.

Prevention: Individual Schedules

Visual schedules are an environment support to accommodate the need for predictability and decreased anxiety about the unknown. Visual schedules take an abstract concept, such as time, and present it in a more concrete and manageable form using words and/or pictures or even objects. Schedules serve two major purposes:

- decrease stress by breaking time and/or activities into smaller chunks
- increase focus by clarifying different types of activities with varying levels of expectations
- increase motivation by clarifying when preferred activities will occur
- increase flexibility by anticipating and responding to changes more positively.

Individual schedules provide children with an understanding of what has been accomplished, what is to come, and when good things are coming. This knowledge empowers an individual to have a sense of understanding and security that leads to success and independence.

The centerpiece or core strategy of all related strategies is the visual schedule. Having established that a schedule is an essential tool for individuals with special needs, the challenge is to create a schedule that is tailored to the needs, strengths, and interests of the child. The first consideration when developing a schedule is the format. What information will the student be able to understand?

- Objects are the most concrete form and may include real objects or representational/miniature objects.
- Pictures and photographs are the next level of representation.
- Graphic symbols are somewhat more complex and consist of pictographs and written language.
- Combinations of any of the previous methods may be used to enhance student understanding.

The ability to follow written/pictorial directions is an important strength for individuals with special needs because it means that with the proper supports, the student need not be under that constant verbal direction of teachers, but can perform more independently.

Once the format is determined, then decisions must also be made regarding the schedule's location and size. Some students will need larger pictures, objects and/or words while others are successful with smaller images and representations. The schedule might be fixed on a wall, on a shelf, or in a notebook, becoming more portable. When possible, choose a location that is visually sparse and neutral, away from other areas of activity.

The individual schedule should represent the larger chunks of time throughout any given day. For instance, the schedule may include pictures, objects, or words indicating that first a student will go to homeroom, then to math, reading, lunch, PE, art, science, and then get on the bus to go home. Once they arrive at math class, there may be a more detailed breakdown of the activities that will take place for that class. This is often referred to as a "mini-schedule" or "mini-map." The amount of larger chunks reflected on the schedule may also vary from individual to individual. Some children with special needs may find it calming to know what to expect for the entire day, while others might be overwhelmed by all this information. A schedule may expose as little as one or two of the next parts of the day when necessary.

The concept of "finished" is an integral component of a schedule. Anyone who has ever compiled and used a "To Do List" understands the joy and sense of accomplishment felt when crossing

off finished tasks. Therefore, the element of "finished" or closure must be incorporated into schedules developed for individuals with autism spectrum disorders. This can be accomplished in a myriad of ways, ranging from a simple check mark to placing the picture or object in a finished box or envelope. The important thing about choosing the method of indicating "finished" is like that of all other components, that it be meaningful for the student. The best way to determine whether or not you have chosen an effective means, or need to adjust it somewhat, is through trial and error.

An added layer of visual information that some students may benefit from is a link between the schedule and correlating location. This link helps the student to understand where they are to go once they have "read" their schedule by having a matching picture/icon/object/word in the location that they are to proceed to. In many cases, a basket or a pocket with a matching picture/icon/object/word may be used as a receptacle for the schedule piece.

The next consideration is that of transitioning to the schedule. How will the individual know when it is time to check their schedule? This can be done with a verbal reminder or the use of a transition marker to signal that it is time to "check your schedule," leading to future independence. Transition markers can be from something as simple as a colored card to something more complex reflecting a student's interest. Transition markers are especially effective for students who might be resistant to checking their schedule. While an individual might not be inclined to check their schedule, the power of a visual tool versus an auditory request can be very compelling. Incorporate a special interest of the student whenever possible as a calming mechanism, as in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Check Schedule Visual Tool

Never underestimate the power of a highly focused interest. A perceptive teacher or parent will use that interest whenever possible rather than strive to stifle or control it. A particular young man comes to mind with two strong, if not overwhelming, interests: Country/Western magazines and Disney characters. When introduced to a visual schedule, he was not inclined to "check his schedule"—especially after viewing what it had to offer. Once his interests were strategically incorporated into the daily routine, his enthusiasm for checking his schedule increased dramatically. By knowing when good things were coming, he was able to follow the routine and stay focused during less interesting activities. Consistency is the key. When things are going well, there might be a tendency to function on an auditory level—that which is quickest, easiest, and most natural. But when things are not going well, then the visual schedule is used—usually not with any great success. A critical key to achieving success is to remember that all visual strategies, especially individual schedules, must be taught during calm times in order to be effective during rough seas. It is neither fair nor realistic to expect an individual with autism to respond to something that is new or inconsistent at their worst, most stressful moments.

Teach, assess, and revise. The good news is that schedules definitely help to make the world more predictable and less confusing, and by doing so can help to minimize behavioral difficulties. The bad news is that schedules almost always require revisions after implementation. In other words, educators and parents teach the visual tool through modeling, guiding, and physical assistance, and then adjust the size, location, format, and other details based on individual performance. The process of trial and error can be complex and frustrating, but is a necessary aspect of the development of a tailored and effective schedule. Educators and parents must be prepared to make changes and more changes until the visual tool is effective.

Use the planning tool in Table 4.2 to help create a tailor-made individual schedule.

Table 4.2 Planning Tool for an Individual Schedule

Student:	Teacher:	Date:
Individual Schedule Considerations:		**Plans:**
1. Schedule Format: What does the student understand best when under stress?	☐ Actual objects (e.g. cup that can be used for drinking) ☐ Representative objects (e.g. miniature bus for going home) ☐ Partial objects (e.g. bubble wand for break time) ☐ Photographs ☐ Clip Art—B&W ☐ Clip Art—color ☐ Line Drawings ☐ Words ☐ Combination of any of these formats ☐ Other: _____	
2. Schedule Location: Where will the schedule be located?	☐ Neutral wall—top to bottom ☐ Neutral wall—left to right ☐ Notebook ☐ Clipboard ☐ Computer ☐ Other: _____	
3. Schedule Content: What are the "big chunks" that will make up the schedule? Examples: • Breakfast • Reading • Math • Outside • Lunch • Science • PE • Choir • Bus/Home	School ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____	Home ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____ ☐ _____	
4. Schedule Length: How much of the schedule should be displayed?	☐ Whole day ☐ Half day ☐ Part day ☐ First/then ☐ Other: _____		

Individual Schedule Considerations:		Plans:
5. Transition: How will he/she transition back to the schedule?	☐ Verbal cue ☐ Visual cue ☐ Timer/clock ☐ Transition marker ☐ Other: _____	
6. Schedule Completion: How will the student know when each part of the schedule is finished?	☐ Look at schedule and check off ☐ Look at schedule and turn icon/object around ☐ Move arrow as activities are completed ☐ Move icons from a "to do" section to an "all done" section ☐ Take icon/object from the schedule and place in a pocket at the bottom of the schedule ☐ Take icon/object from the schedule and place on a matching icon/object at destination ☐ Other: _____	
7. Individual Interests: How does the schedule incorporate the student's interests?	☐ Preferred activities are strategically placed after non-preferred ☐ Schedule is decorated with high-interest object/character ☐ Transition marker is decorated with a high-interest object/character ☐ Other: _____	

Prevention: First…Then Board

The concept of "first...then" is usually founded on the premise that one must first complete work before getting to enjoy a break or other preferred activity. The first...then board helps a student stay focused and engaged during morning circle time by seeing that center time is coming up next, which is a highly preferred activity. While the first...then board can be used for any difficulty moment, it is often a more personal version of the class schedule.

The Premack Principle states that behavior occurring at a high frequency can be used to increase the rate of behavior that occurs at a low frequency. Premack (1959) states: "For any pair of responses, the independently more probable one will reinforce the less probable one."

However, the first...then strategy may be used to help an individual get their needs met first and then be better prepared for work. Have you ever taken a nap in order to be refreshed to face a daunting task? Or have you ever eaten some of your dessert before the main course? When compromising, remember to do so *with* the strategy instead of abandoning the strategy.

Prevention: Mini-Schedule or Mini-Map

Now that we have established the core strategy of an individual schedule as an essential starting point for some students, let's extend our focus to a companion strategy. A schedule within a schedule has many names. For our purposes, we will call this sub-strategy a "mini-map." A mini-map takes a piece of the schedule and breaks it down even further. The schedule guides you from one major activity to another, while the mini-map clarifies the smaller steps within that activity. This can be especially helpful to decrease frustration associated with academic tasks, but can be useful for any chunk of time that presents a challenge. Some individuals with Asperger's have difficulty with experiences that are too sensory in one way or another. Going to PE or taking a bath/shower can be broken down into smaller steps so that an individual can walk through these difficult experiences with a guide and a clear understanding that there is an end in sight.

For now, let's focus on mini-maps as they relate to academic endeavors. Often, teachers note that a common antecedent or trigger to behavioral difficulties is the presentation of academic tasks. The behaviors can range from a verbal protest to a meltdown when students feel overwhelmed by school work. The first question to ask, of course, is what is there about the work that makes the student feel so overwhelmed? Does the page look too busy? Is too much handwriting involved? Are there too many problems? Is it too difficult or too easy? If so, then we must adjust the format and/or content of academic tasks to increase student success.

The schedule says it is time for math. The student struggles consistently with math and typically puts his head down and produces little or no work. But with a mini-map, the student feels more able to get started and move forward. The mini-map is often a small checklist and can be decorated with a student interest to increase focus and motivation. This checklist then breaks down the expectations during math into smaller chunks. The mini-map or checklist might say something like this:

1. Warm-up activity _____
2. Test review _____
3. Do problems 3–10 _____
4. Discuss with partner _____

Next: five-minute break.

This mini-map often reduces the anxiety associated with challenging academics so that the student is more likely to get started and even more likely to continue, especially if there is a motivator at the end of the work.

Real-Life Example of a Mini-Map

A kindergarten student with an autism spectrum disorder was struggling to participate successfully during Computer Lab time. The expectation for that class was to have the children complete a specific reading program called iStation. This student, however, had a different idea about how he would like to engage in reading through a different program called StarFall. The student would immediately go to his computer and eagerly open up the StarFall program. The antecedent to his behavior of screaming and throwing objects was being told to close down the program and go to iStation instead. Most of the 30 minutes that was supposed to be dedicated to the reading program was spent dealing with the disruptive behavior of this student. Considering that the student was getting no instruction on the required program, the staff agreed that at least some time positively engaged in the required program would be better than the current situation. They created a left to right mini-map with a picture of StarFall first, followed by a picture of the iStation program, and then one more picture of StarFall. At a quick glance, the student now saw that he could begin with his preferred activity and then he would do just a little bit of his less preferred activity before getting even more time on his preferred activity. The mini-map supported the student by building positive momentum toward completing desired outcomes in incremental steps.

Mini-Schedules or Mini-Maps at Home

This seemingly simple strategy of a mini-schedule or mini-map can be highly effective to address "rough spots" in different environments. Remember that a mini-map is a visual strategy that takes a chunk of time and breaks it down even further. While we have seen how this can prevent work avoidance behaviors at school, let's shift the focus to an overlapping struggle that is common at home...homework!

Many students with special needs struggle to navigate the waters of school life, only to come home and face more academic work. It is probably safe to say that most students would rather not deal with homework in the evenings. However, the difference is that the students with special needs often work harder all day long to deal with not only academic stressors but also the added challenges of social interaction and possibly sensory overload, creating a cumulative effect with different possible results.

I found myself in a situation recently and was reminded of the real and debilitating impact of this cumulative effect. I had

finished a long day at work and was driving home. However, home was 150 miles away and I started my trip at 6:00 in the evening. So, I was tired and had a bit of a drive in front of me. Oh well, I had got to get home that night. Then, it started to rain heavily. I slowed down and paid more attention. Then, a caravan of big trucks started to speed past me. Now, I had to work much harder to stay in my lane and see where I was going. I noticed that I had both hands on the wheel now and was sitting straight up to see the road better. Then, a construction vehicle moved into my lane directly in front of me. The lights on this truck were not only very bright, but were flashing in a random pattern at every corner of the truck, creating a disco effect. So now, I was tired on a rainy night with my windshield wipers moving as fast as they could against this sea of bright lights. I wanted to look away, but realized this could be catastrophic on a highway. So, I took the next exit and stopped at the first gas station. Some might call this "driving avoidance," but I call it survival. I think that might be how some of our children feel.

So, at the end of a long and stressful day, a student might have to face homework. A mini-map of the evening activities may be all it takes to help them get started, knowing that their favorite activity takes place right before homework time, right after homework time, or both. And some children might benefit from a mini-map/checklist of the homework chunk of time itself. For instance, the homework mini-map might read:

1. Get your materials ready.
2. Reading assignment.
3. Math problems.
4. Review with Mom or Dad.

Next: Have fun on the computer for 30 minutes?

Mini-maps can also help with other rough spots at home. Some examples include household chores, personal hygiene routines, and shopping trips. One family found mini-maps to be helpful even for car rides. Their son would take off his seat belt repeatedly, causing many stops along the way. A mini-map was created that included pictures and words that directed him to:

1. Buckle your seatbelt.
2. Keep it buckled.
3. Listen for Mom or Dad to say it is time to unbuckle.

No more unplanned road stops for this family.

Checklists and Compromise

In this example, the checklist had been written and mapped out that the student was to watch a video about Texas, then read a Social Story about having a substitute, review the Texas map and then have time to flip through his book for break, which was positive reinforcement for this student.

However, after the video, the student asked to have his book to flip through, which was supposed to happen after he completed the three tasks. It was in the afternoon and he'd had a successful day so far and he had completed the first task on the list successfully as well. Given the entire context and because the student used his words calmly to request what he felt he needed, a desired behavior, the teacher reinforced that by honoring his request and adding five minutes of "book flipping" time before proceeding to the next activity. By adding this to the checklist, the compromise became part of the original plan now.

After the five-minute timer rang, the student stopped flipping through his book, put the book away, and resumed the next planned activity of reading the story. He successfully completed this and the map activity. He then asked if he could change his book flipping time to Google Maps time, another highly preferred activity. The teacher and the student also made this adjustment to the checklist and he successfully transitioned to the next subject on his schedule, which was PE. Some students will require more flexibility and compromise than others when implementing strategies. Remember to work compromise into the strategy so that the strategy continues to have meaning.

Prevention: T-Chart

A T-chart (see Figure 3.1) can be made by placing a line down the middle of a page and labeling the left and right side of the page according to acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The T-chart is then used to clarify acceptable or desired behaviors versus unacceptable or undesired behaviors by listing those under each of the categories. I once worked with a teacher addressing a problem with profanity. He had many conversations with the student and had already tried several other strategies, but the profanity continued to spew. I offered the T-chart as a possible strategy and the teacher immediately told me that the student knew she was not supposed to say those words, but she just didn't care about that rule. He was trying to tell me that writing appropriate words on one side of the T-chart and inappropriate words on the other side was just too simple. Perhaps a bit reluctantly, the teacher implemented the T-chart strategy over the next few days. He had incorporated the student's interest in *Pirates of the Caribbean* by placing a picture of a good pirate and a menacing pirate on each side to support the concept. In addition, he sat down with her during a calm time and asked her to come up with some new words that she could say instead of her current repertoire. She came up with very special words that she could use instead of the usual—Holy Plankton and Holy Macaroni were just a few. The teacher was surprised and pleased that this very simple strategy did, in fact, support a positive change in behavior.

T-chart considerations:

- When possible, generate both lists with the student. If student input is not possible, then collaborate with teachers and parents to identify what is most meaningful for the student.
- Pictures may enhance the effectiveness of this strategy.
- Review during calm times. The beginning of the day or each class may be good opportunities.

- Refer back to the T-chart when the targeted behavior occurs. Practice replacement behaviors from the acceptable list.
- The T-chart may incorporate a special interest, increasing the effectiveness of this strategy
- The T-chart may be posted in the class or located in a student folder/notebook.

Another variation of the T-chart strategy is to use it to clarify what a class rule "looks like" and "sounds like" as a way to increase meaning and understanding of class rules and expectations.

Prevention: Puzzle Piece Strategy

When using the puzzle piece strategy, as shown in Figure 4.2, it is recommended to begin with a clear understanding of what the student is expected to accomplish to earn each piece of the puzzle. This may be completion of a specific activity or even a specific amount of time that desired behaviors are demonstrated.

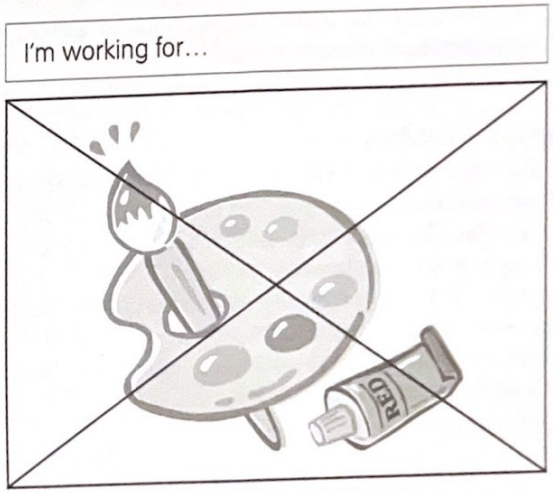


Figure 4.2 Puzzle Piece Strategy

While there may be an instance when the student does not earn the next puzzle piece when the desired behavior is not performed, the puzzle pieces should not be removed once they are earned. When implemented in this way, the strategy promotes building positive momentum toward desired behaviors.

Puzzle piece strategy:

- Insert a picture/photo of a highly desired thing or activity into the center of a blank document.
- Print out two copies of this document.
- Keep one page as is and laminate. Cut up the other page into smaller pieces as if forming a puzzle. Consider how many pieces you expect the child to need to earn to complete the puzzle (e.g. four as in Figure 4.2). Use Velcro to stabilize the pieces.
- Guide the student to place one of the puzzle pieces on the original with Velcro as they complete an assigned activity or perform desired behaviors for a specific amount of time.
- Once they complete the entire puzzle, then they are able to enjoy the highly desired thing or activity for a predetermined amount of time.

Prevention: Star Board

The star board is yet another format to provide positive reinforcement that builds positive momentum, as shown in Figure 4.3. The student is encouraged to choose their reward before beginning to work and place it at the top of the board. Then, the student earns a star for completion of specific tasks or a designated amount of time engaged in a desired behavior. Once all the stars are place on the board, then the positive reinforcement takes place, usually with a predesignated time limit.

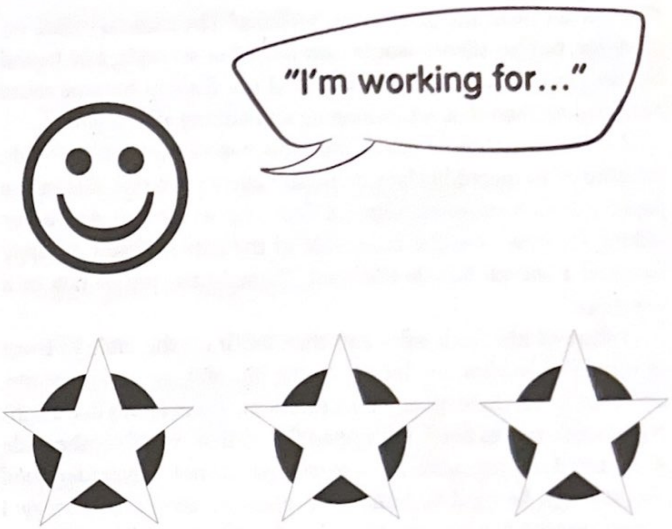


Figure 4.3 Star Board

Prevention: Flip Card Strategy

A flip card is a quick and easy visual strategy which highlights one behavior and clarifies through graphics and words when certain behaviors are acceptable and when they are not.

Place a visual that indicates that it is OK to engage in the target behavior on one side of the paper. Place a different visual that indicates it is not OK to engage in the specific behavior at this time on the other side of the paper. Think of it as a version of an "Open" and "Closed" sign in a store window. The sign, or flip card, gets turned around to indicate when it is OK to enter and when it is not. Much in the same way, the flip card will tell the student when it is OK to do a particular behavior and when it is no longer appropriate. Of course, not every behavior lends itself to this strategy. Again, it is only for behaviors that are acceptable some of the time.

As an example, a student found great pleasure in singing and talking to himself...constantly. The teaching assistant sat near the student so that he could tell him to be quiet through whispers, a

shake of the head and quite a few "Shhhhs." The student would try to oblige, but his silence would only last a few seconds. The to and fro between the teaching assistant and the student became more bothersome than that actual singing and talking after a while.

I took out a piece of paper and drew two pictures on each side (in spite of an incredible lack of artistic talent). On one side of the paper I drew a universal sign for "no" and wrote "no singing or talking for now." On the other side of the paper, I drew a happy face and a speech bubble that said, "Now I can sing or talk in a low voice."

I showed him both sides and then left it on the table in front of him in plain view. He looked at the flip card, he looked at me, and then he sat there quietly for a moment. Then, it was like a light bulb came over his head. He flipped the card over to the other side and started singing again. I was so excited! He not only understood the strategy, he tried to achieve his goals by *using* the strategy. I simply turned the card back over and told him not yet. He was not happy about the directive, but he did follow the directions of the flip card. When the activity was over, I flipped the card over to indicate that he could now sing and talk to his heart's content. He did seem very content. This strategy was generalized into different settings with equal effectiveness. As with most strategies, the flip card becomes a more powerful strategy when a favorite character or interest is incorporated.

Prevention: Narratives or Stories

Narratives or stories have been discussed in the previous chapter to teach skills and positive behaviors. Once again, narratives or stories can be effective in preventing difficulties and offering positive solutions. A narrative can validate feelings, provide a solution, and even offer comfort during a stressful time.

The following is an example of a narrative written to help deal with sensory issues. This narrative was written for a student who wanted to hug her classmates frequently and deeply to get that deep pressure feeling.

BEING A GOOD FRIEND

My name is _____ and I am in the _____ grade at _____ elementary.

I work very hard and try to listen to the teacher.

I love all different colors. My favorite color is pink.

This makes me happy.

I have good friends at school.

I can shake hands with my friends.

I can shake hands with my teachers.

I can even give a side hug if that is OK with them.

I will ask first.

I can do this!

The end...my friend.

With photos of the student, her classmates and teachers included, the story was a big hit with her and the entire class.

Prevention: Topic Card

Some students tend to perseverate on a particular topic that is of great interest to them. Topic cards can help students engage in a variety of topics, beyond their own interests, connecting with others socially. They include just a few words that describe a topic that helps to launch a student or group students in a particular direction.

A teacher had created a special lunch group to help a student with special needs engage in appropriate teen conversations. She had one main interest and it would dominate every conversation. Her interest was in princesses and everything to do with them. While the other children enjoyed talking about princesses some of the time, they grew weary of it being the topic of discussion *all* of the time. This narrow conversational topic had also narrowed her circle of friends to almost none. While the teacher had good

intentions, simply creating a lunch group to help her engage in other topics had not been successful. The students needed some supports to be effective in their role as peer teachers. The teacher chose topic cards as the best strategy for this situation.

Instead of just choosing different topics from her own repertoire, the teacher recruited ideas from the typical peers. She asked them what kinds of things they liked to talk about and the first thing they said was "drama." The teacher thought they were referring to the arts, but when she asked for further explanation, they described drama as "who likes who," "who is in an argument" and "who is in trouble." You know, drama. From this conversation with the typical peers, the teacher compiled the topic cards with pictures and words. The topics included drama, the weekend, movies, games, jokes, favorite things, school work, and birthdays.

Once the topic cards were compiled, the teacher sat with them at lunch one day to teach them how to use the cards effectively. The cards were piled in the middle of the table and the students took turns as they turned the cards over, much like a game. The topic cards guided their conversation as a group and served to help the student with a special need stay focused on the topic at hand. The students should feel comfortable in referring to the cards during conversations as a positive support. By practicing the use of the topic cards in a safe setting, the students are more likely to use them in new and different situations. This lunch group became very effective in using the topic cards at lunch time and at other times throughout the day.

Prevention: Power Card

As stated in Chapter 3, power cards are brief summaries that describe a problem along with possible solutions. The power card is developed by using a student interest as the main character. The power card should be reviewed frequently to be effective as a preventive strategy. In times of difficulty, the power card may also be reviewed as an instructive consequence.

EXAMPLE: POWER CARD FOR SOLVING A PROBLEM
THE HULK SOLVES A PROBLEM

The Hulk is a super hero and is very strong.

Sometimes, the Hulk has a problem. When he has a problem, he takes a deep breath inside and makes his chest extra big. Then he says, "That's OK. I can do this."

So, when you have a problem, the Hulk wants you to remember that you can also:

- Take a deep breath.
- Make your chest extra big.
- Say, "That's OK. I can do this."

Prevention: Video Modeling

Stress and anxiety create a negative situation, which makes learning difficult. In a traditional teaching situation the need for person-to-person interaction can in and of itself be a cause of stress and anxiety. A child is unnecessarily burdened by the need to overcome this stress and anxiety before they can focus on what is being taught.

Video modeling is a strategy that helps to minimize that stress and allow the child to have full benefit of what it looks like to perform the desired skill or behavior. An important benefit of video modeling is that it removes the necessity of person-to-person interaction from the learning process. Removing this interaction takes pressure off the child and allows them to concentrate on the video. Attending to the video only, a learner concentrates and is more focused and less distracted.

Bellini and Akullian (2007) have described video modeling as a strategy involving the use of videos to provide modeling of targeted skills. Sherer *et al.* (2001) have found that both videos that include the participants (video self-modeling, VSM) and videos of others are effective in teaching new skills.

Video modeling including "other" models may be easier to produce because these videos generally require less editing than VSM; typically developing students may more readily cooperate,

understand directions, already demonstrate mastery of target skills, and require fewer prompts.

The videos are short, usually two to five minutes, or possibly even shorter depending on the desired behavior or skill. The student will typically watch the video three to five times at one session. The student will then practice the skill/behavior targeted in the video. The teacher might say, "Now it's your turn, just like the video" and support the student as they attempt the skill/behavior. Continue to create opportunities to practice the new skill at natural and planned times throughout the day.

When making your own video, here are some ways to highlight important information once you have secured photo releases:

- clear and positive title
- slow motion
- up close—zoom in
- highlight single words
- use text
- use symbols
- use magnetic letters for titles
- incorporate student drawings.

One of the most important components to video modeling is that only desired behaviors are included in the final video. Any inappropriate or distracting behaviors captured during the filming of the video should be edited out, leaving only the positive and desired behaviors.

There are also pre-made videos to teach social skills and positive behaviors on YouTube and other apps. Some of the videos made available through YouTube include the following skills and behaviors:

- making friends
- taking turns
- greeting others in the hallway

- accepting "no"
- taking a break to calm down
- cafeteria skills
- walking in the hallway
- and many, many more...

Video modeling has proven to be a highly effective strategy to teach desired behaviors and skills when implemented during calm times with opportunities for practice and feedback. An additional by-product of this strategy is that it often builds the relationship between the student and the teacher, creating a more positive interaction related to behavioral shaping and building positive momentum.

Prevention: Handwriting Supports

The process of writing requires much more than the ability to form pretty letters and can often be a source of frustration. For some children, data may indicate that handwriting tasks are actually a trigger or antecedent to work avoidant behaviors. Oehler (2013) has stated that the writing process involves skills in language, organization, motor control and planning, and sensory processing—four areas that are problematic for many individuals with special needs and, in particular, students with an autism spectrum disorder. It is essential that parents and teachers consider how each of these areas may be affecting a student's aversion to the writing process and recognize it as a legitimate stressor.

There are many handwriting supports available, thanks to the broadening world of technology. Some of the tools to prevent frustration related to handwriting include the following:

- graphic organizers
- computer/portable word processor
- speech-to-text programs (e.g. Dragon Dictation)
- alternate keyboard

- low-tech writing tools
- timers to build endurance
- auditory feedback programs
- iPad apps
- handheld dictionary
- Writing with Whole Words programs.

Communication Bill of Rights: National Joint Committee (NJC) for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities

The NJC for the Communication Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities has put forth a Communication Bill of Rights which emphasizes the critical nature of communication. One can take for granted the ability to request desired objects or activities, reject undesired objects or activities, or simply offer a comment on a moment. Perhaps most importantly, the Communication Bill of Rights reminds us to presume competence at all times and speak about the child as if they understand all that we are saying.

For more information, go to the NJC website.[5]

Prevention: Communication Systems

Research in the area of behavior support has repeatedly demonstrated the positive effects of learning more effective and efficient communication on the challenging behaviors of individuals with developmental disabilities.

An inability to communicate effectively can have detrimental effects from behavior to the quality of one's life. This can often lead to the following behaviors:

- frustration
- aggression
- disengagement
- dependence.

5 www.asha.org/njc

Unaided communication systems rely on the user's body to convey messages. Examples include gestures, body language, and/or sign language.

Aided communication systems require the use of tools or equipment in addition to the user's body. Aided communication methods can range from paper and pencil, to communication books or boards, to devices that produce voice output (speech generating devices or SGDs) and/or written output. Electronic communication aids allow the user to use picture symbols, letters, and/or words and phrases to create messages. Some devices can be programmed to produce different spoken languages.

When a child communicates through gestures or body language alone (a form of unaided communication), their behavior may be misunderstood as something other than what was intended. As an example, a student who was nonverbal and using his body to communicate was running out of the classroom on a regular basis. Staff worked to stop the behavior, but without aided communication, the reason behind the behavior was misinterpreted. The student loved playing on the swings and the staff assumed that the student was running out of the room to go out to the swings. Of course, staff would prevent the student from getting too far for safety reasons, so the behavior was redirected without fully understanding his perspective.

The team, including the teacher, parent, and speech pathologist, recognized the need for an aided communication system and created pictures of highly preferred activities and basic needs. They conducted lessons to teach the meaning and use of the pictures to communicate more effectively. After several days of teaching the student how to use the pictures, he started to run out of the classroom as he had previously. However, before any staff could intervene, the student went to his picture book and selected the "bathroom" picture and handed it to his teacher. This aided communication built a powerful bridge between the teacher and student and provided insight into the running out behavior. He had been taking care of his needs with the only tools that he had available, himself.

More recently, augmentative and alternative communication strategies have been receiving increased attention as primary teaching goals for young children limited verbal expression. The use of pictures and choice-making opportunities has been reported to facilitate language acquisition and/or result in increased communicative attempts across daily routines.

The team should assess the student's strengths, needs, and interests when determining the most appropriate aided communication system. There are many options, which range from simple low technology systems to very sophisticated high technology systems. The following are but a few examples:

- Picture Exchange
- Choice Boards
- Yes/No Boards
- Eye Gaze Boards
- Sound Board App
- Cheap Talk 8
- ProLoQuo2Go
- LAMP (Language Acquisition through Motor Planning)
- and many, many more...

When teaching how to use the communication system, whether it is low or high tech, always try to honor as many communicative attempts as possible. This will strengthen the understanding of how to communicate and will also serve to build the relationship between the adults and child. Later in the process, this may also help the child to accept a "no" better because they understand that they are being heard. Maybe next time.

There are multiple free low-technology communication resources available at the Prentke Romich Company (PRC) AAC Language Lab website.[6]

6 https://aaclanguagelab.com/resources/free

DEFINING A MELTDOWN

When dealing with meltdowns, the most important things to consider are the triggers that lead to a meltdown. It might appear that the behavior just erupts out of nowhere, but there is almost always a trigger. It might be a series of things that have a cumulative effect, making it difficult to ascertain just one culprit. However, good data collection that looks closely at the antecedents will provide some clues. Data on the antecedents, or triggers, should include the time of day, persons involved, specific activities and location. Any other relevant information, such as changes in medication, illness, or other physiological conditions, should be included.

Finding the trigger is the most essential component in preventing a meltdown. It is our best hope in helping an individual avoid the trigger(s) and/or develop coping mechanisms to deal specifically with that trigger. It has been said that a meltdown is like having your emotions hijacked. This is an important understanding for adults trying to understand and support a person as they struggle through this stressful and difficult experience. As one student put it after such an experience, "Meltdowns are terrible."

Once the triggers are identified, then a plan can be developed either with or for the child with special needs to deal with feelings of anger or anxiety in acceptable ways. The feelings chart that has been reviewed previously is just one strategy intended to help identify coping strategies when feelings escalate toward a meltdown.

Intervention: Checklist

When strategies are used consistently as preventive strategies, those very same strategies may be effective as an intervention to prevent further difficulties or escalation. As an example, a student was starting to have a meltdown when a school program in the cafeteria rehearsal went on a bit too long. He was escorted into the hallway to minimize the stressors, but once he was in the hallway, he repeatedly asked to return to the program. He kept

saying that he needed to finish the show, finish the show, finish the show...

The student was very familiar with checklists as they were used consistently to help him be successful in his academic activities. He had several different checklists that were decorated with a variety of his highly preferred characters.

A checklist was presented and he was asked to check off the first item that indicated the show was finished. He said that it was time for PE and staff explained that today was a surprise day and that there was no PE due to the program. Again, he was asked to check off the first box on his checklist.

Once he checked it off, staff told him that it was time for a break and that he could choose to take his break outside or in class. He circled that he would like to go outside. When the timer went off, he checked off the next box on his checklist and went to class.

Upon returning to class, the checklist included highly preferred activities to promote a positive transition back to his routine (e.g. snack, magnets).

After finishing a snack and building with the magnets, he checked off his checklist and then watched science videos (to try to align with his regular schedule as much as is possible). The student completed the science videos, checked off his checklist and then had a final break before leaving for the day.

Prevention: Meeting Sensory Needs

While many people have sensory differences, children with special needs may have more prominent sensory differences that add stress and interfere with daily activities. However, there are many supports that can be put in place to minimize those sensory differences. When possible, consult with an occupational therapist to assess a child's needs and determine the most appropriate supports necessary for that child.

Auditory Sensitivity

Although the hum of the air conditioner seems like mild background noise that is easy to filter for a neuro-typical person, it might sound like a small jet flying overhead with no end for a

person with a special need, especially an autism spectrum disorder. So, this is real and overwhelming and difficult to explain in ways that others can fully understand. However, it is a primary concern related to instructional and behavioral success. The following are a few ways that teachers and families can support individuals with auditory sensitivity

- Headphones and/or earplugs can offer comfort and relief for many students. Noise-canceling headphones are the most effective as they replace irritating environmental noise by producing calming white noise.
- Fans to create background or "white noise."
- Gradual introduction to noise which might happen in a few ways. Perhaps a student who has difficulty with the roar of lunch time might be allowed to enter the cafeteria before others so as to prepare for the gradual increase of noise as students enter. There might also be a designated place where they can go if it reaches an uncomfortable level. Another way might be to go to a loud grocery store for one minute and then wait outside for the remainder of the shopping trip (if safe). The time is then gradually increased as the student is able to handle the level of noise without feeling overwhelmed and/or stressed.
- Provide an alternative yet comparable setting. At school, sitting outside at lunch time might be preferable to sitting inside the cafeteria. At home, families may be selective in their choice of restaurants so as to create a relaxing dining environment.

Visual Sensitivity

Approximately 70 percent of information about the world is taken in through the eyes. First, it should be noted that research exploring the brains of individuals on the autism spectrum has found that there is generally a heightened awareness of visual details. Also, the brain processes information and makes decisions/plans in the visual region of the brain (Bertone *et al.* 2005). The

sense of vision is critical for all individuals and the implications for differences in this sense is especially important to understand.

Let's start with the finding that there is a heightened awareness of visual details. I remember one student who kept trying to remove a lump of mascara from my eye because he found it very disturbing. Or the student who kept insisting that the "zero" that the teacher had drawn on the smart board was a "six" because she had put a tiny tail at the top left of the "zero." He would not move on until she drew a proper zero. Some of the implications of this difference is that a simple worksheet might look like a sea of words that never end. This is likely to be misinterpreted as work avoidance if the student refuses to complete the worksheet or read the page. Teachers and parents can help by increasing the size of the font and adding more white space on the paper. This will help to make it look less overwhelming. Although the information might need to be on two pages instead of one, the student might be able to feel as though they can be successful with this format. Another strategy might be to place each problem or paragraph on an index card so that the student only sees the necessary information at any one time. And still another is to create a window that can slide up and down a page so that the student only sees one section at a time. Other visual supports might include color coding, start and stop points, arrows, and post-it notes with guiding information.

Another possible difference with the sense of vision may be light sensitivity. Possible supports include, but are not limited to, decreased fluorescent lighting and increased natural lighting, sunglasses, caps, shades, and light coverings. You can find light covers that are safe at several occupational therapy websites.

Tactile Sensitivity

For some children, certain textures feel aversive or even painful. For these individuals, the idea of a hug or even accidentally brushing up against something may be highly stressful. In order to prevent this negative tactile experience, much energy and focus is paid to avoiding situations that increase the likelihood of such events. Imagine lining up where there are others in front of you and behind you. The chances of being accidentally touched by either person may cause the simple act of lining up to be highly stressful

and anxiety provoking. For individuals who do not like the feel of certain textures or things, parents and teachers may consider the following types of supports:

- *Clothing adjustments:* Wear worn or softer clothes, remove tags, cover seams, etc.
- *Allow seating options that provide a safe barrier from others:* Sit on a bean bag or chair during large group activities; remain at desk while others sit on the floor, etc.
- *Allow lining up options:* Stand at the front or back of the line to increase control over distance from others.

And yet others with sensory differences might actually seek out certain types of touch. There are some individuals with an autism spectrum disorder who like big hugs or touching certain textures. For these individuals, occupational therapists (OTs) can help to identify activities or equipment that can help provide this sensory feedback throughout the day. With the expertise and input of an OT, weighted vests/blankets, wiggle cushions, and other materials may be recommended. Some individuals who seek out pressure find comfort in a body sock. This neat multisensory "time in" tool is excellent for providing calming/organizing, deep pressure input, and for developing motor planning, spatial, and body awareness. Body socks can be wonderful for tactile and deep pressure proprioceptive seekers, and even for those who are tactilely defensive.

Taste Differences

Many parents experience the "picky eater" from time to time. However, the difference in describing child with a special need as a picky eater can be found in the intensity or degree. Lack of understanding regarding this difference can sometimes lead to criticism of the parent.

First and foremost, is there a way to supplement the diet to ensure adequate nutrition?

For many individuals with narrow food interests, it can be very much about the texture of the food(s). While some individuals will only eat crunchy foods, others might only eat soft or blended

foods. And yet others might respond mostly to the smell of the food. In addition, it may be that the need for sameness may contribute significantly to the ritualistic lunch or dinner. Only eating spaghetti for lunch day in and day out might actually be very comforting for an individual with a high stress level due to the neurological differences in autism.

Understanding the drive behind the narrow food preference may offer some insight as to how to proceed. The following are but a few ways to expand upon the food preferences.

- Offer a visual list of the meal, adding a small amount of new food on the list at a strategic place. Perhaps the list will indicate to start out with a highly preferred food item, followed by a small amount of a new food item, and then again followed by the rest of the highly preferred food and drink.
- Introduce foods that have similar qualities to the individual's current preferences, but expand slightly beyond.
- Introduce new food in small increments that will build toward success. For example, if you are trying to add healthy fruit to a diet, perhaps you will place a grape off to the side of the plate for the first few days, followed by a few days of smelling the grape, and then licking the grape and then eating a small section of the grape until the person has an increased tolerance for the grape.
- If there is a strong interest that the child finds very appealing, use that interest to help introduce new foods when possible. For instance, cut out a sandwich in the shape of an elephant or SpongeBob or any other preferred item or character.

Motor Lab or Sensory Room

Cohen *et al.* (2006) have found that children's sensory processing problems have a strong relationship to their behavior difficulties. Many schools have found great benefit in dedicating a specific room to meet the diverse sensory needs of their students. By meeting those needs, they often see a decrease in behaviors that stem from sensory differences, at least in part. A motor lab or sensory room is a specific room with specific sensory equipment and activities selected to benefit specific sensory processing needs.

General suggestions when developing a motor lab or sensory room include the following:

1. Consult with an OT whenever possible.
2. Assess the needs of the students.
3. Structure the sensory experiences as stations or centers using labels, mini-schedules and/or choice boards.
4. Develop a schedule for planned sensory room times each day, depending on the individual's needs.
5. Encourage all senses to be explored and used, but do not force an experience when there is resistance.
6. Continue to be creative in adding activities and ways in which sensory stimuli are introduced.
7. Watch for signs of overstimulation/overarousal/extreme fears and adjust accordingly.

By balancing structure, visual supports and freedom, teachers and parents help their children to develop both their neural organization and the ability to self-regulate.

SUMMARY

Even with prevention and teaching strategies in place, problem behavior will likely occur and require a thoughtful and respectful adult response. The following guidelines help adults to intervene in ways that build positive momentum toward positive behaviors.

- Approach problem behavior as you would a learning error.
- Plan your responses to typical problems in advance.
- Teach students what to do differently.
- Strive for self-regulation and coping strategies.

- Offer solutions that give some control back.
- Consider context and student needs.
- Always build in consequences that teach instead of punish.
- Use strategies that will build positive relationships.

The goal of this book is to help educators and parents to teach young children how to behave. This is not an easy endeavor and will require all the best we have to offer. Along with patience, consistency and dedication, teachers and parents will need to be ready to be flexible and responsive to the immediate needs of the child. While the goal is always prevention of challenging behaviors, every teacher needs to be prepared to intervene once problems do arise, in ways that prevent further escalation and teach a more preferred behavior or coping strategy.

The following final example hopes to illustrate the art and science of building positive momentum toward positive behaviors. After difficulties on the bus and in speech therapy, Bill started to escalate when in the classroom by laughing and twirling and pulling things off the wall. This is a clear indication of increased agitation for this student. The next activity was hygiene and he was offered the choice of doing hygiene or taking a chill pass, given that he was showing signs of escalation toward a bigger problem.

Bill chose a chill pass for ten minutes. After the timer went off, he was directed back to his schedule, but was still not making a positive transition. He was offered the choice again and he chose another ten-minute chill pass. He did this two more times for a total of 35 minutes engaged in the following calming activities:

- building magnets
- counting magnets
- flipping through a book
- decorating a new checklist on the computer.

Bill then transitioned to the hygiene task and completed each of the steps with the support of the teacher and a written checklist.

Bill went on to transition through the rest of the morning schedule successfully from that point forward.

The teacher had a choice to consider at a pivotal moment. She could either keep pushing the original directive of finishing the hygiene task and possibly seeing an escalation of behavior, given the rumbling signs of laughing, twirling, and pulling things off the walls, or offer a chill pass to help the child de-escalate in a positive way in order to regain a sense of calm. By offering the chill pass and honoring the multiple requests, the teacher helped teach that you can manage to prevent your own escalation toward disruptive behaviors with the tools and supports that have been provided and taught. The teacher reflected, at the end of the day, that the 35 minutes spent on what seemed to be non-instructional activities was actually very much instructional. She was teaching Bill how to manage his emotions in positive and proactive ways. This teacher helped him build positive momentum toward positive behaviors. We can do this.

The thought manifests as the word;
The word manifests as the deed;
The deed develops into habit;
And habit hardens into character;
So watch the thought and its ways with care,
And let it spring from love
Born out of concern for all beings...
As the shadow follows the body,
As we think, so we become.

(From the Dhammapada, Sayings of the Buddha, as cited by Das 1997, p.130)