



ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORTS

BEHAVIOR SUPPORT THROUGH CLASSROOM CHANGES IN TIME, SPACE, MATERIALS, AND INTERACTIONS

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Goal: Environmental supports include specifying how **time, space, material, and interactions** will support positive behaviors. Increased productivity and compliance with routines can be achieved and challenging escape and protest behaviors reduced by increasing tolerance for non-self selected activities through:

- Pacing of Activities
- Establishing Predictable Routines
- Creating Visual-Spatial Organization
- Using of Pictures/Objects/Word/Schedules
- Teaching/Structuring Participation in Activities
- Selecting and Organizing Materials Carefully
- Increasing an Understanding of Elapsed Time

Remarkable outcomes can be achieved when these strategies are coupled with pleasant verbal interactions and consistent body language portraying support and unconditional positive regard.

These supports must be modified to fit the developmental age of the student. This will require analysis of assessment findings to determine how the support should be utilized for this particular student. **Environmental supports** must also be coupled with other behavior support plan components not discussed in this article:

- Teaching of functionally equivalent behaviors for any challenging behavior
- Providing individualized reinforcement ranging from praise to privileges earned, to access to favorite activities to tangibles for:
 - complying with routine classroom expectations
 - utilizing replacement behavior for the challenging behavior
- Stipulating how to handle problem behavior when it emerges again
- Establishing communication with all stakeholders

Examples are given below for a variety of developmental ages. Remember, the younger the child, the more likely pictures and other non-verbal structures will be required. ¹For students with developmentally higher functioning, all concepts below apply and can be modified to fit the communication and cognitive skills of the individual student, with and without disabilities. These principles, with modification for the developmental level of each student as needed, results in a structured environment in which differentiated instruction can be delivered to a wide range of students at any grade level.

¹ For an excellent inexpensive video portraying these non-verbal supports, see:
http://www.asperger.net/bookstore_9902.htm, "Visual Supports in the Classroom" by Jennifer Savner.
Also see: http://www.teacch.com/teacch_e.htm

Predictable Routines Within a Classroom Structure

- **Open and close activities** with ritualized behavior—e.g., predictable reinforcing words that are said/actions that are taken/songs that are sung, etc. This especially enhances time comprehension, and eases transitions into and out of activities.
- **Structure common school routines in clear parts**—beginning, middle steps, ending---during circle time, leaving for lunch, snack, returning from lunch, lining up, etc.
- **Generalization of predictable routines**—assist family as needed in establishing routines/structuring for younger students. Getting ready for school, waiting for bus, after-school activities, returning on bus, snacks, dinner, homework, bedtime, bathing, etc. can be structured to support better rule-following behavior and adult consistency.

Visual-Spatial Organization for Stimulus Control

Clear visual communication can result in a student coming under stimulus control, e.g., when in a particular location, the environment “cues me.” I expect to be doing these behaviors, following these rules, under certain conditions I can read by a variety of visual cues.

- Define what activities will occur in different regions of the room by use of dividers, chair arrangements and with signs: pictures/words/symbols
- Teach (role-play) and post rules (pictures/words/symbols) for student behavior specific to each area
- If you have an especially small space, develop other visual cues which will change the “space” into a new scenario
 - Smocks/aprons put on for free time art activities (remaining at desk)
 - Move chairs to new arrangements, put up new “rules” for this chair arrangement
 - Move chair to other side of desk (one side is “work time,” one side is “play time”)
 - Auditory cue: Place a particular piece of background music on only when certain activities are to occur. (Do not use loud, distracting, “catchy tunes”, etc. Consider Bach, classical guitar, relaxation tapes)

Picture/Object/Word Schedules

Use schedules to organize the flow of activities throughout the school day. This helps students delay gratification for desired activities because they can anticipate when a preferred activity will occur within the schedule.

- **Use symbols in the daily schedule** (picture/object/word) with meaningful developmentally appropriate language for the student. Depict key activities and transitions within a time period that is consistent with the student’s developmental needs (e.g., 1/2 hour, hour, 1/2 day, full day).

- Example of a simple ½ day schedule using pictures on a Velcro board in a left-to-right sequence for developmentally younger students²: Arrive on Bus, Circle Time, Table Time, Ball Games, Mrs. Wright Reads, Computer Game, LUNCH. (Use terms that are meaningful to the student. For example, “Table time,” rather than “language arts” should be used if “language arts” is meaningless to the student.)
- Example of a Word List in a descending sequence paired with time parameters for developmentally older students:
 - ♦ 8:30-8:45 Beginning activities
 - ♦ 8:45-9:15 Reading Group Activities
 - ♦ 9:15-9:45 Centers
 - ♦ 9:45-10:05 Recess
 - ♦ 10:05-10:40 Reading Seatwork
- **Review schedule boards or individual paper word lists frequently** prior to transitioning to each new activity (do not skip this step if problem behavior has occurred during transitions. Waiting to review the schedule when the student has already transitioned does not ease transition.)
- **Employ “closure” as activities are completed** at the developmental level of the student. Examples of different levels of “closure”:
 - Student takes the picture to location in room where the next activity is located and puts the picture in a special envelope before beginning the activity OR, student places picture in finished envelope after completing the activity, prior to returning to the schedule area to check on next activity.
 - Student checks the schedule and then goes to the depicted activity leaving the picture on the sequence board. When returning to “check the schedule”, s/he moves the picture to the finished envelope.
 - Student checks the written sequence list of activities at his/her desk. After completing the activity, student crosses out the finished activity, gives herself/himself points towards earning a reinforcer on a self-monitoring sheet, then checks the next activity on his/her list.
 - Student moves the Post-It note from his/her personal sequenced list of activities s/he has made for the morning’s work.
- **Refer student to the schedule board/individual list frequently to answer questions** about “when I do computers; when does Mrs. Wright read to us, etc.” This teaches use of schedule as reference aid and can lead to student independently checking the schedule to solve problems.
- **Refer to the schedule to negotiate with student when s/he is protesting** an undesired activity. Often visual reminding of the sequence, putting the undesired activity in context, will secure compliance. Point to pictures/words, paired with verbal explanation as appropriate: “We just finished this, now we do this, THEN we do the activity you want!”

² For easily downloadable pictures, see <http://www.do2learn.org>

- **Introduce choice-making into the scheduling process**
 - Student assists in schedule production by selecting when a preferred activity will occur prior to beginning the sequence. Gestures, words, visually demonstrating by moving pictures: “Johnny, do you want to do XXX here, or here?”
 - Student assists in schedule production by selecting which of two or three activities might occur in the next spot in the sequence.

- **Handle sudden disruptions in routines using the schedule**
 - Insert a new picture/words/object to symbolize the sudden change in routine, e.g., when vision screening by the school nurse is suddenly required at 10:00 am.
 - Show the student the sequence again. “Now we are doing XXX, next we do YYY (the vision screening), then we do ZZZ (the return to expected routine).”

Teaching/Structuring Participation in Activities

- **Develop a material organization system** to use with a variety of tasks that clearly communicates the sequence of task completion. This often increases time on task and helps the student delay gratification. Examples:
 - Green/Yellow/Red tubs that the student completes in sequence (relating the tasks to a stop light can be helpful for developmentally young students)
 - Worksheets completed in sequence that are printed on paper of different shades of Green/Yellow/Red
 - Green/Yellow/Red circled sections of a worksheet that a student completes in sequence
 - Boxes, tubs, templates on desk for proper placement of materials
 - Post-it notes made by adult or the student showing parts of assignment, or series of assignments to be completed in sequence

- **Teach how to participate in the task**, using words, symbols, pictures on a task card or poster in the room.
 - Example of a task completion sequence:
 - ♦ First, get my next work folder
 - ♦ Look and decide: Do I need help?
 - ♦ Circle: 1. I can do alone 2. I need help
 - ♦ Do the work now—alone or with help
 - ♦ Put in finished folder
 - ♦ Give myself a point for good work on my card)

- **Teach what to do if the student needs “Time Away” or a “Fast-Break” from a task.**
 - Example of a teaching sequence using printed words (use symbols/pictures for developmentally younger students, eliminating the “point” keeping):
 - ♦ If I need a “fast-break” (or “time away”) I take my break card to the classroom fast-break (or time away) spot (a small area with minimal activity—perhaps one or two low interest magazines available. Do not allow high interest activities, such as a computer game).

- ♦ When I am finished with my fast break, I go back to my work folder.
 - ♦ I give myself a point for choosing a good coping strategy (teacher will reinforce through praise, privileges, etc. later).
 - ♦ I finish my task.
- **Teach how to participate in an activity with other students and how to handle difficulties** that may develop. Role-playing with feedback will be necessary. Then, use symbols/pictures/words at student's developmental level to prompt. Define and role-play different roles.
 - Example for center participation in a 2nd grade general education classroom (teacher emphasizes team-building and has taught decision making on teams and wants students to practice this skill)
 1. *Team Role Decisions*
 - ♦ Write your names on the center participation list (list specifies how many may participate).
 - ♦ *Rule-reminder*: person who reviews center rules, passes out materials, says, "Begin," and sets the timer
 - ♦ *Activity finisher*: person who collects all materials after s/he says, "Clean Up Time" after the timer goes off
 - ♦ *Problem-helper*: person who helps the team solve any problems
 2. *Do the Center Activity*
 - ♦ Follow the center's rule on how to do the activity that is depicted on the specific center (which was role-played when the new center was introduced for the first time).
 3. *Appropriate Talking*
 - ♦ Use inside-voices and remember, "Your talk should help you and not interfere with your classmates work!"
 4. *Solve Problems*
 - ♦ The "problem-helper" will tell the team what to do to complete the center if s/he sees a problem. The "problem-helper" will consult with the "rule-reminder" if needed to understand the center rules and help the center team. The problem-helper will ask the teacher if s/he can't solve the problem.
 5. *Team Points*
 - ♦ After clean up, the team gives themselves points by consensus (2 minutes).
 - **Participation (0-1-2)**
 - 0= not everyone participated
 - 1= everyone participated, but some of us got off task and didn't immediately get back on task when reminded
 - 2= everyone participated, no reminders needed

- **Completion (0-1-2)**
 - 0= no one finished the task
 - 1= most of us finished
 - 2= all of us finished
- **Problem-solving (0-1-2)**
 - 0= we couldn't solve a problem that developed
 - 1= we had a problem, but we solved it!
 - 2= we didn't have any problem behavior; we all supported each other!

Teach/Support Appropriate Waiting and Transitioning

Students can become confused and challenging behavior can emerge when high structure is not in place. Structure what is often unstructured!

- **Provide “wait time” supports**
 - Example: Assign a peer-supporter. Both students are responsible for assuring each waits appropriately. Consider giving the dyad points towards a reinforcer. Teach responsible waiting:
 - ♦ Hands and feet to self
 - ♦ Talk using inside-voice with your partner
 - ♦ Stay in the space assigned
 - ♦ Help each other follow the three wait-rules
 - Example: Provide an object to hold or use during a “wait” such as a book to look at, headphones to listen to music, etc.
- **Structure transitions in four parts (remember to role play appropriate behavior)**
 - Give four clear signals to the students:
 - 1.) Warn the ending of an activity, e.g.:
 - ♦ “2 minutes to finish” verbal warning
 - ♦ Yellow card placed on student’s desk
 - ♦ One click from a metal toy frog/one sound from a timer
 - 2.) Signal the time to transition, e.g.:
 - ♦ “2 minutes to quietly move to your next area, ready begin”
 - ♦ Student is handed a transitional object to take to next area (toy dinosaur, teacher’s briefcase, tub of materials)
 - ♦ Two clicks from a metal toy frog/two sounds in sequence from a timer

- 3.) Continue to remind: “We are transitioning!”
 - ♦ “We are transitioning, we are transitioning,..” repeated slowly and with low tone
 - ♦ “Thank you for moving quietly, thank you for moving quietly” repeated slowly and with low tone
 - ♦ Classical music is turned on to signal entire transition period

- 4.) Completely signal the end of the transition
 - ♦ Stop sign is held up.
 - ♦ Classical music is turned off.
 - ♦ “Show me you are ready: ‘eyes, ears, feet, hands, mind’.” Cue using these words slowly in a 1-5 sequence, with accompanying gestures:
 1. “My eyes are looking.” (touching eyes, students follow)
 2. “My ears are listening.” (touching ears, students follow)
 3. “My feet are quiet.” (touch feet, or simply demonstrate feet together, on the floor)
 4. “My hands are ready.” (folded on top of desk or palms down on desk)
 5. “My mind is ready.” (demonstrate looking, listening, sitting up slightly in the chair)

Interactions: Convey Unconditional Positive Regard

- **Get on eye level and use the student’s name** when correcting, praising, and directing, using a calm, low voice. Don’t rush or use shrill voice tones to deliver corrections.
- **Use specific private praise** for real achievements.
- **Know the student’s life, and reference** family, friends, pets, and favorite activities when you can to convey your mentoring of each and every student. “Boys and girls, we are going to read a story about wolves. One of the wolves reminds me of Stephen’s Basset Hound. Stephen, let me know if I’m right.”
- **Use the specific words, gestures, and actions that have been proven to “connect” with this specific student in the past.** Be aware of the reinforcing qualities of touch and use the level that works for this particular student (a pat on the back/shoulder, touching a hand or arm gently). Ask the student what s/he prefers to be called. Find out the words s/he prefers to be told when work is sub-standard, when s/he is not following rules, etc. Student’s responses to this query are enlightening!
- **Let this student “eavesdrop” on you** praising a specific accomplishment or your pleasure in their company to a fellow teacher.
- **Share yourself, genuinely, but maintain developmental appropriateness.** By knowing each other’s lives, human beings connect, regardless of age and role differences. Third grade classroom example: “I went to the circus and really loved it; has anyone ever been?” Do not say, “I have a real problem with my uncle’s drinking I want to tell you about.”