An Ecological Approach to Affirming Behavior Assessment and Support in Autism

Kait Gould, PhD, BCBA–D
The College of Saint Rose
Center for Autism and Related Disabilities

Table of contents

01
Introduction
Background information

02
FBA
Process and overview
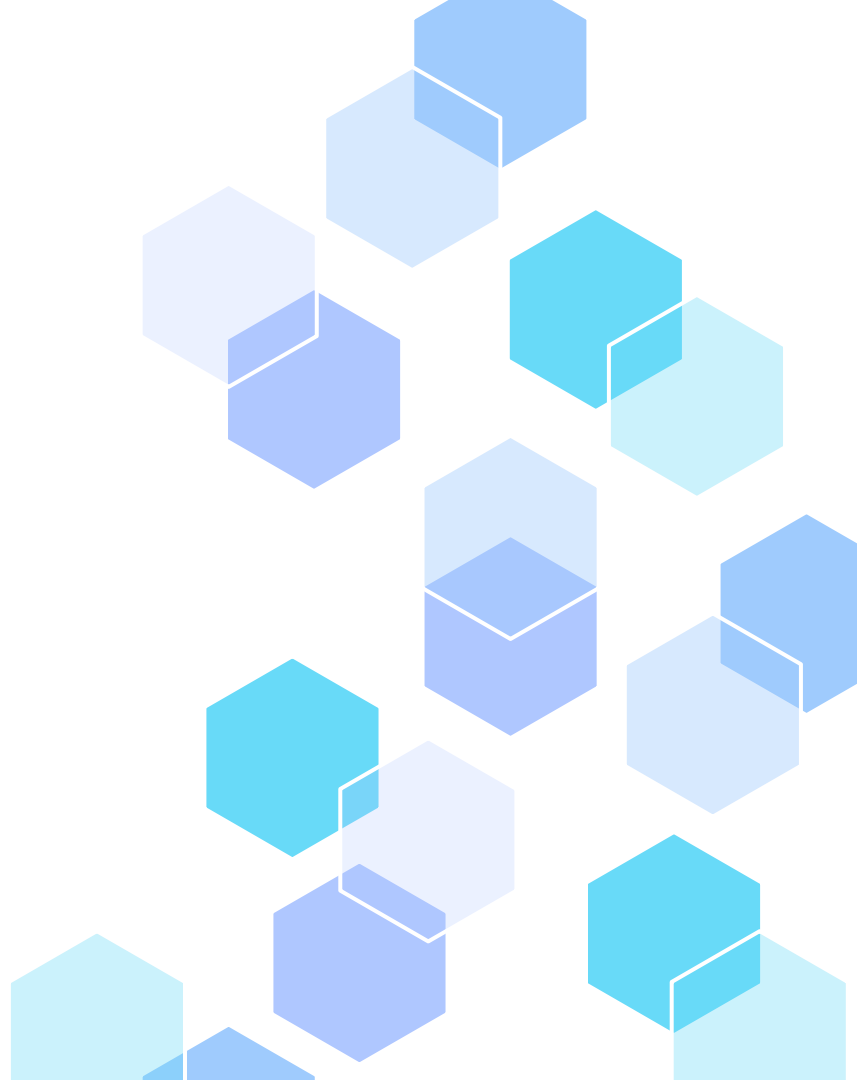
03
BSP
Core components

04
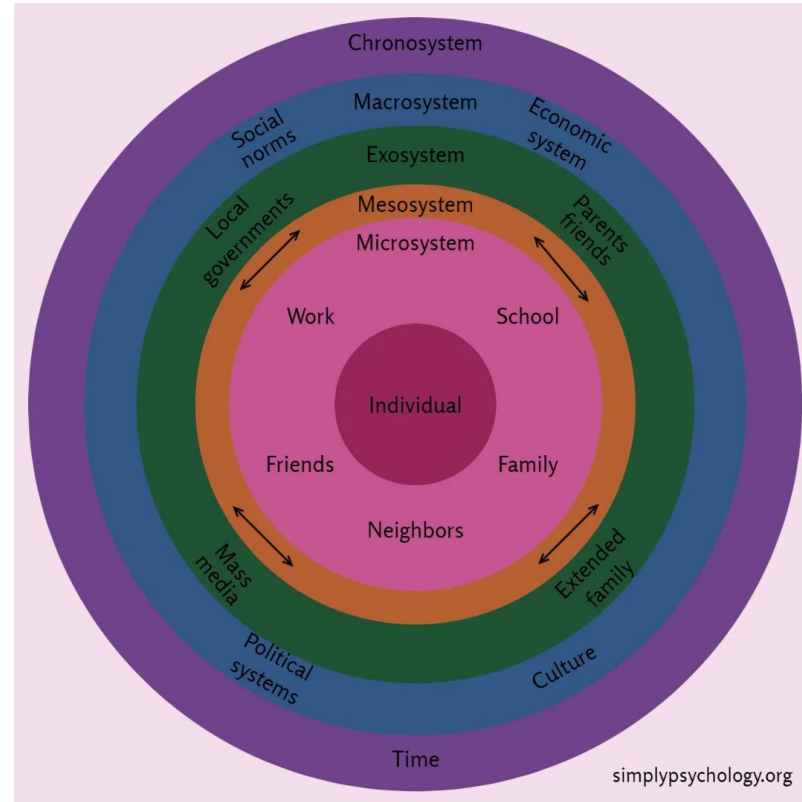### Application
Case example

01

Introduction

Ecological perspective, affirming care, and self-determination as key components

Who do we have with us?

What ages do we work with?

Ecological Systems Theory

Strengths–Based Focus

Strengths-Based Approach	Deficit-Based Approach
Strength driven	Needs driven
Focus on possibilities/opportunities	Focus on problems created by needs
Ask- what can be built upon?	Ask- what is missing?
Growth mindset	Learned helplessness

Self-Determination

https://www.imdetermined.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/toolbox_for_self-determination_2.pdf

Self-Determination

1. Self Awareness	2. Self-Understanding	3. Self-Acceptance	4. Self-Advocacy and Disclosure	5. Self-Determination

- Foundational skill for self-determination
- Defined by the ability to identify abilities, limitations, character, feelings, desires

- Using what they have learned
- Understanding personal growth
- Making comparisons to where they have come from
- Understanding needs and differences

- Accepting knowledge gained as self-knowledge in order to make plans based on that understanding

- Ability to represent their views, needs, and desires

- Ability to be in control
- Choosing one's own future
- Making own decisions

www.imdetermined.org

Goals by Age

Age 10-12	Age 12-14	Age 14-15	Age 15-16	Age 16-17

Age 10-12
- Describe and know your disability
- Identify what your needs are in school
- Explain who helps you in school
- Know what an IEP meeting is and participate in your meeting.

Age 12-14
- Evaluate how your disability impacts your daily life
- Describe what accommodations you use and how they help
- Provide information at your IEP meeting regarding how you learn best, your likes, dislikes, dreams

Age 14-15
- Participate in assessments and understand how the results relate to your transition plan
- Become an active member of your IEP
- Begin coordination of supports
- Express wants and needs

Age 15-16
- Describe issues related to self-disclosure (when, what, how)
- Continue leading IEP
- Define self-success

Age 16-17
- Realize and understand barriers and solutions
- Independently discuss needed accommodations and supports
- Understand adult rights and responsibilities
- Provide direct input into the development of your IEP goals

Affirming Care

Table 1. Medical model versus social model of disability.

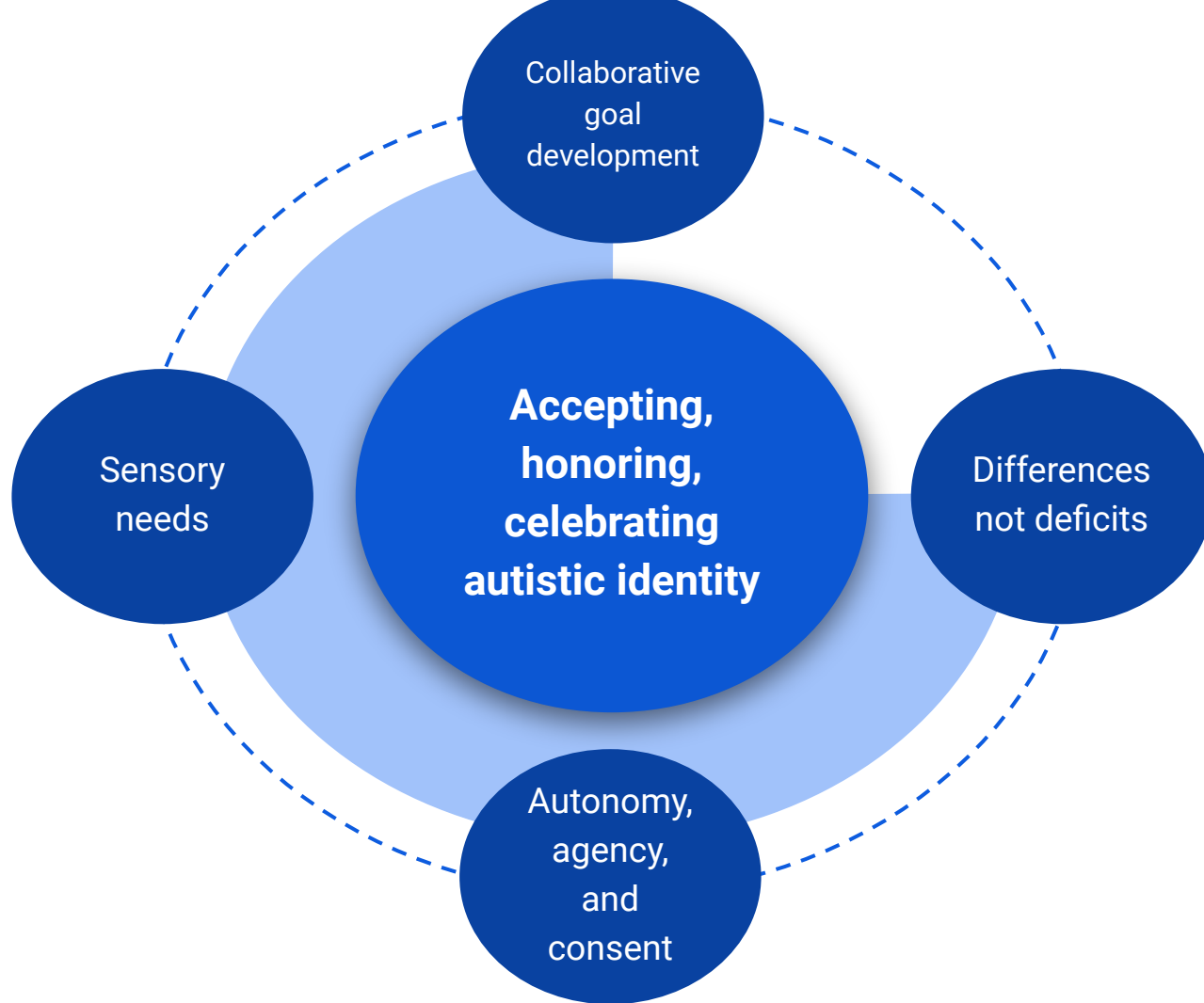| Medical model	Social model
Person is disabled by brain/body deficit, dysfunction, or disorder	Person is disabled by societal attitudes, environment (accessibility), and context
Disabled person is defective, in need of fixing or cure	Disabled person may need accommodations or support, but not repair
A "normal" or "typical" body/neurology is the end goal, the metric upon which others are measured	Body/neurology differences are valued; disability is viewed as part of human diversity
Inclusion is accomplished through assimilation—the disabled person must conform to abled society for acceptance	Inclusion is societal responsibility; accommodation and acceptance of disabled individuals enriches society as a whole
Disabled person is viewed as less capable in making decisions and offered less autonomy	Disabled person should have agency, autonomy, and self-determination
Disabled person must rely on others for help and caretakers make decisions for them	Disabled person is valued as a human being who plays active role in their care and can make their own decisions

Gaddy & Crow, 2023

Affirming Care

Figure 1. Disability culture. Information in this figure was gathered from *Disability as diversity: Developing cultural competence* by E.E. Andrews, 2019, Oxford University Press. Copyright 2019 by Oxford University Press. A version of this figure originally appeared in the accompanying PowerPoint for *Neurodiversity as cultural competency: Three autistic SLPs walk into an ASH convention...* presented by H. Crow, R. Dorsey, and G. Gaddy, 2021, [Oral Seminar], ASHA 2021 Convention, Washington, D.C. United States.

Is intentionally created & developed by the disability community

Includes diverse & full range of disabilities

Affirms disability identity

Includes shared values

Rejects the idea that disability needs to be cured, endured, or overcome

Creates pride in unique perspectives & experiences of disabled people

(Gaddy & Crow, 2023)

02

FBA

Functional Behavior Assessment

Functional behavior assessment

Behaviour is Communication

What we see: Behaviour

What we don't see

Emotions
- *Anger*
- *Sadness*
- *Fear*
- *Happiness*

Social skills

Need for connection

Hunger

Self-esteem

Sense of safety

Sense of belonging

Self-regulation

Attachment

Sense of security

Developmental level

Sensory needs

Sleep

www.medium.com/parentingplace
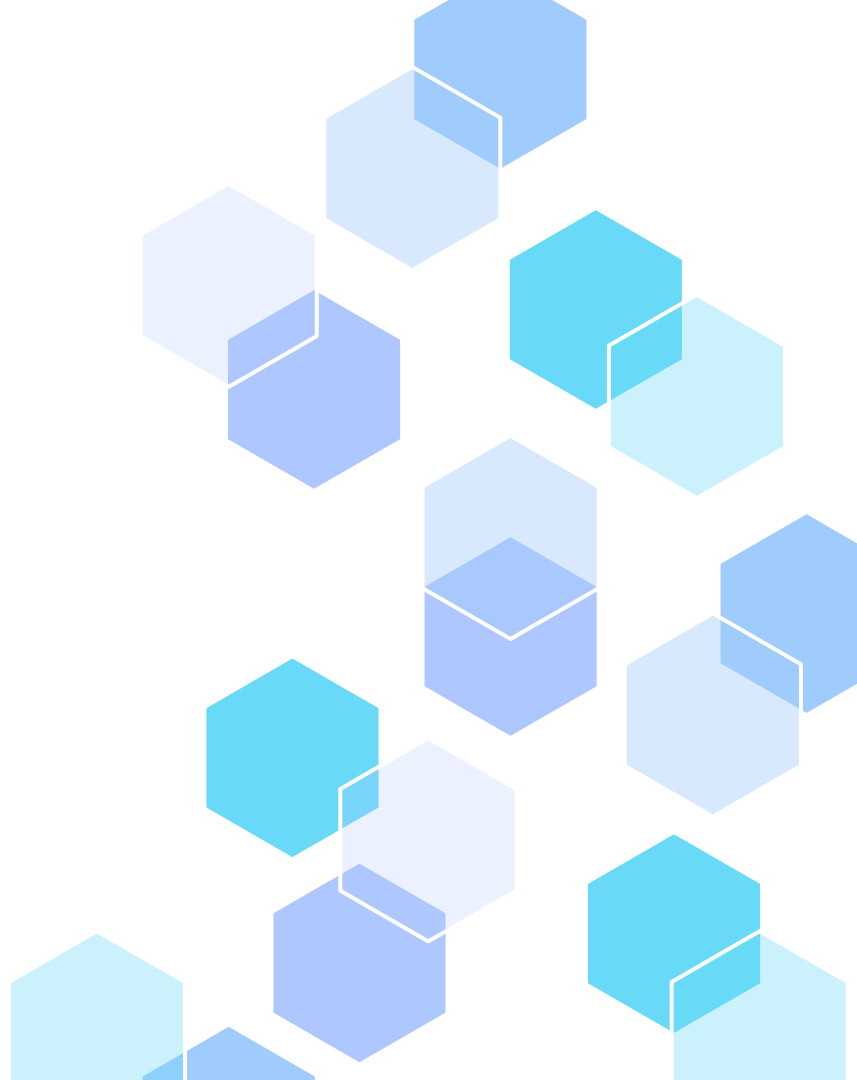
Key Components of a FBA

- Step 1: Define the target behavior
- Step 2: Collect relevant data
- Step 3: Analyze the data to identify function

Step 1: Define the Target Behavior

- Defining behavior is the first step in carrying out a program for behavior change
- An operationally defined behavior is…

  - described in an **observable** manner

  - described in **measurable** terms

  - defined in **positive** terms

  - defined in an **objective** manner

  - **clear** and concise

  - **complete** (examples and nonexamples)

Examples

Behavior Label	Definition
Positive statements	Positive words or statements separated by a break in speech directed toward self, others, objects, or tasks (e.g., "I can do this," "You look nice today," "That is a nice shirt," "I like to read")
On task	In seat (buttocks on the seat of the chair unless otherwise permitted [feet do not need to be on the floor]), working on the assigned task, and engaging in bodily movements related to the assigned task, such as using a pencil
Aggression	Any pushing, shoving, hitting, or pinching that could result in damage (does not include behaviors that occur when playing, such as when wrestling)

Martella et al., 2011

Complete

Behavior: Talking out Definition: Any vocalizations that are not initiated by the teacher, are out of turn, and/or are unrelated to academic content	
Examples	Non-Examples
Answering questions directed to other students	Answering questions directed to the student or whole group
Talking, laughing, or making noises while the teacher gives instructions	Asking the teacher a question about work after the teacher has finished giving directions
Talking to a peer when direction is to work independently	Talking to a peer during group work or free time

Prioritizing Target Behavior

Distracting   Disruptive   Destructive

Prioritizing Target Behavior

1.	Does the behavior pose a danger to the student or others?
2.	How much does changing the behavior matter to the student?
3.	Is it more appropriate to simply make environmental changes or teach others?
4.	How often does it occur?
5.	How long standing is the problem?
6.	Will changing the behavior produce higher rates of reinforcement?
7.	What is the importance related to overall independence?
8.	How likely is the success of changing the behavior?
9.	How much will it cost to change the behavior?

Modified from Cooper et al., 2007

Worksheet for Prioritizing Potential Target Behaviors

Name of the Student _____ Date _____

Informant: _____

Directions: Use the key within each question to rank each potential target behavior by the extent to which it meets each prioritization criteria. The behaviors with the highest total scores would presumably be the highest priority for intervention. Please, write the rank for each prioritization criteria in the box below each potential target behavior.

Potential Target Behaviors

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____

Prioritization Criteria	Target Bx 1	Target Bx 2	Target Bx 3	Target Bx 4
Does the problem behavior pose danger to the learner or to others? (0 = Never; 1 = Sometimes; 2 = Often; 3 = Always)				
How often does the problem behavior occur? (0 = <1 time a week; 1= ≤ 2 times a week; 2 = 3 to 4 times a week; 3= 5 to 10 times a week; 4= >10 times a week)				
How long standing is the problem behavior? (0 = ≤ 1 week; 1 = ≤ 2 weeks; 2 = ≤ 3 weeks; 3 = ≤4 weeks; 4 = >4 weeks)				
Will changing the problem behavior produce higher rate of reinforcement for the student? (0 = Never; 1 = Sometimes; 2 = Often; 3 = Always)				
What is the relative importance of the problem behavior to future skills development and independent functioning? (0 = Not Important; 1 = Somewhat Important; 2 = Important; 3 = Very Important)				
Will changing the problem behavior produce reinforcement for significant others (teachers and or parents) (0 = Never; 1 = Sometimes; 2 = Often; 3 = Always)				
How likely is the success in changing the problem behavior? (0 = Not Likely; 1 = Somewhat Likely; 2 = Likely; 3 = Very Likely)				
How much will is cost to change the problem behavior? (0 = Above average cost; 1 = Average Cost; 2 = Below average cost)				
TOTALS				

Priority Ranking (Order the behaviors from highest to lowest score)

| Level of Priority	Potential Target behavior
1 (highest)	
2	
3	
4 (lowest)	

Adapted from Copper, Heron, and Heward, 2007

Step 2: Collect Relevant Data

02

01

Data collection is crucial for understanding the behavior and its patterns.
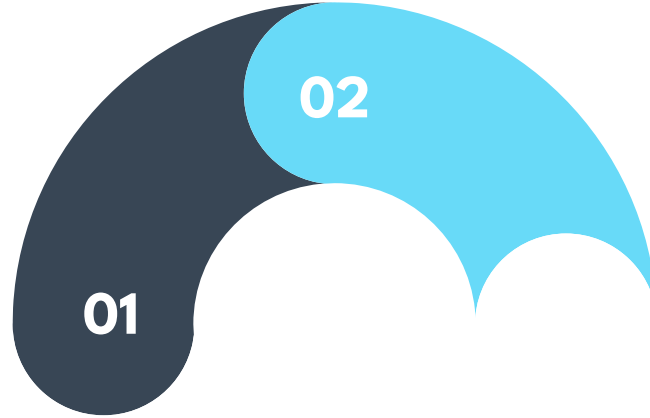
Collect data on the frequency, duration, intensity, and conditions of the behavior.

Use various methods like record review, direct observation, interviews, and behavior rating scales.
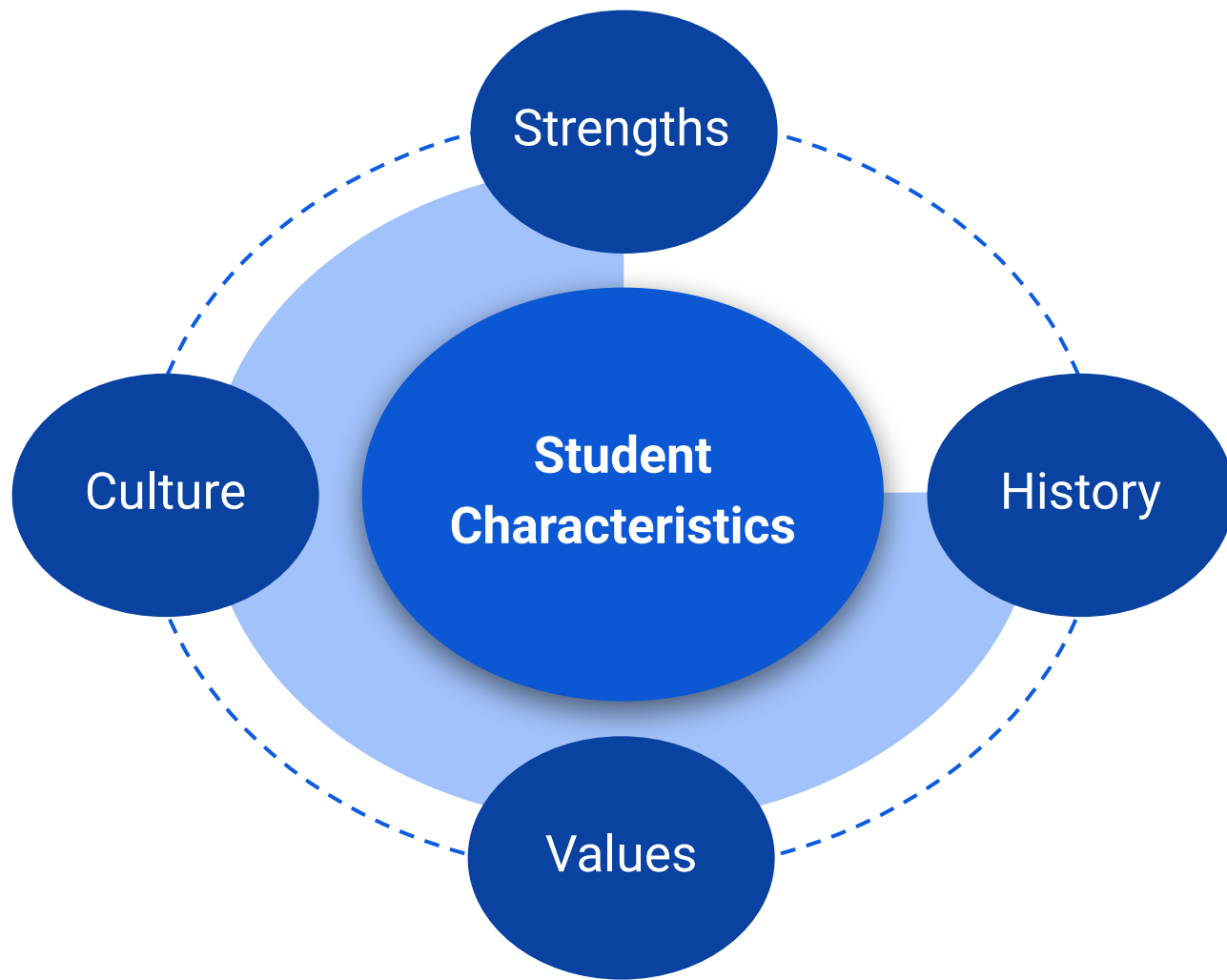
- Assessment measures include
  - Reviewing previous and current records.
  - Conducting formal and informal, questionnaires and interviews (direct and indirect) with the student, school staff, and family members.
    - FAST, Iwata & deLeon, 1995
    - PBQ, Lewis et al., 1994
    - QABF, Singh et al., 2006
    - FAI, O'Neill et al., 1997
    - Student–FAI, Oneill et al., 1997

Indirect measures– interviews

| Questions |
|---|
| 1. List, describe, and prioritize behavior(s) of concern. |
| 2. What do you think causes the behavior (e.g., what are the antecedents)? |
| 3. What do you think is the function of the behavior? |
| 4. How often do these behaviors occur? |
| 5. Is there any circumstance under which the behavior does not occur? |
| 6. Is there any circumstance under which the behavior always occur? |
| 7. Does the behavior occur more often during certain times of the day? |
| 8. Does the behavior occur in response to the number of people present? |
| 9. Does the behavior occur only with certain people? |
| 10. Does the behavior occur only during certain subjects? |
| 11. Could the behavior be related to any skills deficit? |
| 12. What observable events signal that the behavior is about to occur? |
| 13. What one thing could you do that would likely make the undesirable behavior occur? |
| 14. What are the consequences of the behavior? |

ABC Charts

Collect observation–based data on the occurrence of the target behavior

A (Antecedent) (describe the activity and specific events preceding the behavior)	B (Behavior) (describe exactly what the behavior looked like)	C (Consequence) (describe events that followed or results of the behavior)
Joe was told to line up for math class.	Joe hit a peer in line.	Joe was moved to the end of the line.
Joe was told to line up for lunch.	Joe pulled a peer's hair.	Joe was moved to the end of the line.

Date	Beginning/ Ending Time	Setting	Activity	Who Was Involved	Antecedent: What Happened Right Before the Behavior?	Behavior: What Did It Look Like?	Consequence: What Happened After the Behavior; How Was the Behavior Handled?	Function of the Behavior (Circle Hypothesized Function)
								Escape/avoid Attention To get what child wants Automatically rewarding
								Escape/avoid Attention To get what child wants Automatically rewarding
								Escape/avoid Attention To get what child wants Automatically rewarding
								Escape/avoid Attention To get what child wants Automatically rewarding

Date/ Time	Activity	What was happening behavior the behavior occurred? (Check all that apply)	Behavior (Check all that apply)	What happened after the behavior? (Check all that apply)	Other factors (Check all that apply)	Staff initials
	☐ Specials ☐ Snack/Lunch ☐ Reading ☐ Math ☐ Language Arts ☐ Recess ☐ Science or Social Studies ☐ Transition ☐ Small Group ☐ Independent Work ☐ Free Time ☐ Other _____	☐ Told to start a work task ☐ Completing a work task ☐ Engaging in preferred activity ☐ Asked for something child cannot have ☐ Working independently ☐ Asked to wait ☐ Transitioning ☐ Playing with peer ☐ Left alone while adult works with someone else ☐ On a break ☐ Other _____	☐ Out of area ☐ Refusal ☐ Tantrum ☐ Disruption ☐ Aggression ☐ Throwing items ☐ Property destruction ☐ Self-injury ☐ Off task ☐ Other ____ _____	☐ Verbal redirection/ correction ("no") ☐ Reminded of the expectation ☐ Adult attempts to reason or compromise ☐ Peer interaction ☐ Removed from class ☐ Work demand adjusted or withdrawn ☐ Prompted to ask for a break or attention ☐ Redirected to another activity or action ☐ Other _____	☐ Late to school ☐ Feeling sick ☐ Sick yesterday ☐ Sleepy/ tired ☐ Change in schedule ☐ Hungry ☐ Other _____ _____	

- Additional observation assessment measures based on the occurrence of target behavior include
  - Scatterplots
  - Standardized Behavior Rating Scales
  - Motivation Assessments
  - Preference Assessments
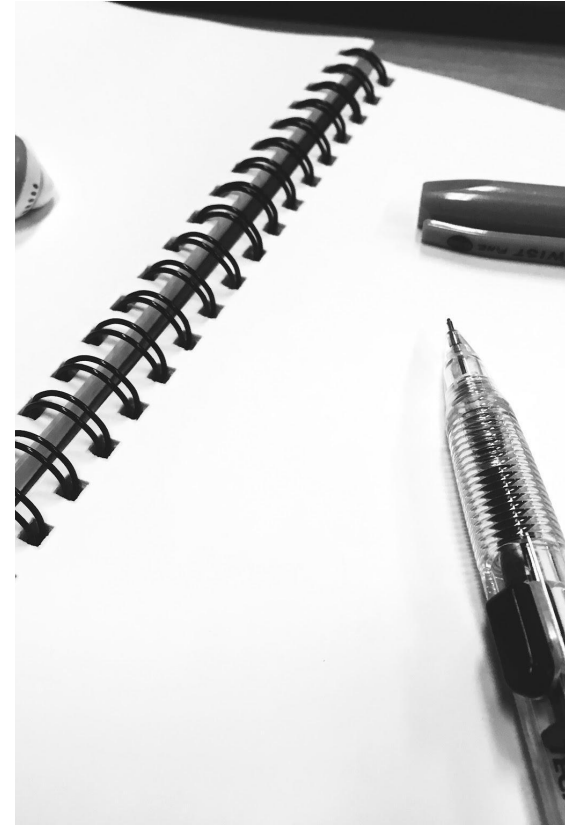
Scatterplots

Time	Activity	Date						
		8/22	8/23	8/24	8/25	8/26	8/27	8/28
9:15	Reading (independent work)			X	X			
9:30	Reading (small group)					X		X
10:00	Science (whole group)	X					X	
11:30	Lunch							
12:15	Recess	X X	X X	X	X		X	X
1:00	Math (whole group)		X			X		

FUNCTIONAL ASSESSMENT OBSERVATION FORM[1]

Name: _____

Starting Date: _____   Ending Date: _____

Time(s)	Behaviors					Predictors									Perceived Functions									Actual Consequences		COMMENTS: (If nothing happened in period.) Write initials.
						Demand/Request	Difficult Task	Transitions	Interruption	Alone (no attention)					Get/Obtain				Escape/Avoid							
															Attention	Desired Item/Activity	Self-Stimulation		Demand/Request	Activity ( )	Person		Other/Don't Know			
Total(s)																										
Event(s)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	
Date(s)																										

Motivation Assessment Scale II

Test Version – 2.0

Item	Response						
1. Would the behavior occur continuously, over and over, if this person was left alone for long periods of time? (For example, several hours.)	Never 0 ☐	Almost Never 1 ☐	Seldom 2 ☐	Half the Time 3 ☐	Usually 4 ☐	Almost Always 5 ☐	Always 6 ☐
2. Does the behavior occur following a request to perform a difficult task?	Never 0 ☐	Almost Never 1 ☐	Seldom 2 ☐	Half the Time 3 ☐	Usually 4 ☐	Almost Always 5 ☐	Always 6 ☐
3. Does this behavior occur when others are attending to him or her?	Never 0 ☐	Almost Never 1 ☐	Seldom 2 ☐	Half the Time 3 ☐	Usually 4 ☐	Almost Always 5 ☐	Always 6 ☐
4. Does the behavior occur in response to your talking to other persons in the room?	Never 0 ☐	Almost Never 1 ☐	Seldom 2 ☐	Half the Time 3 ☐	Usually 4 ☐	Almost Always 5 ☐	Always 6 ☐
5. Does the behavior ever occur to get a toy, food, or activity that this person has been told that he or she can't have?	Never 0 ☐	Almost Never 1 ☐	Seldom 2 ☐	Half the Time 3 ☐	Usually 4 ☐	Almost Always 5 ☐	Always 6 ☐
6. Would the behavior occur repeatedly, in the same way, for very long periods of time, if no one was around? (For example, rocking back and forth for over an hour)	Never 0 ☐	Almost Never 1 ☐	Seldom 2 ☐	Half the Time 3 ☐	Usually 4 ☐	Almost Always 5 ☐	Always 6 ☐

Preference Assessments

- Example steps:
  - Sit in front of the learner and hold up two items and say to the learner, "Pick one."
  - Wait ten seconds for the learner to indicate his/her choice in whatever manner is appropriate to the learner.
  - Place the selected and non–selected objects in their appropriate containers.
  - Continue the first three steps until half the objects presented are chosen
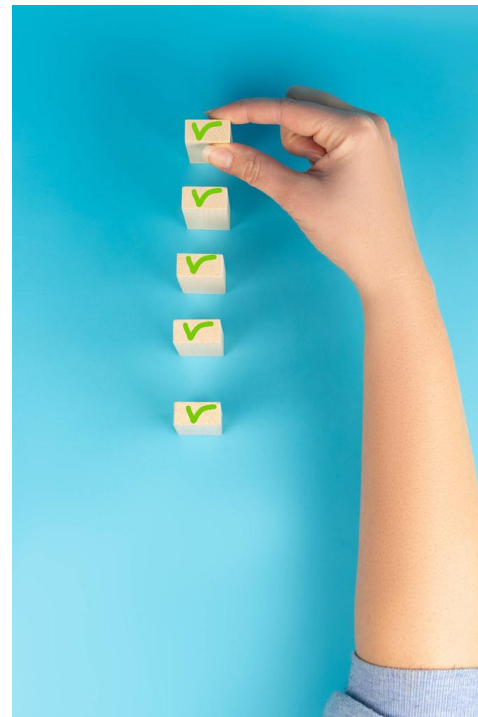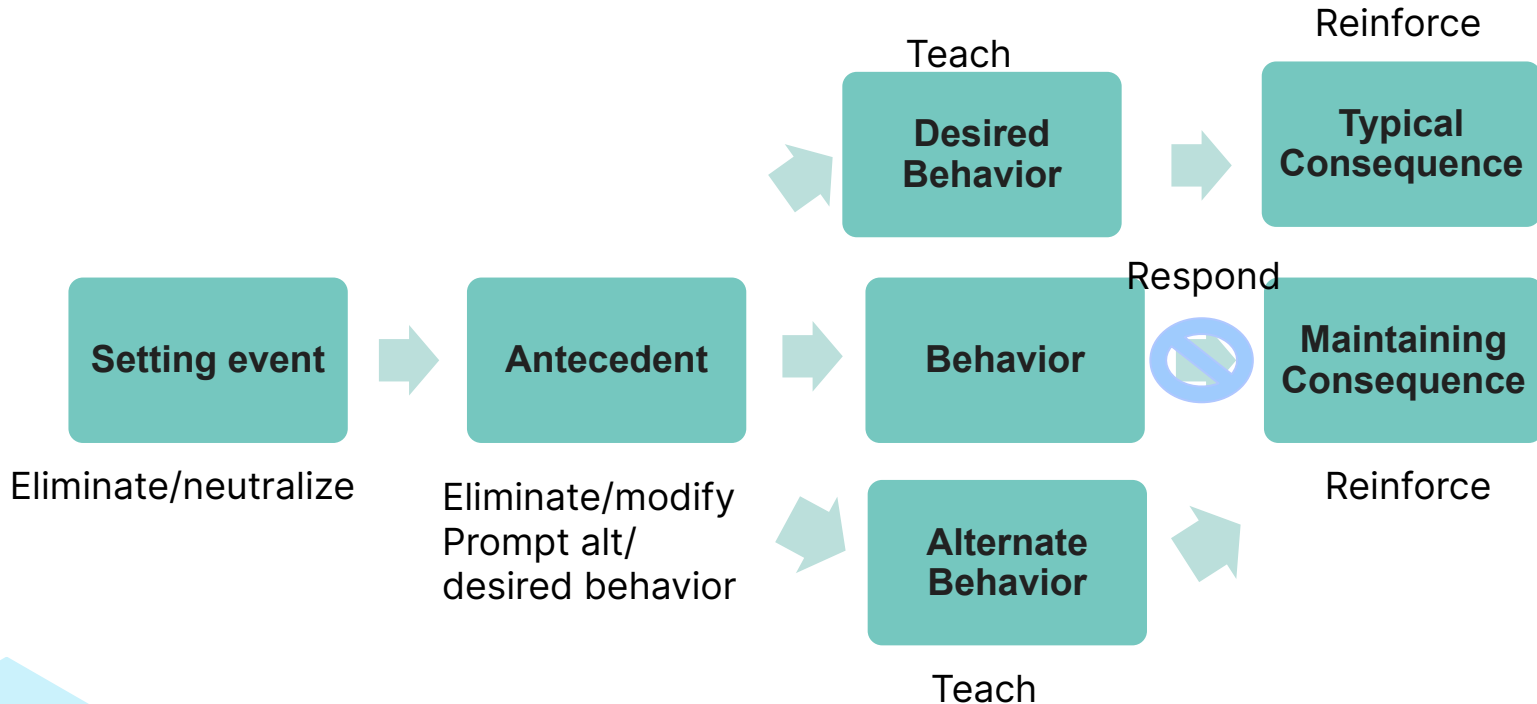
Step 3: Analyze the Data

Identify behavior setting → Identify antecedents → Identify consequences

Identify sequential conditions → Summarize and validate concern
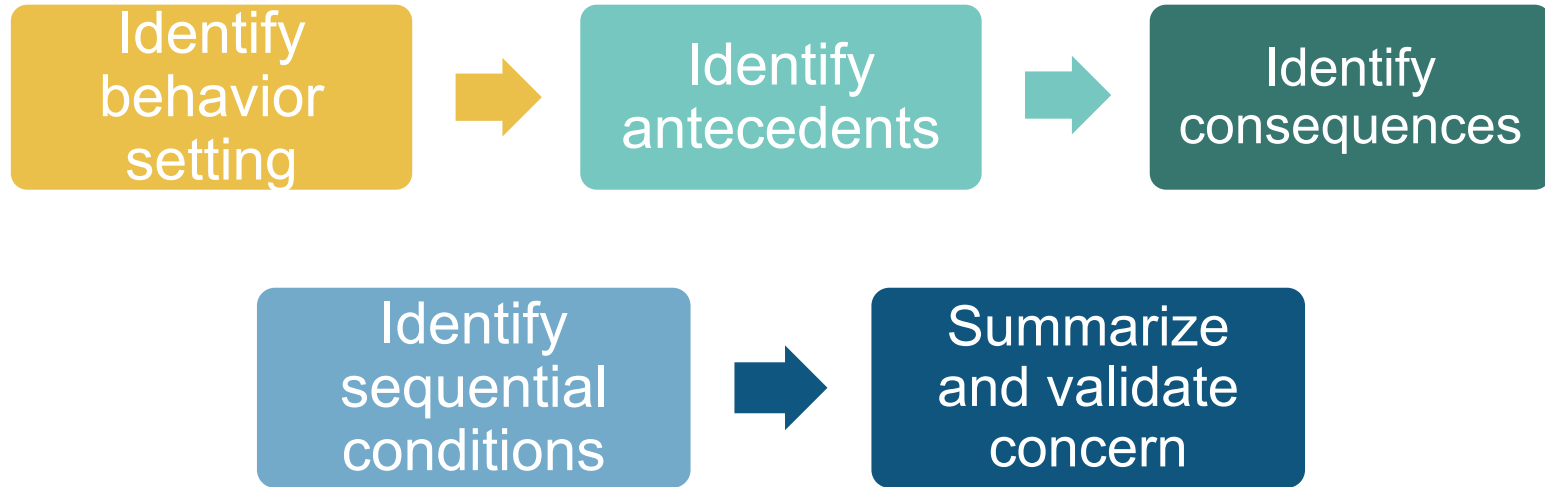
Identify Function

An Example

A → ← **B** → ← **C**
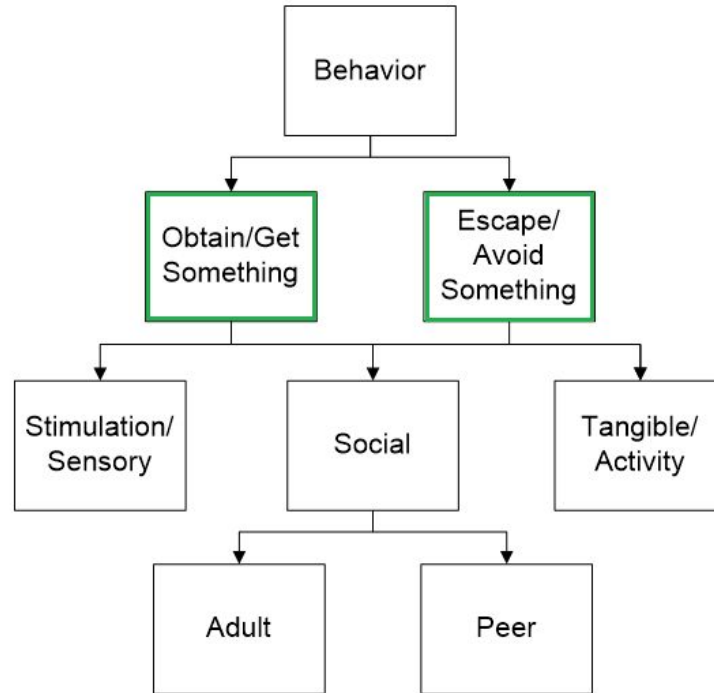
Antecedent   Behavior   Consequence

Given math work   Talks over teacher, yells out   Sent to principal

Why Do We Do This?

Establishing the Competing Pathway

When tired → And given math work →

- Jaiden does his math work → Thumbs up?
- Jaiden yells out → And escapes the task
- Jaiden asks for a break →
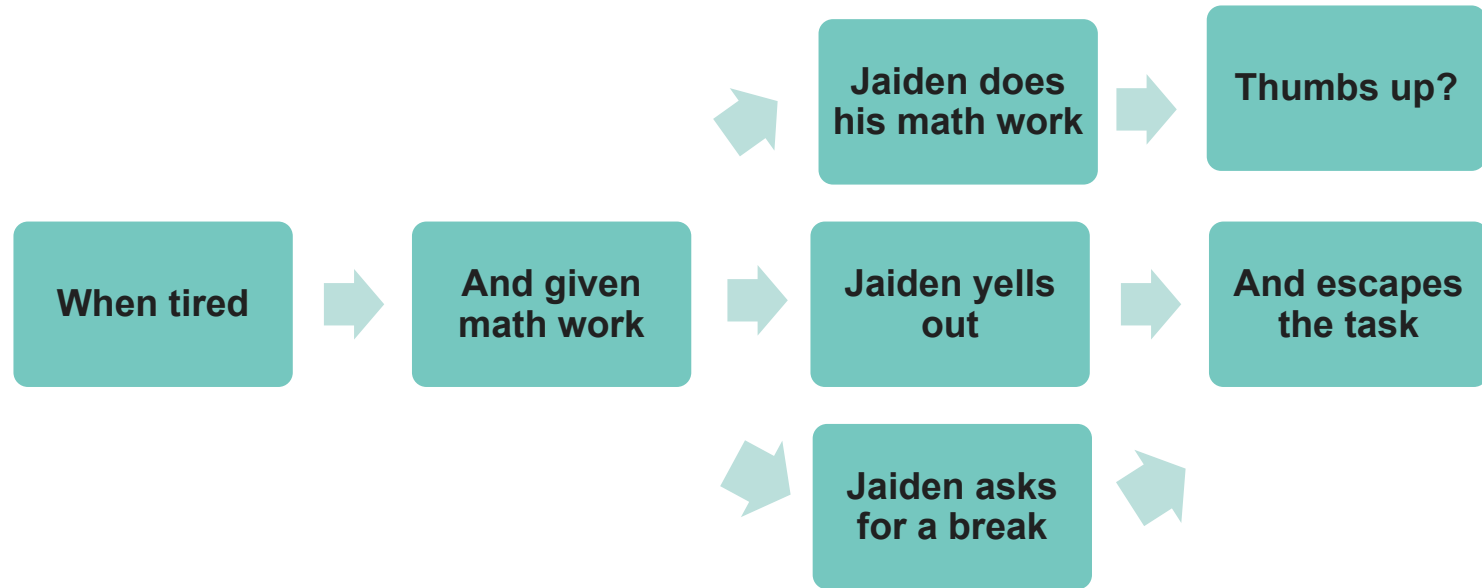
03

BSP

Behavior Support Plan
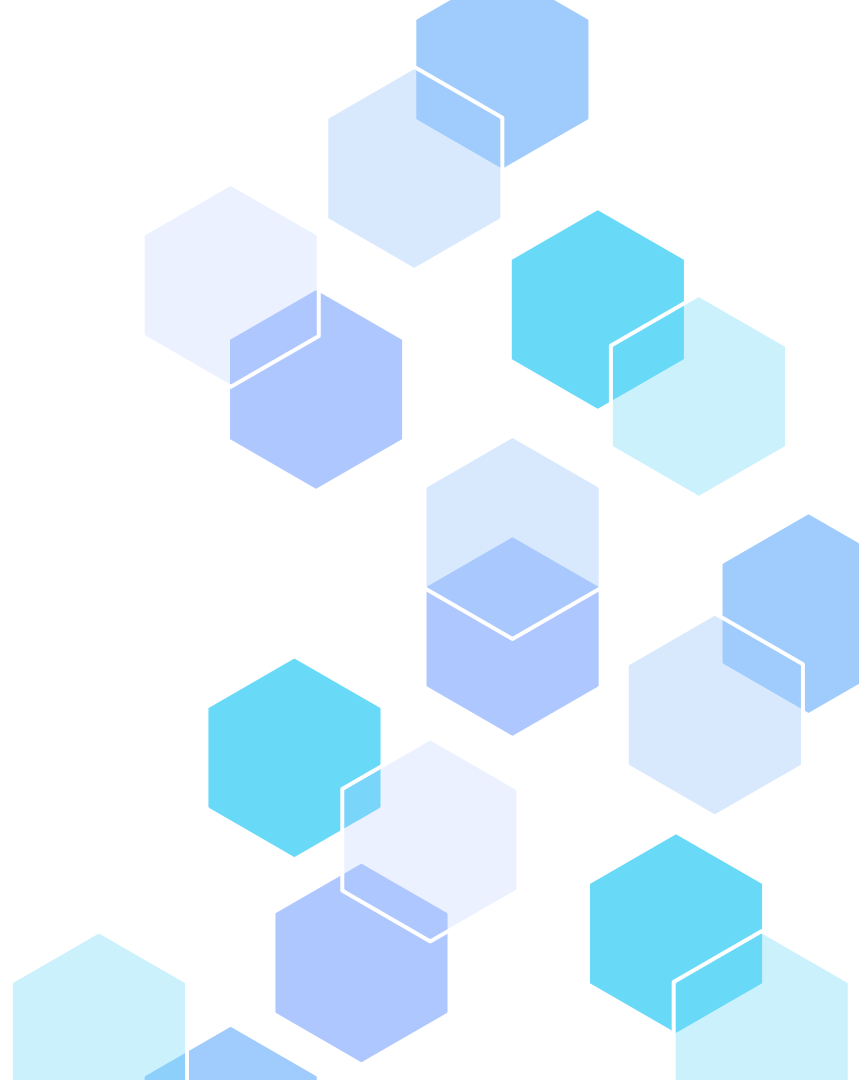
Behavior Support Plans

- The goal of the BSP is to outline steps for all involved:
  - Adult:
    - How to manage the environment to make the target behavior less needed
    - How to reinforce the new skill
  - Student:
    - What skill they will be taught to use in replacement of the target behavior
      - The new behavior must serve the same function as the original one and thus continue to provide reinforcement to the student.

BSP Components

- Operational definition of the target behavior
- Results of assessment
- Hypothesized function
- Relevant student characteristics
- Setting event strategies
- Antecedent strategies
- Replacement behaviors/skills to teach
- Consequence strategies
- Plans for
  - Monitoring
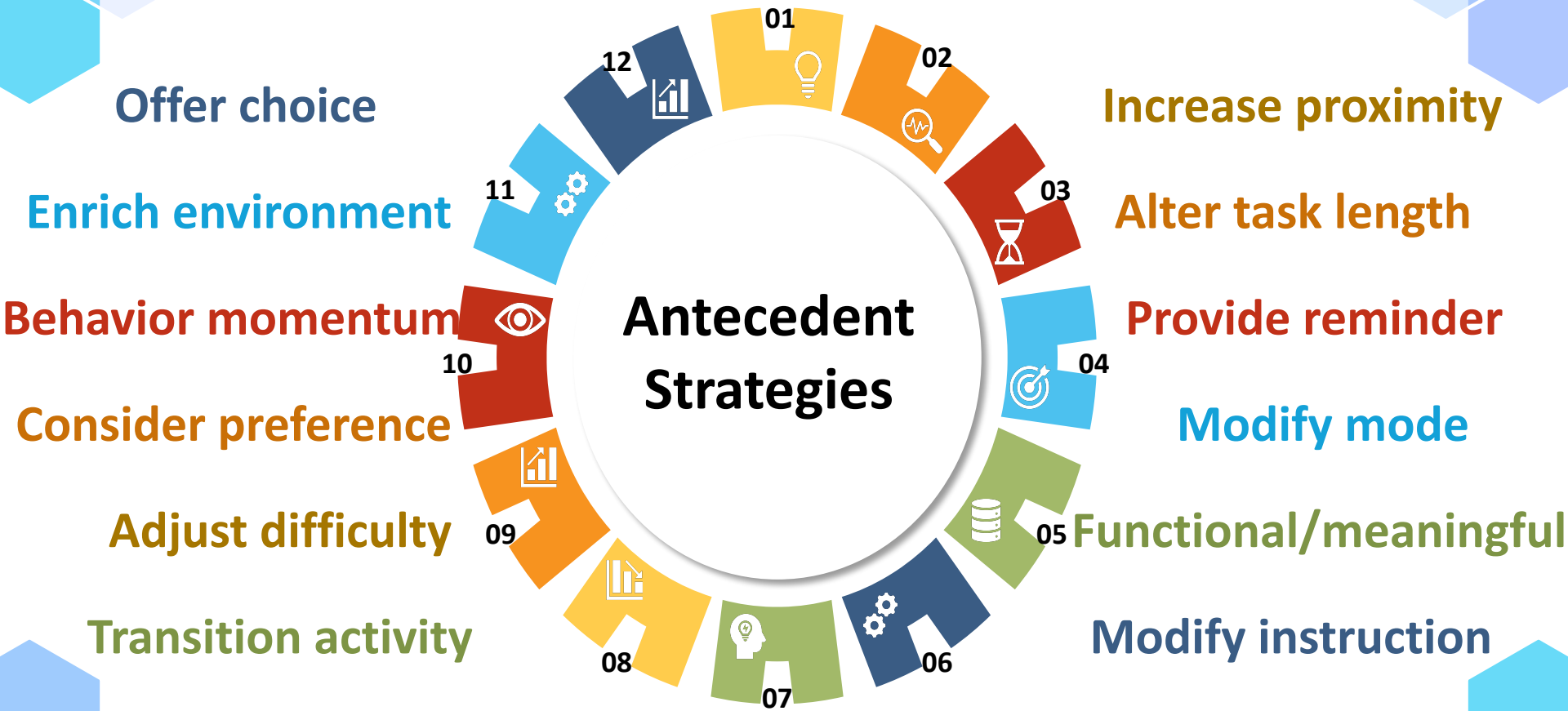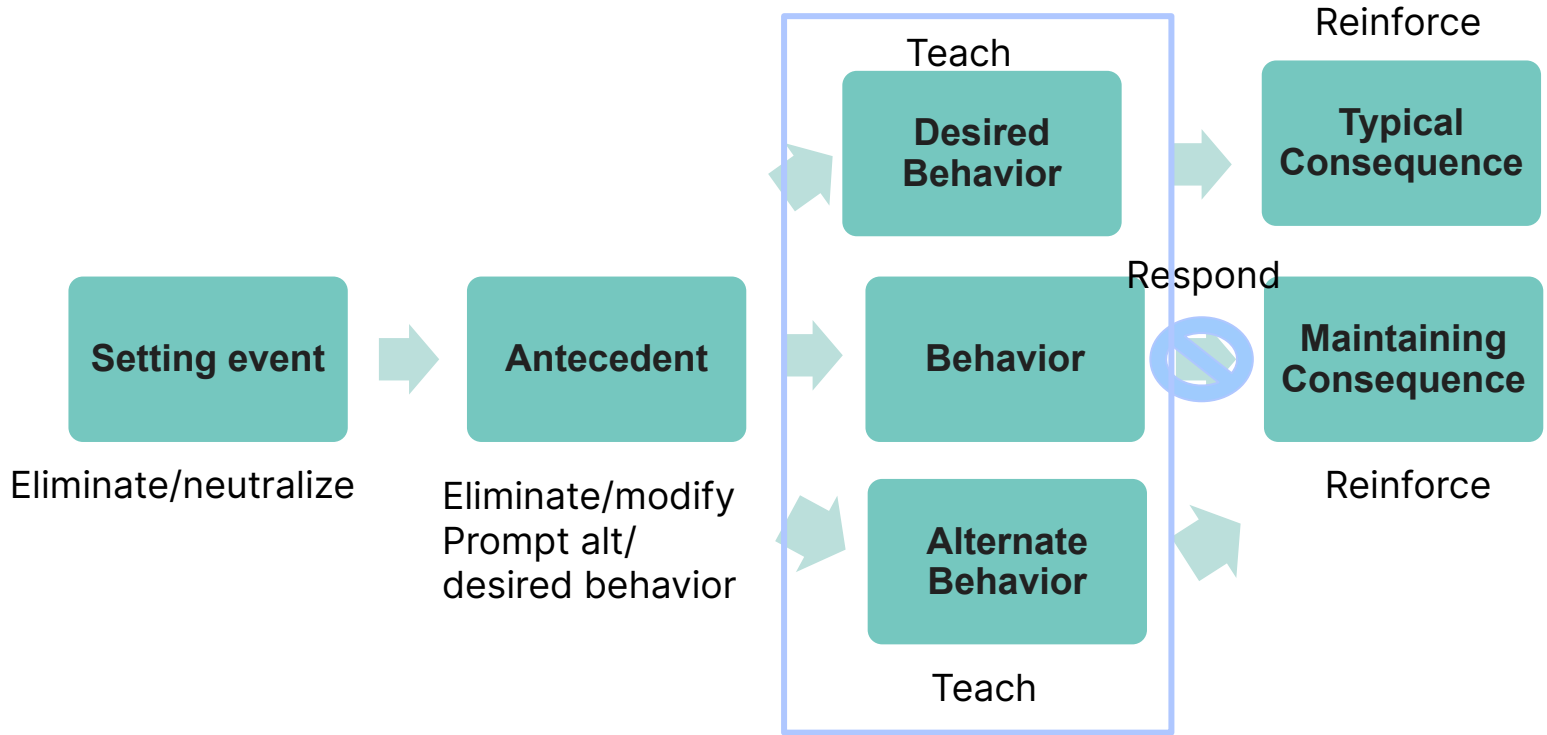 - Maintenance/generalization
 - Crisis
  - Staff training

Teach   Reinforce

Desired Behavior → Typical Consequence

Respond

Setting event → Antecedent → Behavior → Maintaining Consequence

Eliminate/neutralize   Eliminate/modify Prompt alt/ desired behavior   Alternate Behavior → Reinforce
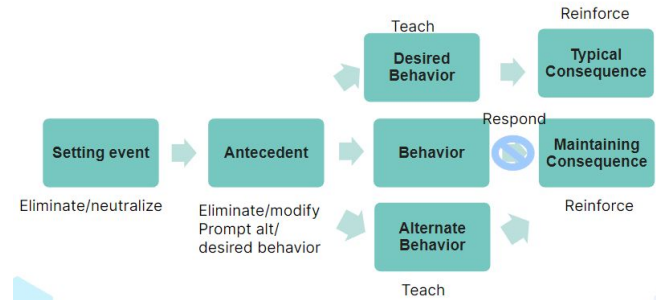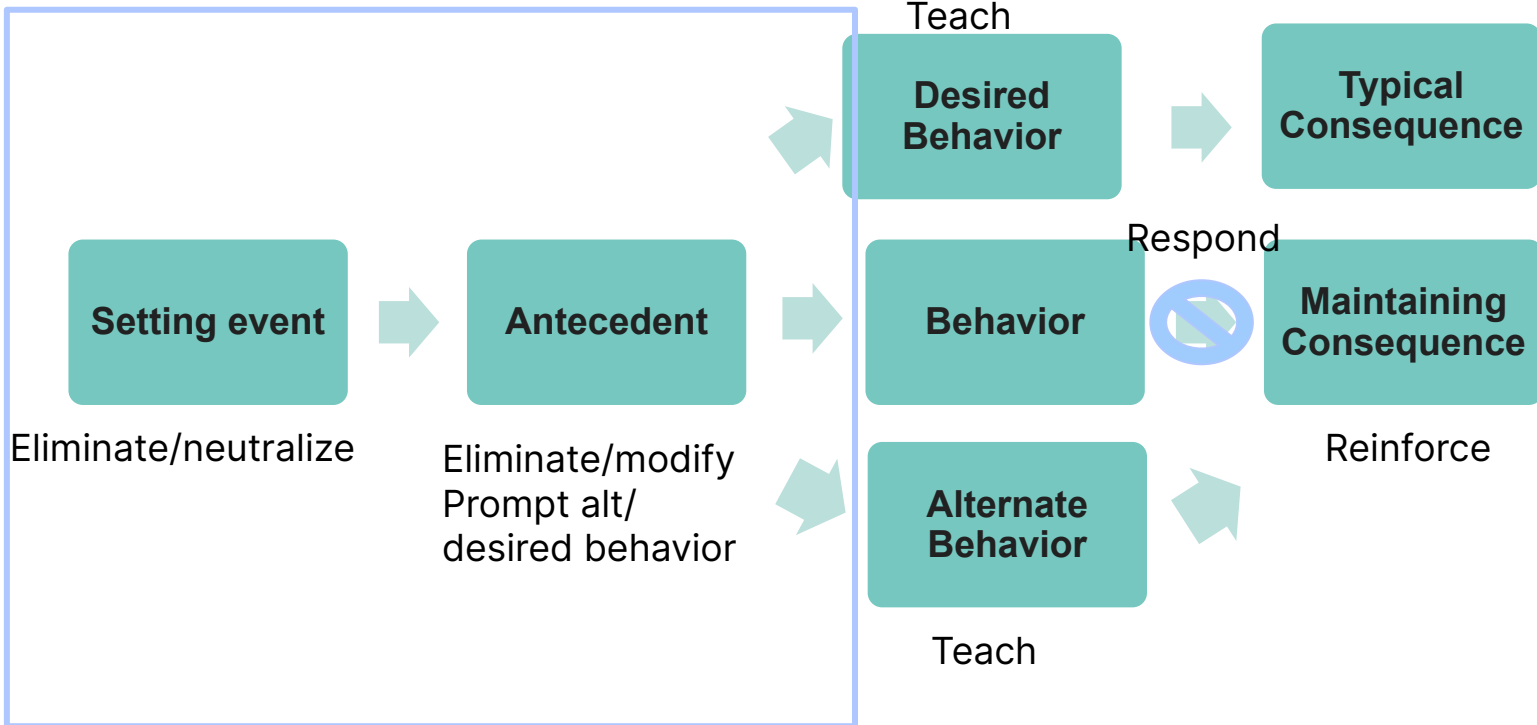
Teach

Setting Event Intervention

Can the setting event be eliminated?

Yes

No

Eliminate

Remove/modify immediate antecedent

Ameliorate influence of setting event

Antecedent Strategies

01 —
02 Increase proximity
03 Alter task length
04 Provide reminder
— Modify mode
05 Functional/meaningful
06 Modify instruction
07 —
08 Transition activity
09 Adjust difficulty
10 Consider preference
— Behavior momentum
11 Enrich environment
12 Offer choice

Replacement Behaviors/ Prosocial Skills to Teach

Replacement Skills	Coping/Tolerance Skills	Self-Determination Skills
● What skill will serve the exact same function as the behavior?	● What skills will help the student cope with the difficult situation?	● What related skills will prevent the need for the behavior? ● What skills will result in meaningful life improvement?
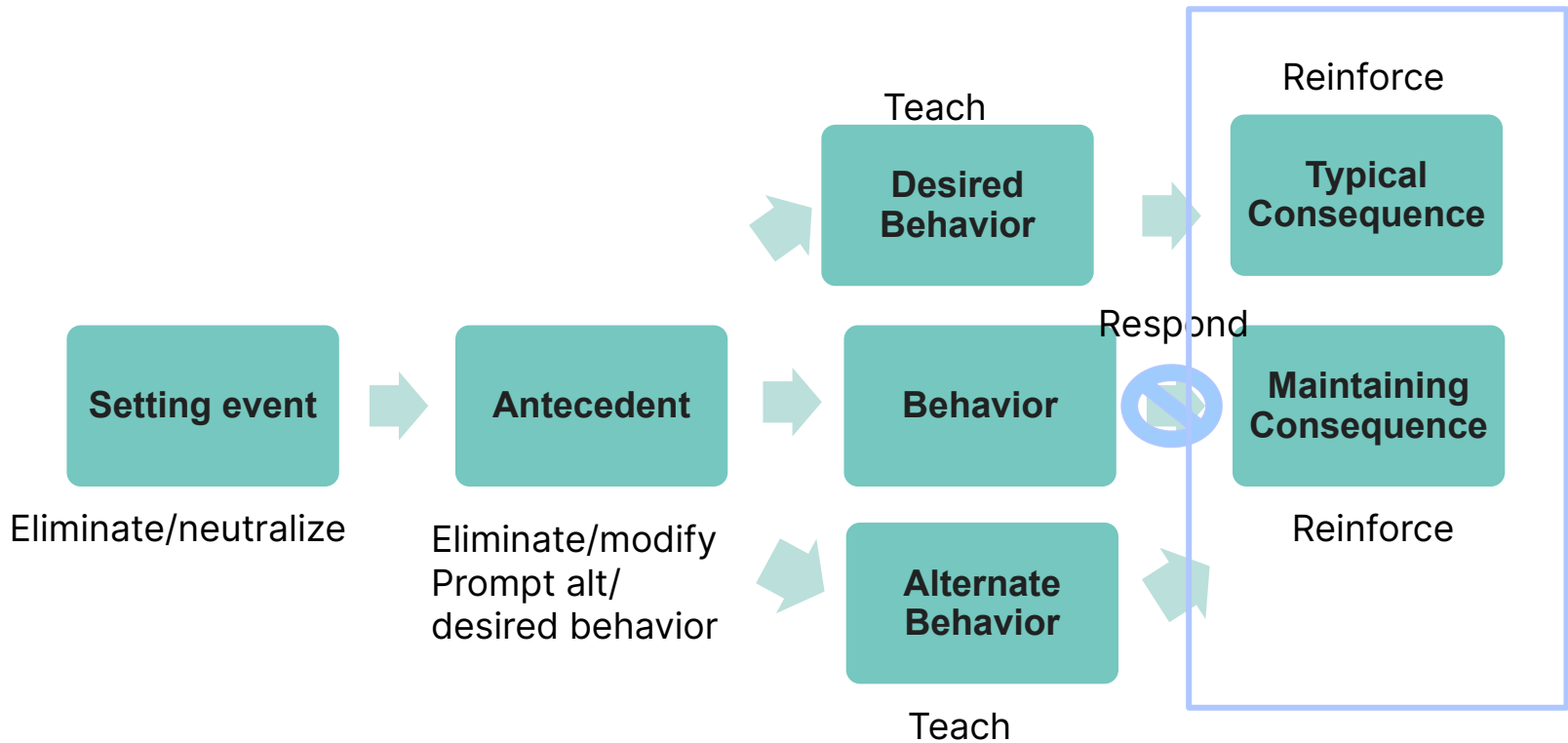
Consequence Strategies

Response to Desired Behavior	Response to Target Behavior
When Jaiden asks for a break, engages in deep breathing, or advocates for himself and asks for help…	*When Jaiden yells out in frustration…*
The adult should …provide behavior specific praise and provide access to what is requested	The adult should… provide visual prompt to remind Jaiden of options for accessing break or help

What We Write (and Say) Matters

- The language we use and put into our assessments MATTERS
  - Make it empowering
  - Focus on skills in need of development

Instead of …	Try …
Student regularly acts out in anger during instruction	Student has not yet mastered the ability to self regulate independently when angry, resulting in frustration and disruptions to learning.
Person with autism	Autistic person
Low functioning	Strengths in the areas of emotional regulation and difficulties in the areas of verbal communication

A Note About Language

Instead of …	Try …
Student regularly acts out in anger during instruction	Student has not yet mastered the ability to self regulate independently when angry, resulting in frustration and disruptions to learning.
Person with autism	Autistic person
Low functioning	Strengths in the areas of emotional regulation and difficulties in the areas of verbal communication
Follows their own agenda	Displays sustained attention for a select number of things, prefers sameness and has difficulties shifting their attention to new activities that do not pertain to their interests.

Divergent Perspectives (2022, Aug 29). Neurodivergent Report Writing.

Your Turn

Thank, Pair, Share

Instead of …	Try …
Blunt, abrupt, rude	The child is a direct communicator, uses language efficiently to express needs and opinions
Purposeless play	Prefers to sit side-by-side, share the space with other peers, connect through shared activity, and comment on what they are doing (parallel play)
Flat affect	Uses neutral facial expressions

04

Application

Case example
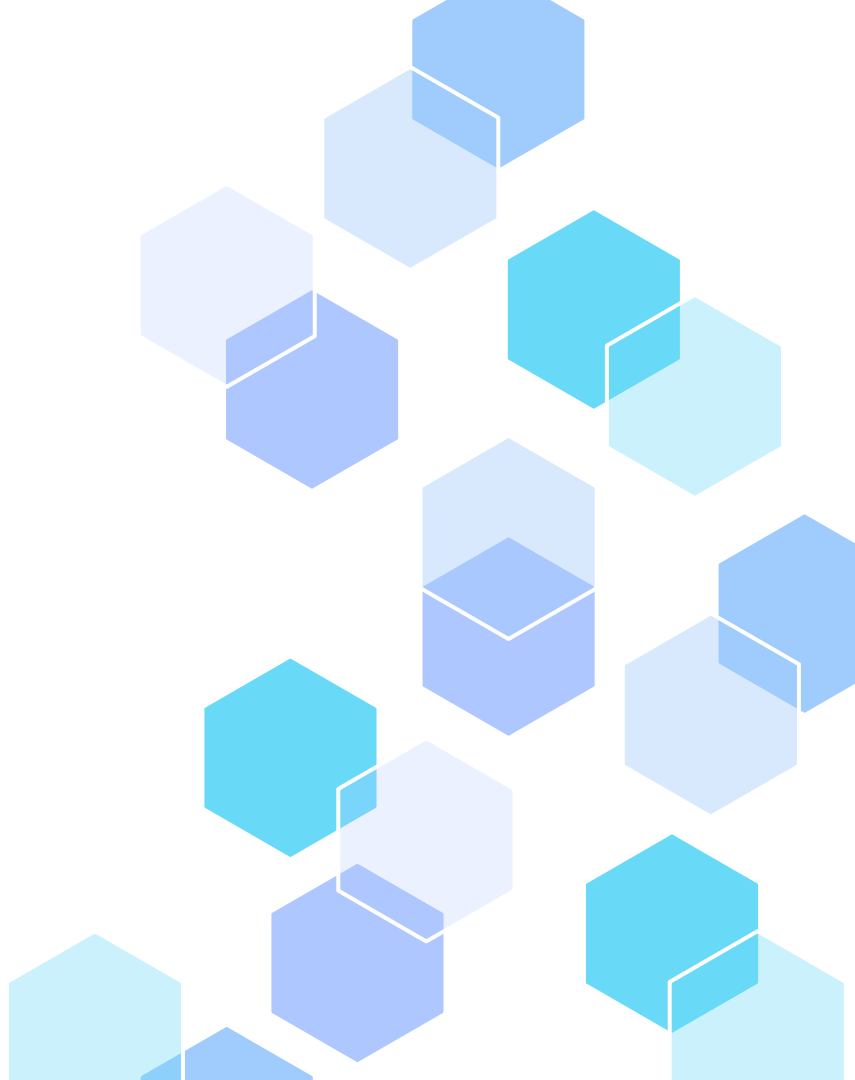
Case Example: Elizabeth

- Fourth grade
- Latina female
- Receives special education (speech, academic supports) under autism identification
- Lives with mother, two younger siblings, and maternal grandmother
- Teacher referral: Concerns with "inattention", "tantrums"

First Steps

- Meet with referral source to be able to prepare to team meeting with Elizabeth
- Refocus concerns away from being deficit-based and toward affirming language
  - Revised referral concerns:
    - *Attention differences characteristic of Autistic children, and attends best when presented with highly–preferred content.*
    - *Extreme distress when presented with unexpected change, which significantly impacts her ability to meet expectations of the classroom environment*
    - **Provide examples of what these look like for both**

Next Steps

- Complete relevant information gathering
  - Utilize strength finding assessments
    - e.g., Signature Strength Questionnaire, SSQ-72
  - Develop "one-pager" with Elizabeth
    - Strengths, preference, interests, needs, strategies that work, etc.
  - Consider impact of culture, trauma history, academic history, medical history, values, etc.
  - Conduct formal and informal interviews, formal and informal assessment measures
    - Preference
    - Motivation
    - Function
    - Observational data

Name: Elizabeth

Date:

One-Pager

Answer each of the four parts in this One-Pager. Your answers will help you create your **SPIN**, or your **S**trengths, **P**references, **I**nterests, and **N**eeds. Give it to your teachers and employers so you can help them understand you and your needs and you can be successful!

My Strengths	My Preferences	My Interests	My Needs
King	Working in quiet spaces	Art	Visual aids
Caring	Individual work (instead of group work)	Swimming	Predictability
Helpful	Direct communication	Dancing	Consistency
Persistent		Video games	Rules
		Engineering	Reminders

Scan code for more guidance, videos, and examples.
For additional resources visit www.imdetermined.org/resources.

Next Steps

- Host a team meeting and encourage Elizabeth to join
- Provide Elizabeth and the team a break down of the assessment results
  - Review strengths and concerns and to prioritize areas of need
  - Encourage Elizabeth's participation in selection of goals for supports, focusing on those that will improve her overall quality of life and align with her interests
  - Help Elizabeth to complete a "good day" plan to lead to behavior support development

Good Day Plan

Answer each of the four parts in this Good Day Plan. Think about what happens on the best days and write or type out what happens, if it's happening now, what you can do to have a good day, and what help you can use along the way.

Good Day	Now	Action	Support
What happens on a good day?	Does it happen now?	What needs to happen to make it a good day?	Who can help me?

I'M DETERMINED

Scan code for more guidance, videos, and examples.
For additional resources visit www.imdetermined.org/resources.

Behavior Plan Development

- Begin behavior support development
  - Collaboratively develop support plan, focusing on skill building
    - Model goal setting and problem solving
    - Provide choice-making opportunities and ensure assent-continue to revisit
    - Encourage inclusion in progress monitoring and decision making
    - Establish check-ins to allow Elizabeth to self-reflect and self-advocate

Distressed Behavior: Teaching Plan

Replacement Skills	Coping/Tolerance Skills	Self-Determination Skills
• Functional communication training to request an escape from the unplanned change *Hypothesized function: escape*	• Direct instruction in breathing exercises that allow Elizabeth to regulate her body • Explicit practice with exposure to challenging situations, paired with coping and reinforcement	• Direct instruction and practice with emotion identification, emotion awareness, and coping skill selection/ implementation • Direct instruction in self-advocacy skills

Art

Dancing

Math

Video games

Quiet spaces

Adult attention

Rules

Reminders

Working alone   Visuals   Predictability   Consistency   Praise

Consequence Strategies

Response to Desired Behavior	Response to Target Behavior
When Elizabeth uses her breathing square in place of distressed behavior	*When Elizabeth begins to cry and/or yell in response to an unexpected change*
The adult should … provide behavior specific praise and provide Elizabeth with one token, which can later be traded in for a "get out of the activity" pass	The adult should … provide visual prompt to remind Elizabeth to use her coping strategies or to request escape from the activity (depending on what "level" she is on)

Reminders and Takeaways

Prioritize skill building to empower, promotion of safety, trust, and rapport above all else

Listen, learn, guide, shape, and coach our students to support their goals to increase their overall quality of life

Questions?

THANK YOU!

gouldk@strose.edu

References

- Bearss, K., Johnson, C. R., Handen, B. L., Butter, E., Lecavalier, L., Smith, T., & Scahill, L. (2018). *Parent Training for Disruptive Behavior: The RUBI Autism Network, Clinical Manual.* Oxford University Press.
- Cheak-Zamora, N.C., Maurer-Batjer, A., Malow, B.A., & Coleman, A. (2020). Self-determination in young adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism, 24,* 605–616.
- Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (1987). *Applied behavior analysis.* Merrill Publishing Co.
- Divergent Perspectives (2022, Aug 29). Neurodivergent Report Writing.
- Fullerton, A. & Coyne, P. (1999). Developing skills and concepts for self-determination in young adults with autism. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 14,* 42–52.
- Gaddy, C. & Crow, H. (2023). A primer on neurodiversity-affirming speech and language services for autistic individuals. *Perspectives of the ASHA Special Interest Groups, 8,* 1220–1237.
- Martella, R. C., Nelson, J. R., Marchand-Martella, N. E., & O'Reilly, M. (2011). *Comprehensive behavior management: Individualized, classroom, and schoolwide approaches.* Sage Publications.
- Virginia Department of Education's Self-Determination Project; imdetermined.org