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## Annotated Case Studies

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# DENISE

**D**enise is an 8 year old, 2<sup>nd</sup> grade student served in a self contained special education classroom with 9 peers of various disabilities and cognitive skills. Denise has a diagnosis of Autism.

### **Problem Behavior:**

Denise exhibits problem behavior which escalates from muttering 4 letter words under her breath, to rocking back and forth, to spitting and biting her hand. Without adult intervention, her behavior frequently escalates to screaming, dropping to the floor and head banging. These behaviors are hypothesized as serving a PROTEST function (Her face looks angry and is often red. Her voice quality is high pitched and she frequently moans and looks unhappy.) These behaviors have occurred in structured and unstructured activities, in multiple settings. The team is not sure what she may be protesting.

### **Identified skill deficit requiring teaching:**

Denise inconsistently uses 1-2 word utterances to make her needs and wants known. On mornings that she arrives at school looking very tired she attempts to avoid contact with adults and peers. On these days she is especially likely to use problem behavior and does not readily verbalize needs and wants. She also uses problem behavior on days she does NOT appear tired. Sometimes she does express needs and wants in the earlier stages if an adult says, "What do you want?"

**DBW:** *The problem behavior is NOT simply a result of arriving tired as she does it on other days as well. However, the setting event of "arriving looking tired" does require the team to consider how they will change the environment to minimize the likelihood of problem behavior on those days. Denise does not yet have a reliable verbal way to express her needs and wants. The team will wish to consider picture exchange communication instruction to augment her periodic, not yet reliable verbal communication of needs and wants.*

### **Physical Setting (e.g., noise, crowding, temperature)**

The classroom is physically small, but adequate space for whole class activities and individual desks is present. The room is relatively quiet and the teacher emphasizes "inside voice" with the other student. Denise has not demonstrated sensory avoidant behaviors for sounds in class, but has done so in the large cafetorium.

**DBW:** *Physical Setting does not appear to be a significant variable to address in the environment.*

### **Social Setting: (interaction patterns, with and around the student)**

Denise's teacher and 1 classroom aide are soft spoken and frequently affectionately touch students. All students respond positively, including Denise, unless she has already begun the problem behavior or it is a day in which she appears very tired when she arrives at school. One aide has a loud voice and moves very rapidly. Denise does not have more difficulty with him than others.

***DBW:** Social Setting does not appear to be a significant variable to address in the environment*

### **Activities: (activities/curriculum match learner needs?)**

Denise's IEP focuses on functional reading and math. Worksheets are commonly used, employing "Touch Math" in this classroom. During circle time, Denise often enjoys the music, but after 15 minutes of a 25 minute circle, will sometimes begin problem behavior. If removed, she typically does not escalate further, but she also does not appear to purposefully use the behavior to escape. Activities are given in sequence but no container organization system (series of numbered trays or folders, rolling charts with sequenced drawers, etc.) is used.

***DBW:** It is not likely that Denise understands the concepts of addition without the use of manipulatives. Touch math and worksheets with numerals is a mismatch of curriculum to student needs. She appears to begin protesting lengthy circle time, and although she may not realize the protest results in an escape, Denise is likely to learn this very quickly. Without obvious visual organization systems, Denise can not observe "closure." That is, when all the folders or drawers are finished, I have completed my work. Often students will decrease problem behavior and tolerate longer work periods if they have a sense of how long completion will take. Otherwise, when they are tired of the activity, having no idea how much longer they will be required to work, they use problem behavior to protest or escape.*

### **Scheduling Factors: (timing, sequencing and transition issues)**

Denise often has to wait for 5+ minutes as the teacher prepares new activities, collects work, or transitions to lunch, recess, etc. Problem behavior is sometimes seen at this time.

No use of an individualized picture schedule has been observed, though there is a generic picture-with-symbol schedule in the front corner of the room.

The schedule of the day does not intersperse Denise's desired activities (computer touch screen games, making marks on the chalkboard, watching a specific video) with less desired activities. Desired activities usually occur back-to-back at the end of the day.

**DBW:** *Scheduling Factors are contributing to problem behavior. Lengthy transitions and lack of awareness of what is next, coupled with a lack of frequent access to desired activities are frequently observed in classrooms with a high rate of problem behavior for students with moderate and severe disabilities and autism.*

**Degree of Independence: (reinforcement intervals appropriate to foster independence)**

Denise prefers the close presence of a specific female aide. She pats this aide on the leg, smiles and hugs frequently. The aide frequently smiles and sometimes hugs. She is quite patient and is often able to get Denise to do “work” she has refused previously, or refused with other adults. Problem behavior has occurred one-on-one with this aide as well, but not as frequently.

**DBW:** *Degree of Independence does not appear to be a significant variable affecting probability of problem behavior.*

**Degree of Participation: (group size, location, and participation parameters)**

Denise frequently works alone, but will tolerate some reciprocal games (UNO) with one adult and a few peers if an adult is present. She enjoys circle time most of the time and delights in identifying peers names as well as putting the date card on the calendar. She used to participate in assemblies, but parents believe she does not tolerate this well, so she now remains in the room.

**Social Interaction: (social communication needs match instruction and opportunities)**

Denise rarely initiates interactions beyond initial greeting of a familiar adult. Adults are working on tolerating reciprocal interactions. One non-disabled 12 year old student seeks her out at recess and Denise now anticipates and shrieks with delight when she appears.

**DBW:** *Degree of Participation and Social Interaction do not appear to be significant variables affecting probability of problem behavior.*

**Degree of Choice (amount of choice making and negotiation present in the environment)**

Denise is allowed to choose activities following a problem behavior and during free time. All other activities are required and no choices are given. She has no negotiation skills as of yet.

**DBW:** *Degree of Choice deficit is a significant variable affecting likelihood of problem behavior.*

**What is IN the environment or MISSING in the environment that needs changing to potentially remove or reduce the student's need to use the problem behavior?**

**DBW Conclusion:** *Lack of interspersed desired activities, a personal schedule, an available communication system to express needs and wants, and appropriate curriculum and task organization are likely to be variables affecting problem behavior. The presence of lengthy transitions between activities is also likely to be affecting problem behavior.*

**DBW Comments:** *This scenario occurs with great regularity. Denise's environment has not yet been tailored to meet her needs. A significant amount of consultant time and mobilization of resources to assist the teacher in changing the environment are necessary.*

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# ADAM

Adam is an 11-year old, 5th grade student served 60% in a self contained special education classroom this year. There are 15 peers of various disabilities and cognitive skills in the class. Adam has a learning disability in reading and AD/HD. He reads at an approximate 3.5 grade level, but is making good progress. Last year Adam was in a general education class for all but 35% of the school day. This year he is in general education environments for P.E., music, and math.

### Problem Behavior:

Adam will sometimes throw his work on the floor, swear under his breathe and state that the “work is stupid and I’m not going to do this baby work!” If pressed, Adam will sometimes run out of the room crying or screaming “F\_ck you!” as he departs. This has occurred approximately 5 times per week for the last six weeks he has been in this class. At other times, he is cooperative and successful. This behavior only occurs in the special education classroom. The principal has stated that when Adam’s behavior is under control for four weeks, the IEP team should meet to discuss more time in general education class with an accommodation plan for his reading deficits, because he obviously prefers that environment. She has told the team that “Adam has to earn the right to be in the general education class for more time by showing more good behavior in the special day class.”

*DBW: The most significant variables affecting problem behavior are Adam’s desire to be in a different classroom and the lack of friends in this class. The principal’s position is commonly expressed by educators: “The student has to earn their way into general education classes.” Since he rarely, if every, has shown this problem behavior in general education environments, this does not seem logical. Additionally, no one person can override the IEP team’s decision on the least restrictive environment to meet his educational goals as outlined by the team. N.B.: Remember, in determining an appropriate education for a student with an IEP, goals must come first and placement then follows. As a result of this environmental analysis, the team will want to consider that it is not a particular deficit in the environment or curriculum as related to Adam’s disability. Rather, it is the student’s preference for a different environment, and the fact that he can probably do well in general education with a well developed accommodation plan that we should be considering following this assessment.*

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### Task 1: Comments on the politics of this situation

*DBW: We must proceed very carefully, considering what knowledge would help the team make a good decision. Understanding that no one person may determine educational placement, and that “earning general education” is not legally tenable are facts which must be communicated.*

### Task 2: Prepare your analysis describing: What is IN the environment or MISSING in the environment that needs changing to potentially remove or reduce the student’s need to use the problem behavior?

*DBW: Adam’s current class placement is in a more restrictive setting than his preferences and he does not have friendships in this environment. He has not yet had a comprehensive accommodation plan developed that would facilitate successful inclusion in general education for science and social studies and other subjects other than reading.*