Module 6 – Looking for the "Why"

James 1:19 reminds us, "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry" (*Holy Bible, New International Version*).

Behavior always makes sense if you know what to ask. In our classrooms, may we pause long enough to ask the right questions, listen to the answers, and learn to recognize the "why" that shapes our students' actions (Author's personal reflection).

JONAH: A Positive Behavior Strategy

The JONAH framework continues to guide our work, reminding us that growth happens through **Just Opportunities**, **New Actions**, and **Hope**. These principles, rooted in grace and accountability, call us to see every learner as capable of change when given the right support.

- **Just Opportunities** = Creating fair and supportive conditions for learning, where accountability and second chances build trust.
- **New Actions** = Teaching and practicing positive behaviors that replace old patterns through structure, modeling, and encouragement.
- **Hope** = Believing in the capacity of every student, and every teacher, to grow through grace, perseverance, and community.

In Module 5, we explored how teachers can shape behavior through **New Actions**, including modeling positive communication, offering structured choices, and developing systems that help students build self-regulation and independence.

Module 6 marks our transition into the **Hope** portion of the JONAH strategy and into the more intensive supports found at Tier 3. In this framework, Hope reflects the idea of Biblical Hope, a hope that goes deeper than simple optimism or positive thinking. Biblical Hope is the belief that God is at work even in the hard places, redeeming what is broken and guiding growth. It does not ignore challenges or past difficulties; instead, it looks at

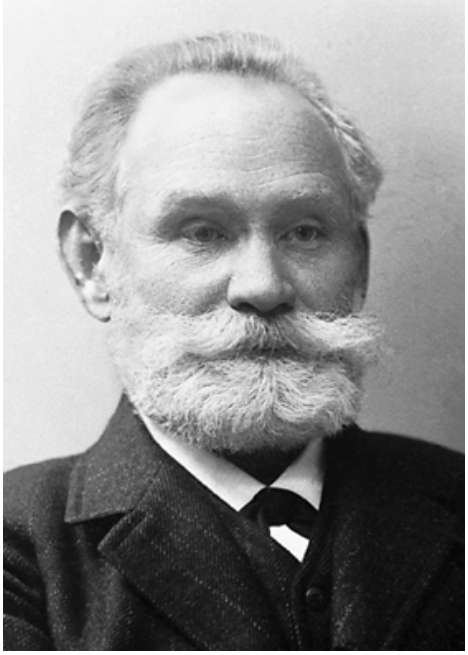
them honestly while still trusting that change is possible. This kind of hope encourages teachers to be patient, steady, and committed to supporting their students, even when the journey feels messy.

In that spirit, Module 6 invites educators to look beneath challenging behavior and seek understanding, an essential shift for effective Tier 3 support. When we choose to ask why the behavior is happening and seek to identify the need, emotion, or barrier it might be communicating, teachers shift from reacting to surface actions to responding with compassion, clarity, and purpose. This makes seeking to understand the "why" behind behavior an act of hope. It communicates to students, "I see you. I believe you can grow. I am here to walk with you."

To facilitate this work, Module 6 introduces practical tools such as ABC data collection, structured observations, and reflective practices that help uncover behavior patterns, environmental triggers, and unmet needs. With these insights, teachers are better equipped to design intensive, individualized supports that guide students toward healthier and more adaptive ways of meeting their needs.

Understanding the "Why" Behind Student Behavior

When a student struggles with behavior, it's essential to look beyond the "what" of the behavior and seek to determine the "why" behind it. Taking time to explore the reasons behind a student's actions strengthens the teacher–student relationship, builds empathy, and, most importantly, lays the groundwork for meaningful support. With this understanding, educators can begin to recognize triggers and teach appropriate replacement behaviors that address the underlying root cause rather than simply managing the surface appearance of the behavior. Without this awareness, consequences often fall short, leading to repeated misbehavior or even escalation of the behavior over time. In short, discovering the why helps teachers move from simply reacting to the behavior in order to contain it, to responding to the behavior with insight, compassion, and the goal of helping the student learn **New Actions** as a better way to get their needs met.

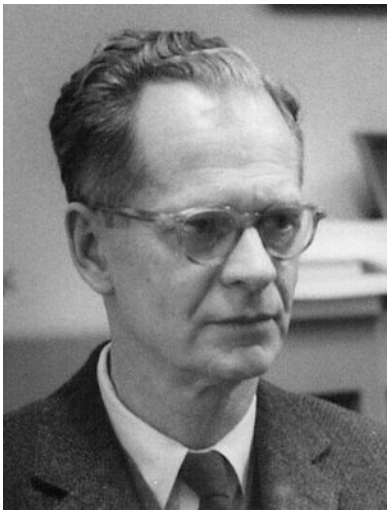


Ivan Pavlov researched classical conditioning.
Image: *Ivan Pavlov*. (1904). Official Nobel Prize photo. (Public Domain)

The scientific study of behavior began in the early 20th century, when researchers started asking the question, “Why do people and animals act the way they do?” Ivan Pavlov was one of the first to explore this. His research on **classical conditioning** demonstrated that learning happens when the brain builds an association between two events that occur close together in time. This is true for both people and animals. For example, just as Pavlov’s dogs learned to salivate when they heard a bell, people can also form learned associations with environmental events and these associations can then affect behavior. A classroom example of this phenomenon can be seen in the child who has been repeatedly criticized during math activities in the past and now starts to feel nervous as soon as the teacher begins passing out a math worksheet. A more positive example is the kindergarten student whose teacher always plays a specific song before story time. The song has become associated with the pleasant routine that typically follows it and now the student begins to smile the moment the music starts.

John B. Watson studied human behavior by documenting observable actions.
Image: Prasad, P. (2018, February 5). *John B Watson*. Wikimedia. (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Building on Pavlov's work, John B. Watson moved the study of human behavior forward by looking closely at what can be learned from observable actions, the things learners actually do. He argued that to truly understand behavior, we must begin with what we can see rather than with assumptions about the thoughts or feelings behind it. In the classroom, this might look like noting that one student repeatedly gets up to sharpen a pencil, asks to use the bathroom, or stares at the ceiling when it's time to begin a writing assignment and that another student often crumples their paper or puts their head down when a multi-step math problem is introduced. In both cases, the focus is simply on recording the behaviors that are visible, without trying to guess what the student is thinking or feeling. By emphasizing observable and measurable behavior, Watson laid important groundwork for future researchers and educators who continued to explore how and why students behave the way they do.



B. F. Skinner studied operant condition and the consequences of behavior.
Silly Rabbit & FMSky. (2023, June 20). *B. F. Skinner at Harvard, circa 1950*. Wikimedia Commons. (CC BY 3.0)

B.F. Skinner built on this earlier work in the 1930s and 1940s through his research on **operant conditioning**. He showed that what happens *after* a behavior, its consequences, plays a major role in whether that behavior is likely to happen again. Through experiments with animals and later with people, Skinner demonstrated that even small changes in the environment following a behavior can reliably influence how often that behavior is repeated in the future. For educators, this means that simple, everyday responses such as offering praise or giving criticism can shape how students learn and behave, especially when those responses happen right after the behavior occurs. Skinner's work provided the foundation for applied behavior analysis (ABA), a field that uses these principles to help students learn new skills, reduce problem behaviors, and experience success at school and in daily life.

As a result of Skinner's success in showing that consequences can shape behavior, educators and practitioners in the 1970s began adapting his ideas for use in schools, hospitals, and other settings. Their approach, known as behavior modification, focused mainly on changing behavior through the use of rewards and punishments. While this method could produce quick results, it could also be taken to extremes and often overlooked the deeper reasons, the "why," behind a person's actions. In some environments, this lack of understanding led to practices that were more controlling than caring. Over time, researchers and practitioners recognized that to truly help learners grow, they needed to understand the purpose or function of the behavior. This realization opened the door to more compassionate, effective approaches, ultimately leading to the positive behavior support and behavior assessment strategies widely used in classrooms today.

With the field evolving beyond simple reward-and-punishment systems and the emphasis shifting toward considering the purpose of the behavior, educators and behavior

specialists began to look more deeply into improving strategies for identifying the why behind the behavior. This led to the development of the **Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)**, a process grounded in the belief that all behavior happens for a reason. Instead of seeing behavior as random or simply defiant, FBAs are conducted from the viewpoint that behavior is the way in which a person responds to their environment and might be how they seek to overcome a problem in their environment. By understanding what the behavior accomplishes for the student, teachers can help the student learn to meet that need in a more appropriate and effective way.

B. A. Iwata's research focused on functional behavior analysis.
Image: Virués Ortega, J. (2023, October 9). *B. A. Iwata*. Wikimedia.(CC BY-SA 4.0)

The foundation of functional behavior assessment rests on two key ideas: behavior is communication and behavior meets a need. In one of the earliest and most influential studies, Dr. Brian Iwata and his research team (1982) demonstrated that instead of relying on contrived rewards and punishments to stop challenging behavior, practitioners could help individuals by teaching them other ways to get that same need met. At the same time, they could also reduce the payoff for the target behavior, thereby making the alternative way more effective at meeting the function of the behavior for the individual. This approach allowed behavior to be understood more objectively and compassionately.

Iwata's team identified four common functions of behavior:

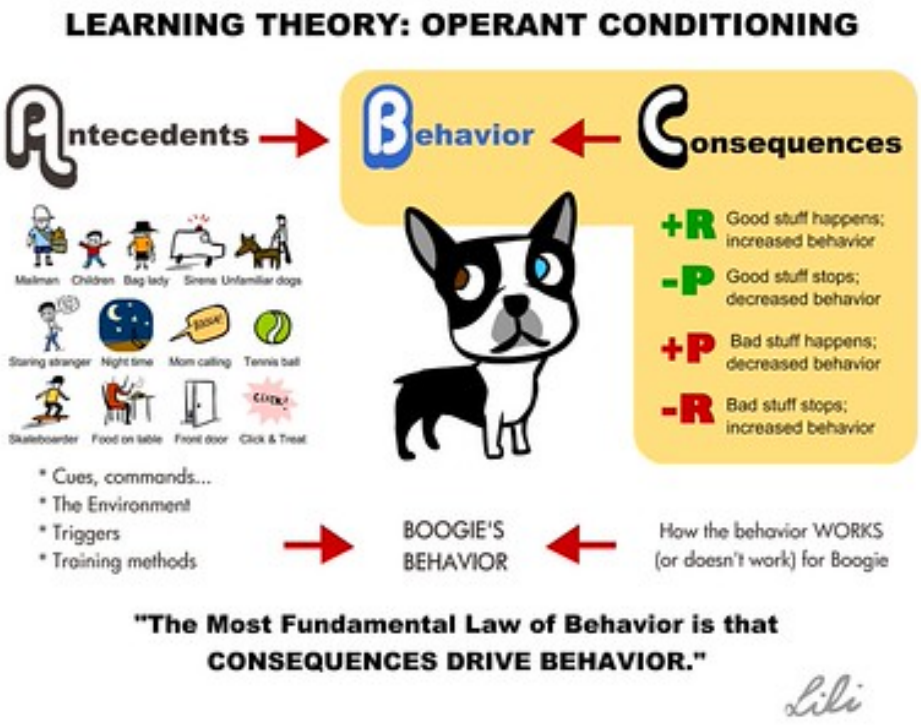
- Access to tangibles such as a preferred object or activity.
- Escape or avoidance of something unpleasant or nonpreferred.
- Attention-seeking, or an attempt to connect with another person.
- Automatic or sensory reinforcement, where the behavior itself provides internal pleasure, relief, or stimulation.

While functional behavior assessments (FBAs) can provide powerful insight, traditional FBA models also have limitations. They can be difficult to apply when behaviors occur very frequently, across many different settings, or occur so rarely that the behavioral patterns are hard to detect. In addition, while FBAs are designed to identify one function for a behavior, many behaviors are multiply maintained, meaning they serve more than one function at a time. For instance, a student might act out both to escape from a difficult assignment *and* to gain access to a preferred activity like computer time. Recognizing this complexity is essential for developing effective, compassionate interventions that truly address student needs rather than just suppressing behavior. (Bowler, 2022; Cooper et al., 2020; Crone et al., 2004; Iwata et al., 1982; Minahan & Rappaport, 2018)

From Theory to Practice: Understanding Behavior in the Classroom

While formal functional behavior assessments (FBAs) are typically completed by trained specialists, teachers play an essential role in the early stages of understanding student behavior. Everyday experiences in the classroom offer teachers opportunities to notice patterns, ask questions, and gather insight into what might be the "why" behind a student's actions. This process, sometimes referred to as an informal functional behavioral assessment, can help teachers make informed decisions before behavior becomes severe or habitual.

The goal of an informal FBA is not to label the student, but to simply observe the data patterns with curiosity and compassion. Teachers can begin by identifying what happens before and after the behavior of concern. What seem to be the triggers that occur right before the behavior and what are the outcomes for the student that occur right after the behavior? For example, what was the task the student was presented with and the tone of voice in which it was presented immediately before the behavior occurred? What changed for the student right after the behavior occurred? Perhaps the student got to escape the task, gained attention from the teacher or from peers, or achieved access to something preferred. Over time, these patterns will help reveal the possible function of the behavior and suggest where to begin providing support.



Please recognize that children are not animals. However, many of the same principals of operant conditioning apply. This chart clearly illustrates the ABC observation framework.
Chin, L. (2011, February 2). *Learning theory: Operant conditioning.* Flickr. (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

One of the simplest and most effective tools for identifying these behavior patterns is the **ABC observation framework**. The ABC observation framework helps teachers see behavior not as an isolated event but as one part of a larger sequence that unfolds within a specific context. ABC stands for **Antecedent, Behavior, and Consequence:**

- **Antecedent** – What happens right before the behavior? This might include a teacher's instruction, a transition, an interaction with a peer, or even an internal event like the feeling of frustration or fatigue.
- **Behavior** – What exactly did the student do? Describe the observable action without judgment or interpretation. For example, "put head down on desk" or "walked out of the classroom."
- **Consequence** – What happened right after the behavior? What changes have occurred in the environment? How did adults and peers respond? Did the student avoid a task, receive attention, or gain access to something preferred?

Recording even a few examples throughout the day or week can help teachers spot meaningful behavior patterns. For example, if a student regularly leaves the room as soon as independent work begins, the antecedent might be being asked to complete a difficult or lengthy task, and the consequence might be getting a break from that work. This pattern

suggests that the function of the behavior may be to escape from a nonpreferred activity. Similarly, if a student frequently calls out answers during group instruction, the antecedent might be the teacher asking a question, and the consequence might be laughter or attention from peers. In this situation, the function is likely attention-seeking. Using a data-collection method such as the ABC observation framework can help make patterns like these easier to see, understand, and address.

🐟 Example: Sample ABC Observation Data

Date/ Time	**Setting/Activity**	**Antecedent (What happened right before?)**	**Behavior (What the student did)**	**Consequence (What happened right after?)**	**Possible Function(s)**
10/15, 9:20 AM	Math independent work	Teacher gave an instruction: "Complete the next five problems on your own."	Student put head down on desk and did not begin work.	Teacher approached and offered help; student talked with teacher for several minutes and avoided starting the assignment.	Escape/avoidance of difficult task and access to adult attention
10/15, 1:05 PM	Transition from recess to classroom	Bell rang and teacher asked class to line up quietly.	Student stayed on the playground and ran in circles instead of lining up.	Teacher gave a verbal reminder; student remained on playground. Eventually the principal came out, talked to student, and then took the student's hand to walk to the door.	Escape/avoidance of transition and continued access to preferred activity (play), gained access to adult attention.

10/16, 10:30 AM	Reading small group	Peer made comment: "You read that word wrong."	Student shouted, "No, I didn't!" and pushed the book off the table."	Group stopped; teacher intervened, spent time calming the student and then sent the student to take a break in the calm corner.	Escape from social embarrassment and a difficult task; gained attention from teacher

Interpretation: *Across these observations, the student's behaviors (putting head down, refusing to transition, shouting) tend to occur when a demand is placed or peer criticism happens. The most consistent consequences are escape from the task or situation and increased adult attention, suggesting that the behavior is primarily functioning to avoid difficult or uncomfortable tasks and to gain one-on-one support.*

ABC observation is not about catching students "being bad"; it's about noticing the pattern to the behavior and trying to identify what the behavior may be communicating. Once practitioners understand what the behavior is achieving for the student, they can design supports that allow the student to meet that same need in a more appropriate way, such as offering breaks proactively, adjusting the difficulty of a task, or building in positive attention.

Teachers can begin the data collection process by simply jotting quick comments on sticky notes as an informal running record or by gathering input from staff during team meetings. These initial insights can help identify the most useful times to conduct more formal observations using structured tools such as the ABC observation framework. Even brief observations scheduled during the most challenging parts of a student's day can reveal meaningful patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. Teachers may also find it helpful to talk with the student directly to better understand the context surrounding the behavior. Many tools and methods for data collection exist and the best choice for the situation will depend on the nature of the target behavior and the staff resources available. Although completing observations requires time, identifying patterns based on data is essential for developing interventions that are both effective and supportive. (Bowler, 2022; Cooper et al., 2020; Crone et al., 2004; Iwata et al., 1982; Minahan & Rappaport, 2018; Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, 2018).

Want to learn more about ABC? Start with p. 101 in the handbook from Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (2019).

Data Collection Methods

Understanding why behavior happens starts with careful observation and thoughtful data collection. Good data helps teachers move beyond guesswork and begin to recognize patterns that show when the behavior occurs, where it occurs, and what might be influencing it. There are many ways to gather this information, and each method offers a different window into student behavior. ABC data helps identify the context and possible function of a behavior, while frequency or event recording shows how often the behavior happens. Duration and latency recording help teachers see how long a behavior lasts or how quickly it begins after a request. Interval recording and rating scales offer snapshots of behavior over time, and permanent product measures, like completed assignments, capture the outcomes of behavior. Teachers can also use student self-monitoring tools to help learners track their own behavior, building responsibility and awareness. More informal methods, such as **anecdotal notes**, can also be used to document behavior incidents in real time. When used together, these tools help educators view behavior more objectively, recognize meaningful trends, and design supports that truly meet students' needs.

ABC Data in the Classroom

Collecting ABC data does not need to be complicated or time-consuming. The goal is to look for *patterns*, not perfection. It is best to begin by choosing one student and one behavior and then record data over several days. ABC data does not necessarily need to be collected across the entire day, unless the target behavior generally occurs across the entire day. Focus on the times of day and the settings in which the behavior seems most likely to occur. Even short observation periods, when consistently implemented, can reveal meaningful trends.

- Focus on one behavior at a time: Start with a behavior that is specific, observable, and measurable. This means that instances of the behavior can be clearly described and counted, such as "calls out without raising hand" or "leaves seat without permission." Avoid broad terms like "disruptive" or "disrespectful," which can mean different things to different people.
- Use simple tools: Paper and a clipboard, sticky notes, or a digital form can all work. Record what happened *right before* the behavior (the **antecedent**), what the student *did* (the behavior), and what happened *right after* (the consequence). The key here is consistency so that details are recorded in a similar way each time.

- Watch for context and patterns: After several days, review the data to identify when and where the behavior happens most often. Does it occur during certain subjects, times of day, or with particular people? Patterns often point directly to triggers or unmet needs. Identifying times when the behavior does *not* occur also provides valuable information.
- Combine observation with conversation: Talk to the student in a calm, supportive way to hear their perspective. Sometimes, simple questions like, "What's hardest about this time of day?" or "What would make this part of your day easier?" reveals insights that data alone can't show.
- Share and reflect as a team: Collaborate with paraeducators, co-teachers, and support staff. When multiple adults talk together about what they've noticed, whether through informal notes or formal observations, their shared insights help create a more complete picture of the student and support more effective planning.

ABC data provides a structured, objective way to see the story behind the behavior. When paired with empathy, collaboration, and thoughtful reflection, these observations form the foundation for effective Tier 2 and Tier 3 behavior supports that address both the *what* and the *why* of student behavior.

Want to learn more about ABC? Start with p. 101 in the handbook from Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (2019).

🐟 ABC Observation Data Form

Date/Time	Setting/Activity	Antecedent (What happened right before?)	Behavior (What the student did)	Consequence (What happened right after?)	Possible Function

Instructions for Use:

1. Observe the student during typical routines and record several examples of the target behavior and the context in which it occurs.
2. Describe what occurred objectively. Write what you *see* and *hear*, not what you think or feel.
   Example: "Student threw pencil across table" instead of "Student was angry."

3. After several observations, use the contextual information to identify patterns such as where and when the behavior occurs as well as what tends to trigger it (antecedents), and what typically happens afterward (consequences).
4. Use your findings to hypothesize the function of the behavior (e.g., escape, attention, tangible, or sensory).

Tracking Behavior: How Often, How Long, and How Quickly

Some behaviors are easier to understand when we track how often they happen, how long they last, or how long it takes a student to respond after a directive is given. These types of data, known as frequency, duration, and latency recording, help teachers notice patterns that are not always obvious in the moment. For example, a student might only call out a few times a day (**frequency**) but may stay off task for long periods during independent work (**duration**) or take several minutes to get started after the teacher gives a directive (**latency**). Each type of measurement gives teachers a different lens for understanding what's happening, where support is needed, and whether interventions are helping over time.

How Often? Frequency or Event Recording

- What it is: Counting how many times a specific behavior occurs.
- Best for: Behaviors with a clear beginning and end (e.g., calling out, leaving seat, raising hand).
- Example: "Student got out of seat 7 times during a 30-minute lesson."

Using frequency recording, a teacher might count the number of times that a student raises their hand during a lesson.
Image: Podrez, A. (2021, May 27). *Boy raising his hand*. Pexels.com. (CC free to use)

🐟 Case Study: Frequency Recording: Calling Out During Group Instruction

Ms. Johnson notices that Liam frequently calls out answers without raising his hand during whole-group lessons, especially in math and science. It happens often enough that it disrupts learning. To better understand the severity of the problem and whether it varies by subject, she decides to track how many times he calls out during the first 20 minutes of a lesson at different times of the day.

Representative Sample from the Frequency Data Table:

Date	Subject / Activity	Duration of Observation	Number of Callouts (Frequency)	Notes
9/12	Math Lesson	20 min	7	Most call-outs occurred during whole class practice with multi-step problems
9/13	Math Lesson	20 min	3	Whole group reminder of hand raising expectations at beginning of the lesson
9/14	Science Discussion	20 min	2	Raised hand more after teacher praised hand-raising from other students.
9/15	Math Lesson	20 min	6	Call-outs increased during check-for-understanding activity over new content.

Interpretation: *Ms. Johnson notices that callouts are highest during math instruction, especially when the material is new or difficult. This information helps guide her as she develops instructional and behavioral supports.*

How Long? Duration Recording

- What it is: Measuring how long a behavior lasts from start to finish.
- Best for: Behaviors that vary in length, such as tantrums, amount of time on-task (e.g., reading quietly), or amount of time off-task (e.g., out of seat).

Example: “Student worked on the math worksheet continuously for 12 minutes before turning to talk to a peer.”

Duration recording is used to track the time a student spends off-task.
Image: RDNE Stock Project. (2021, June 26). *A bored student sitting looking afar*. Pexels.com. (CC free to use)

🐟 Case Study: Duration Recording: Off-Task Behavior During Independent Work

During independent writing time, Ava often spends long stretches of time staring out the window, drawing instead of writing, or quietly wandering around the room. To better understand the extent of the problem, her teacher tracks how much time Ava is off task during several 30-minute writing blocks.

Representative Duration Data Table:

Date	Task / Setting	Total Work Time	Total Minutes Off Task	% of Time Off Task	Notes
10/3	Writing	30 min	14 min	47%	Wandering & drawing
10/4	Writing	30 min	10 min	33%	Off-task mostly at the beginning
10/5	Writing	30 min	18 min	60%	Needed repeated prompts
10/6	Writing	30 min	8 min	27%	Teacher provided a graphic organizer

Interpretation: *The percentages show that Ava is off task almost half of the time. The teacher sees she struggles most at the beginning of writing and that providing supports like graphic organizers helps reduce time off task.*

How Quickly? Latency Recording

- What it is: Recording the time between a directive and the start of the behavior.
- Best for: Understanding how quickly a student responds to instructions or requests.
- Example: "After being directed to begin the assignment, it took 45 seconds for the student to begin work."

🐟 Latency Recording Case Study: Delayed Start After Directions

Mr. Green notices that when the class is given instructions to begin a task, Mason generally doesn't begin the task until several minutes later. Mr. Green decides to track how much time passes between giving a directive ("Begin your math warm-up activities") and Mason starting the task.

Representative Latency Data Table:

Date	Teacher Directive	Time Directive Given	Time Student Started	Latency (Delay in Seconds/Minutes)	Notes
11/2	Start warm-up	8:32 a.m.	8:35 a.m.	3 min 00 sec	Sorted materials for a long time
11/3	Start warm-up	8:30 a.m.	8:32 a.m.	2 min 15 sec	Appeared tired, stared out the window
11/4	Start warm-up	8:31 a.m.	8:37 a.m.	6 min 00 sec	Said he "didn't understand" but didn't ask for help
11/5	Start warm-up	8:30 a.m.	8:31 a.m.	1 min 10 sec	Teacher gave Mason a checklist of the required activities beforehand

Interpretation: *Mr. Green notes that when he added a checklist, Mason began significantly sooner. He decides to try a few other support methods, such as having students complete the first warm-up activity with a partner, to see if they are equally effective.*

Estimating Behavior: Rating Scales and Intervals

When a behavior happens too often or too quickly to count easily, teachers can use **rating scales** or **interval recording** to capture patterns over time. These tools don't require tracking every instance. Instead, they help estimate how consistently or intensely a behavior occurs within a set period. For example, a teacher might use a simple 1–5 scale to rate the intensity of a behavior each time it's observed, or the teacher might use interval recording to note whether the behavior occurred at specific moments. Interval methods can take different forms: whole-interval recording (the behavior occurs for the entire time block), partial-interval recording (the behavior occurs at any point during the block), or momentary time sampling (the behavior is occurring exactly at the end of the interval). These strategies offer an efficient way to get a big-picture view of behavior patterns and progress, especially when detailed counting isn't practical.

Rating Scales

- What it is: Teacher- or student-completed scales that allow for a quick rating of the frequency, intensity, or success of the behavior.
- Best for: Tracking behaviors that are hard to quantify like engagement, emotional regulation, task completion, or frustration.

Example: Using a 1–5 scale for rating student success with staying focused and on task during independent work time (Specify what each rating means such as: 5=focused the entire time; 3=focused about half the time; 1=difficulty staying focused for even brief moments of time)

When behaviors have a range of intensities, such as fidgeting with materials and task avoidance, teachers can use a rating scale to monitor the variations.
Image: RDNE Stock Project. (2021, June 16). Girl holding crayons. Pexels.com. (CC free to use)

🐟 Case Study: Rating Scales: Writing is Rough

Evan is a student in Ms. Rivera's 2nd grade class. He does not like writing and becomes visibly frustrated during writing assignments. Because his behaviors vary from mild sighing to running out of the classroom, she decides to use a simple 1–5 intensity scale to rate his frustration each time it occurs.

Representative Rating Scale Data Table:

Date	Activity	Intensity Rating (1–5)	Notes
Mon	Morning Writing	2	Looked around room, fidgeted with eraser, wrote slowly
Mon	Afternoon Writing	4	Crumpled paper, said, "I can't do this," refused to continue without teacher assistance
Tue	Morning Writing	2	Worked at a slower pace and said, "This is kind of hard" three times, but did not stop working.
Tue	Afternoon Writing	3	Erased and started over twice, long pauses between writing, asked, "Am I doing this right?"
Wed	Morning Writing	1	Sighed quietly and rested head on hand, but worked throughout writing time and completed the assigned task.

Interpretation: *Ms. Rivera notices that Evan's frustration is usually rated as a 2 during morning writing but frequently rises to a 4 during longer afternoon assignments. She decides to provide more support by adding scheduled breaks and graphic organizers to the afternoon writing block.*

Interval Recording

- What it is: Dividing an observation period into equal intervals of time (e.g., 30 seconds, 1 minute, 5 minutes) and noting whether the behavior occurred during each interval.
- Best for: Estimating how often a behavior happens over time or across settings.
- Variations:
    - Whole interval: Behavior lasts the entire interval.
    - Partial interval: Behavior occurs at any time during the interval.
    - Momentary time sampling: Behavior is checked only at the end of each interval.

🐟 Case Study: Whole-Interval Recording: Independent Reading

Mr. Thompson wants to increase Alyssa's on-task behavior during independent reading. He uses whole-interval recording, noting every 5 minutes whether Alyssa stayed on task for the entire 5-minute interval. If it appears that she is reading the whole time, he marks "yes." If she looks around, talks, or gets up even once, he marks "no."

Representative Whole-Interval Data Table:

Interval (5 min)	On Task for Entire Interval? (Yes/No)	Notes
0–5 min	Yes	Reading silently
5–10 min	Yes	Reading silently
10–15 min	No	Watched her peers and then looked out the window for awhile
15–20 min	Yes	Reading silently
20–25 min	No	Asked peer a question

> ***Interpretation:*** *After taking data for several days, Mr. Thompson notices that Alyssa has a hard time sustaining silent reading for longer than 10-12 minutes, so he builds in a break at 10 minutes and continues to take data to see if that helps increase her total time on task.*

🐟 Case Study: Partial-Interval Recording: Tapping

David's kindergarten teacher notices that he frequently taps on nearby objects and even classmates. Because the behavior occurs both quickly and frequently, counting each instance isn't realistic. Instead, the teacher decides to use partial-interval recording to take data on this behavior. Every 10 seconds, she records whether the behavior happened at any point in that interval. Even one tap counts as "yes."

Representative Partial-Interval Data Table:

Interval (10 sec)	Behavior Occurred? (Yes/No)	Notes
0–10 sec	Yes	Tapped on wall, table, and three chairs
10–20 sec	Yes	Sat in a chair, tapped table several times
20–30 sec	Yes	Tapped peer on the arm
30–40 sec	Yes	Tapped table and papers on the table
40–50 sec	No	Listening to teacher
50–60 sec	No	Listening to teacher

Interpretation: *After collecting data across several days with assistance from the classroom paraprofessionals, she sees that David's tapping spikes during transitions and she begins thinking about the types of supports that might help David during those times.*

Momentary time sampling may help teachers identify students who need additional check-ins.
Image: Danilyuk, P. (2021, May 20). Teacher checking on her student. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

🐟 Case Study: Momentary Time Sampling: Wandering

During science labs, Maya often wanders away from her group. To monitor this efficiently, her teacher uses momentary time sampling, looking up at the end of each 5-minute interval to see if Maya is in her group at that exact moment.

Representative Momentary Time Sampling Data Table:

Time Check (End of Interval)	In Group at That Moment? (Yes/No)	Notes
5 minutes	Yes	Passing out materials to the group
10 minutes	Yes	Measuring activities with group
15 minutes	No	At sink washing hands
20 minutes	No	Walking around room
25 minutes	No	Standing by teacher's desk

Interpretation: *After collecting data for a week, the teacher notices that Maya is usually with her group during the first half of the lesson but is consistently away during the last 15 minutes. This pattern suggests she may need clearer task roles or more structured check-ins as the lab progresses*

Capturing Behavior: Outcomes and Reflection

Not all behaviors need to be observed in real time to gather meaningful data. Some can be measured by what's left behind or by how students reflect on their own actions. **Permanent product recording** focuses on the tangible results of behavior such as classroom assignments, artwork, or completion of cleanup tasks, providing concrete evidence of performance that can be compared over time. Anecdotal or running records involve writing brief, objective notes that describe what was observed, capturing context and details that numbers alone might miss. **Self-monitoring** empowers students to track their own behavior or progress, helping them build awareness, responsibility, and independence. Together, these methods round out a comprehensive data collection system which can provide a more comprehensive picture of student behavior and growth.

Anecdotal Notes

- What it is: Brief, objective narrative descriptions of what was observed.
- Best for: Noticing patterns, identifying triggers, or capturing context that numerical data might miss.
- Example: "After group work began, student started to cry and left the table."

Self-Monitoring Data

- What it is: The student tracks their own behavior using a structured format.
- Best for: Promoting self-awareness, responsibility, and independence.
- Example: Student marks "yes" or "no" after each subject for "stayed focused on assigned work."

Permanent Product Recording

- What it is: Collecting or evaluating physical outcomes of behavior.
- Best for: Academic tasks or behaviors that produce a visible result.
- Example: Counting number of math problems completed or number of assignments turned in.

Calendars and visual schedules help students organize their time.
Image: Cameron, J. M. (2020, Mar. 28). *Boy in yellow crew neck t-shirt sitting on a chair*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Case Study: Permanent Product Recording: Work Completion During Centers

During daily literacy centers, Elena often appears busy looking at books, moving materials, and talking quietly with her peer partners. However, her teacher notices that Elena generally turns in little or no completed work at the end of center time. The teacher decides to use permanent product recording to measure Elena's actual output as these products provide a concrete record of how much Elena finishes and the quality of her work.

Representative Permanent Product Table:

Date	Literacy Center Task	Completed? (Yes/Partial/No)	Quality (1–3)	Notes
10/10	Word Sort	Partial	2	Sorted correctly but did not glue down or label categories
10/11	Reading Response	No	—	Wrote her name on the paper, but left rest of paper blank; spent time flipping pages of the book
10/12	Writing Prompt	Yes	3	Completed with detail; teacher provided timer and a graphic organizer
10/13	Vocabulary Cards	Partial	1	Drew pictures but left rest of card blank
10/14	Word Sort	Yes	2	Completed the assignment after the teacher checked in midway, but looked at and talked with peers who finished early and made several errors in the final problems.

Interpretation: *The data show that Elena is more successful at completing tasks when she is provided with more structure. The teacher realizes the barrier is related to executive functioning skills such as getting started and maintaining effort. She plans to teach Elena to use organizational supports such as a timer, a visual checklist, and self-monitoring.*

Understanding the "Why" Through Connection and Conversation

One of the most effective ways to understand why a behavior is occurring is to collaborate with the student and listen carefully to what they have to say. Meaningful conversation can reveal when and where the problem behavior tends to occur, what the student finds difficult or frustrating, and how the student interprets the situation. These discussions also

help teachers consider the student's developmental level and problem-solving abilities. These are all important factors that shape how a student responds to expectations.
A helpful framework for these conversations involves four simple steps:

- Approach with empathy and without blame. The teacher begins by sharing their observations and expressing genuine curiosity and concern, inviting the student to share their perspective.
- Explain why the issue matters. The teacher clarifies the concern in terms of safety, learning, or relationships, helping the student understand its importance.
- Collaborate on solutions. The teacher encourages the student to propose ideas that could work for both the student and the others in the classroom community, including the teacher.
- Agree on a plan and follow up. Together, the teacher and the student decide on a strategy to try and a time to meet again to reflect on the results.

This process builds trust and ownership. When students are involved in both identifying the problem and planning potential solutions, they are more likely to feel respected, understood, and motivated to make positive changes.
Practitioners do not need to rely on a single method of gathering information. For example, a teacher might use ABC data to identify the function of a behavior and guide the development of a behavior improvement plan. The teacher could also track frequency or duration data to establish a baseline and monitor progress over time. Including a thoughtful conversation using the framework above can further strengthen the assessment process and lead to more effective and meaningful outcomes for both the student and the teacher. (Bowler, 2022; Cooper et al., 2020; Crone et al., 2004; Minahan & Rappaport, 2018; Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, 2018).

Conversations between teachers and students build trust and stronger relationships.
Image: Krukau, Y. (2021, July 4). Teacher teaching his students. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Putting it All Together

Every behavior happens for a reason. It is not random, and it is rarely about simple defiance or disobedience. Instead, behavior reflects a complex mix of influences including health, environment, relationships, emotions, and each student's unique learning history. Recognizing this helps educators shift from frustration to understanding. Ultimately, the "why" of behavior reminds us that every challenge is also an opportunity for insight, connection, and growth. When teachers approach behavior with curiosity and compassion, they create the conditions in which positive change becomes possible.

Choose and Use Challenge

Use this menu of options to put Module 6 into practice. Choose one or two strategies that best fit your students, your routines, and your current classroom needs.

1. Practice Describing Behavior Objectively: Choose one student and write one clear, observable, and measurable behavior description. Avoid words like defiant, disrespectful, unmotivated. Reread the statement later with a colleague or your implementation partner. Does it clearly describe what the student *did* without assumptions?
2. Try a Short ABC Observation: Pick a time when a behavior is most likely to occur and record 3–5 ABC entries. When you look across the entries, do you see any patterns?
3. Select a Data Tool That Fits the Behavior: Choose one method (frequency, duration, latency, rating scale, interval recording, or permanent product) to better understand a behavior you see regularly. Collect data for several days. What trends do you see?
4. Talk With the Student: Use the four-step conversation framework with one student. What did you learn that was surprising or helpful?

One idea I will implement next week is…

Glossary

ABC (Antecedent–Behavior–Consequence) observation framework - a structured observation tool used to identify patterns of behavior by recording the antecedent, the behavior, and the consequence.

Anecdotal notes – Brief, objective descriptions of what a teacher observes in real time. These notes capture important details or context that numbers alone may miss and can help identify patterns across situations.

Antecedent – identifying what happened right before the behavior.

Behavior – describing the target behavior.

Classical conditioning – learning that occurs when an association is made between an environmental stimulus and another event that occurs close to it in time.

Consequence – identifying what happened right after the behavior.

Duration – A method used to measure how long a behavior lasts from start to finish.

Frequency – A method for counting how many times a specific behavior occurs within a set period of time. This approach is useful for behaviors that are quick, observable, and have a clear beginning and end.

Functional behavior assessment (FBA) – an assessment methodology designed to identify the need behind the behavior.

Interval recording – A way to observe whether a behavior occurs during specific time segments. This method offers a snapshot of behavior patterns without requiring continuous observation. Variations include whole-interval, partial-interval, and momentary time sampling.

Latency – A tool for measuring the amount of time between a request or cue and the student's response.

Operant conditioning – learning that occurs as a result of the environmental events that occur following a behavior and that influence whether the behavior will be repeated again in the future under similar conditions.

Permanent product recording – A measurement method that evaluates the outcomes of behavior rather than the behavior itself. Examples include completed assignments, cleaned-up materials, or written work that reflects performance or progress.

Rating scales – A quick method for estimating the intensity, frequency, or impact of a behavior using a numerical scale (e.g., 1–5). Rating scales are efficient tools for tracking trends over time without counting every occurrence.

Self-monitoring – A strategy in which students observe and evaluate their own behavior or academic performance.

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