Critical Components for a Classroom Containing a Student with a Behavior Disorder

An Assessment Checklist

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How to Use this Checklist

The following checklist may be used to assess both general education classrooms and special education classrooms containing one or more students with a behavior disorder.

Administrators may use this checklist to assess to what extent a classroom exhibits the traits necessary for all children in the room to be successful. Teachers may use the checklist to self-assess whether they are doing all they can to help all their students—those who have a behavior disorder and those who don't—be as successful as possible.

This document is set up as a checklist—either you feel you're doing well enough on a particular item to check it, or you don't. If you want to add some more nuance to this assessment, you can easily turn it into a rubric by giving a score of 1-4 on each item (1 = unsatisfactory; 2 = needs improvement; 3 = satisfactory; 4 = exceeds expectations).

Adult Behavior

All the items in this section apply to how the adults in the room interact with *all* students. Positive relationships between the adults in the room and students creates an expectation that, "No matter what happens, I like you, and we will work it out." This, by itself, can reduce the number of behavior problems that occur.

That said, behavior issues *will* happen from time to time. The most important element is how the adult behaves in these situations. No matter how out of control a student gets, the adult must stay calm and in control and not get "sucked into" the student's behavior.

A neutral, detached tone of voice delivered evenly and at normal volume can often help keep the student from escalating the situation. Also, non-confrontational body language (keeping some distance, facing the student at an angle and not making direct eye contact, arms by your side, palms up, etc.) can help keep the situation from getting worse.

Class-Wide Behavioral Supports

This section of the checklist is designed to assess whether a consistent system of expectations and consequences is clearly communicated to students and consistently employed by the teacher.

Whatever system the teacher employs (whether it's a voice control chart, behavior chart, list of expectations, etc.), it's important that the expected behaviors are communicated *visually*. But just posting the system isn't enough. It's also crucial that teachers *teach* (model and have students practice) the expected behaviors, no matter the grade level of the students. And, of course, it's not enough to simply establish this all at the beginning of the school year and then forget it; teachers must *use* the system daily, collect data, and document how students are progressing with their behavior.

In addition, if an occupational therapist has recommended use of tools such as wiggle cushions, therabands, etc., for specific students in the class, the teacher needs to make sure that those tools are being used when and as recommended.

Finally, *all* students (no matter the grade level) can benefit from frequent breaks that incorporate movement and, if possible, walks outside the classroom. This practice is often even more beneficial for students with a behavior disorder.

Classroom Organization

The organization of a classroom can go a long way toward providing the necessary structure for students to feel psychologically safe. Students with a behavior disorder, especially, benefit from knowing what to expect in any situation and knowing what's coming up next.

The three main elements of classroom organization are the room arrangement, the class schedule, and individual work systems.

1. Room Arrangement

The traditional classroom set-up of desks in rows is challenging for students with a behavior disorder, as there's a lack of environmental cues to tell students what needs to be done, when, and where. Thus, it's important to structure the classroom into a number of discrete work areas so students know what's expected of them when they are in each area (for example, "This is the place where I do independent work" or "This is the place I'm expected to participate in group discussions").

When designing the classroom, it's also an excellent idea to designate an area as the "chill zone" or "cool off spot"—a place a student can go to calm down when they're about to lose control. Having such a spot can often deescalate situations so punitive consequences don't have to be employed.

In addition to teaching students what they're expected to do in each area of the room, teachers also need to teach students how to get out, use, organize, and put back in place all materials that are housed in each area.

2. Schedule

The second aspect of classroom organization is the classroom schedule. This schedule must be created daily and posted where everyone can see it. The schedule could be a picture schedule (more common in elementary grades) or a written schedule (more common in high school), or a combination of the two.

In addition, some students might need individual schedules—if they have to go to counseling, for example, or if they're going to their resource class or occupational therapy, or if they're going to be leaving early that day.

Classroom schedules need to be gone over daily to provide predictability, structure, and routine. *All* students need this structure, but especially students with cognitive disabilities or behavioral issues.

3. Individual Work Systems

The final aspect of classroom organization involves students' individual work systems. The work system is a more detailed breakdown of their individual schedules.

If the schedule says, "Reading," the work system might say, "I'm going to read my book in the book corner, then I'm going to write about my book in the writing station, then I'm going to do some research for my project on the computer."

The individual work system tells the student *what* to do, *when*, and *where*.

Instruction

The teacher should obviously have daily lesson plans, and instruction should be meaningful, motivating, and linked to *all* students' interests.

In addition, for students with IEPs, those goals and expectations should be linked to the daily lesson plans.

For students with a behavioral disorder, the last item in this category is especially important. Many students with behavior disorders have a history of poor performance on

paper/pencil tasks and tests, which is why they often act out during these tasks. Many of these students are more successful when they are engaged with hands-on tasks or when doing projects using technology and the Internet.

Student Behavior

This category is intentionally listed last because, if all the items in the categories listed above are in place and working well, the teacher will have fewer problems with student behavior. That being said, issues with student behavior will inevitably arise.

When a behavioral issue does occur, the first thing a teacher needs to do is to identify the "function of the behavior"—that is, *why* is the student acting this way? Are they doing it to get attention? To escape or avoid some situation? To get revenge on someone? To gain something tangible (a power play)?

Once the teacher determines the reason (function) for the behavior, they should take appropriate action. This includes thinking through the antecedents of the behavior (what led up to this?), the behavior itself (and the function of that behavior), and the appropriate consequences.

The two main categories of consequences are (1) punitive and (2) instructional.

Delivering appropriate instructional consequences involves sitting down with the student at an appropriate time (when they're calm) and going over the behavior (maybe using a Power Card, a T-chart, etc.). The teacher must ask himself, "What consequences does it make sense to use here? What does the student need to learn (and what do I need to teach) to keep this from happening again in the future?"

Instructional consequences are always preferable to punitive consequences. That said, there are times when a punitive consequence (sending the student to detention, to the principal's office, or home) must be applied first when the student presents a danger to themselves or others. But this is a last resort.

If the teacher must apply a punitive consequence, this doesn't mean that instructional consequences no longer apply. Once the student returns and is set to be reintegrated into the classroom, the teacher still needs to sit down with the student for a post-vention meeting to discuss instructional consequences.

Checklist of Critical Components for a Classroom with One or More Students with a Behavior Disorder

Adult Behavior:

- ☐ The #1 Ingredient: The teacher has positive relationships with students
- ☐ The adult controls him- or herself, not the student (i.e., monitors his/her own reaction, demonstrates “rational detachment”)
- ☐ The adult’s tone, volume, and cadence indicate respect and project dignity
  - Tone: Try to avoid inflections of impatience, condescension, inattention, etc.
  - Volume: Keep the volume appropriate for distance and situation
  - Cadence: Deliver your message with an even cadence or rhythm
- ☐ Be aware of your own body language: 85-90% of body language projects true feelings

Class-Wide Positive Behavioral Supports (Environmental and Emotional):

- ☐ Clear visual behavior goals and classroom procedures are posted and taught
- ☐ Sequential consequences for misbehaviors are communicated—including strategies for prevention, intervention, and consequences
- ☐ There is evidence of close daily monitoring and data collection and documentation of progress
- ☐ Sensory needs are recognized and met using sensory diet and/or tools such as wiggle cushions, therabands, deep pressure, joint compression, etc. (based on recommendations from occupational therapist)
- ☐ There are frequent structures breaks and walks and time for movement through physical games

Classroom Organization:

1. Room Arrangement

- ☐ Classroom furniture is arranged to clearly define work areas
- ☐ Defined areas exist for individual and group instruction
- ☐ The room is arranged for students to assume responsibility for class materials
- ☐ A “chill” or break area is clearly defined

2. Schedule

☐ A classroom schedule is developed and posted for the school day
☐ Individual schedules for children are developed and posted
☐ Evidence exists that both types of schedules are used daily

3. Individual Work Systems

☐ Work systems are developed and are in use for each student
☐ Time is allotted in the daily schedule for work systems to be used in 1:1, independent, and group settings

Instruction:

☐ Daily lesson plans exist
☐ Instruction is meaningful, motivating, and linked to students' interests
☐ Lesson plans correlate with IEP goals and objectives and grade level expectations
☐ The teacher can link each student's IEP objectives to daily lesson plans
☐ Technology and hands-on learning are emphasized over paper and pencil tasks

Student Behavior:

☐ The teacher identifies the function of the behavior (*why* the student is acting this way): to get attention, escape/avoidance, to get revenge, or to gain power
☐ Once the teacher has identified the function of behavior, he or she reviews the antecedents of the behavior and the behavior itself and decides on the appropriate consequences