

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE SUMMARY

Behavioral Consultation in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms

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The purpose of this report is to describe a behavior consultation model that has been successfully tested in early childhood classrooms. A behavior consultant can assist in a teachers' use of behavior analytic techniques, which have proven successful in classroom settings when applied. Recommendations for choosing a behavior consultant and successful behavior strategies are presented.

Keywords: behavioral consultation, inclusion, early childhood education, developmental delays, applied behavior analysis

INTRODUCTION

Challenging behavior in early childhood learning spaces is defined as disruptive behaviors which negatively impact learning and social engagement opportunities, decreasing the child's opportunity for developmental progress (Dunlap et al., 2006). Challenging behaviors can disrupt the learning environment and may escalate to more injurious actions, potentially beginning with tantrums and increasing the harm to self and others (e.g., head banging, biting, and property destruction; Erturk et al., 2017). In early childhood education/early childhood special education (ECE/ECSE) classrooms, these behaviors often manifest as aggression toward peers, elopement, and tantrums requiring teachers to be trained to prevent and respond to these behaviors effectively. While many early education teacher preparation programs require classroom management and guidance coursework, specific training on strategies to prevent challenging behavior and teach replacement skills is less common (D'Agostino & Douglas, 2021).

One solution is to continue teacher education through behavioral consultation. Consultation is defined as an expert passing their knowledge and skills to a mentee, who, in turn, can implement this newly learned approach (Kunze & Machalicek, 2021). More specifically, behavioral consultation, as delivered by a behavior consultant, involves a behavior expert mentoring a classroom teacher on strategies to decrease challenging child behavior using their expertise to prevent disruptive behaviors, respond to behavior escalations, and teach replacement behaviors. A

critical focus of a behavior consultant is to support a child in their development of a healthy adaptive behavior repertoire (e.g., increasing communication, strengthening social interaction, and improving self-help skill set).

Behavioral consultation can provide training in various situations. For the early childhood educator, this type of consultation may provide specific guidance on setting up classroom environments, allowing for increased learning and communicating expectations for children to succeed. Additionally, the behavioral consultant may observe during active classroom times, allowing for feedback on supporting play between peers. The behavioral consultant may model behavioral strategies during role-play scenarios before asking the teacher to implement the strategy directly with a child. Praise and corrective feedback can be provided to the teacher when demonstrated in the classroom. Teacher progress and areas of focus for practical improvement can be tracked independently. Such self-evaluation data allows the behavior consultant to recognize skill deficits in teaching strategy implementation and adjust the appropriateness of these strategies to best meet the child's needs. Behavior consultants guide educators in using this data to make data-based decisions in the classroom. This example, behavioral skills training, is often utilized in behavioral consultation (see Kirkpatrick et al., 2019).

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH METHODS

In a 4-year project implemented by the authors, behavior consultants provided recommendations to ECE/ECSE teachers in inclusive classrooms. Overall, 44 early childhood classrooms were visited, with 196 teachers and 97 children.

Behavior consultants were employed by a non-profit agency focusing on children and families with developmental disabilities or delays. This agency partnered with a school district in a southern US state to provide behavioral consultation to preschool programs in the public school district. The behavior consultants were Master degreed Board-Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA) or doctoral level BCBAs with a minimum of five years of experience (range of 5-12 years). Children were identified by the school or child development center supervisor as exhibiting challenging behavior which warranted outside assistance. Each classroom teacher agreed that a behavior consultant would assist in training them to respond appropriately and prevent challenging behaviors in their inclusive learning environment.

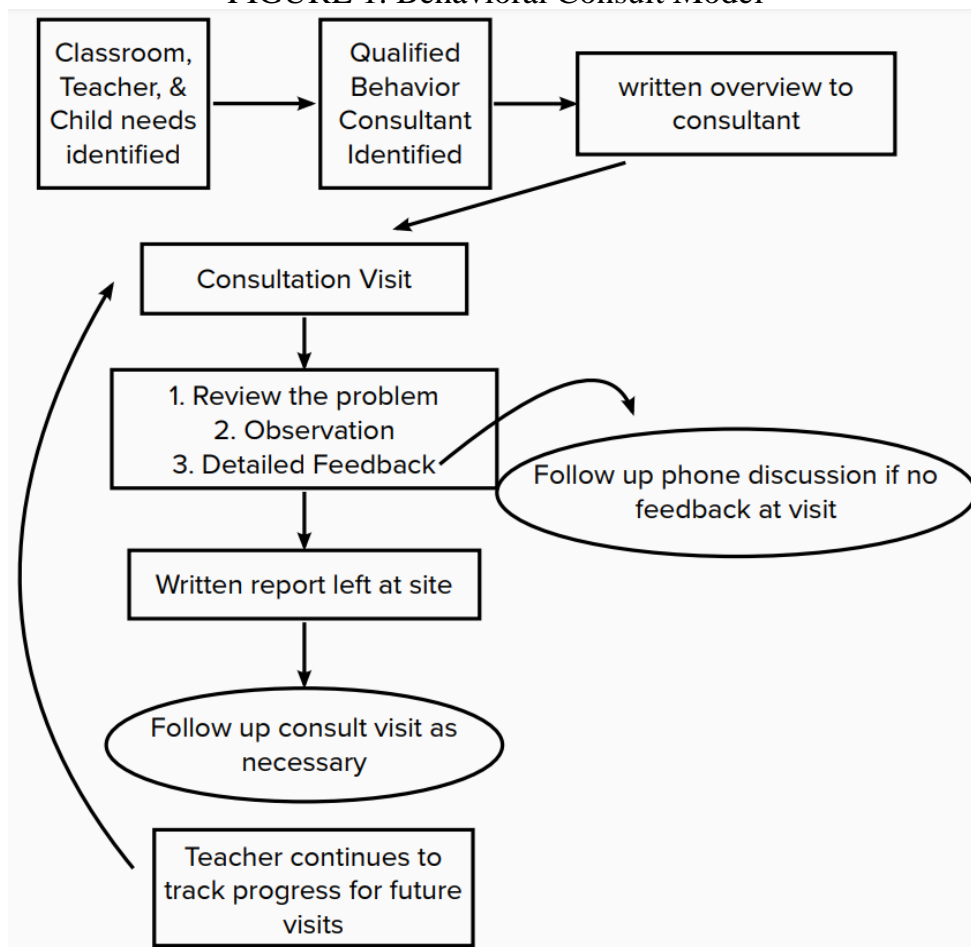
Between two and six consult visits at various time points throughout the school year (i.e., August to May) were provided to each site. Visits were 60 to 90 minutes in duration and occurred most often in a classroom, cafeteria, or playground setting. Before the consultation visit, a written overview was provided to the consultant describing the classroom, staff, and focus child.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Consultation visits included a review of the problem, an observation, and detailed feedback. The review of the problem was a brief discussion between the consultant and the classroom teacher. This meeting was an opportunity for the teacher to describe the challenging behavior further and

include what supports were currently in place. This review also included a brief history of the child. In some cases, the consultant reviewed the child’s individualized education plan (IEP) to identify some developmental skills. Following the review, the consultant completed their observation in the chosen setting. The consultant looked for the child’s expressive and receptive language, interactions with materials, and social interactions with peers. The consultant also took note of the teacher-child interactions, classroom management and routines, and adult behavior in the room. Because the consultant did not intervene, work with, or model behavioral strategies directly with the child, detailed feedback was necessary to provide a clear suggestion. Following the observation, the consultant created a written report of their observations, including strengths and suggestions. This report provides documentation to the classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and center director for future reference. When specific strategies needed to be demonstrated for clarity to a classroom teacher, the director arranged for the teacher to leave the classroom to meet with the consultant or schedule a visit within a few days. Ideally, the behavioral consultant presented and discussed recommendations with the teacher and director before leaving the site. However, this was not always possible. Follow-up phone discussions occurred with the supervisory team on an as-needed basis between consult visits when an in-person meeting did not occur. Individualized return visits were unique to each site and situation. Figure 1 provides an overview of the consultation model.

FIGURE 1. Behavioral Consult Model



RESOURCES FOR CHOOSING AND USING A BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT

Several considerations should be taken when selecting a behavioral consultant. These considerations include experience with young children, knowledge of working with diverse cultures, knowledge of developmental differences and behaviors, experience working with various levels of professionals and necessary professional certification. We recommend that the behavioral consultant be a BCBA, as BCBAs have specialized training to provide behavioral consultation (BACB, 2021). It is important to note that not all behavior analysts have experience in ECE settings. In this case, we recommend prioritizing experience over credentials. If the behavioral consultant lacks ECE experience, the behavioral consultant should have a mentor they can consult with who has this experience. This mentor can be a supervisor or colleague. This information is often lacking from a resume or curriculum vitae. As such, engaging in conversation about this topic may be necessary to determine the behavioral consultant's experience. Table 1 provides a list of the considerations discussed here.

TABLE 1. Considerations for Choosing a Behavior Consultant

Characteristic	Example in Practice
Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≥ three years of experience in ECE/ECSE Practice with young children in classroom settings Considers themselves an expert in some behavior and consulting topics
Cultural Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explores personal bias to decrease its influence on work Recognizes the importance of cultural and linguistic differences
Knowledge of Developmental Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experience with a broad range of disabilities and disorders Signs and symptoms of some disorders
Knowledge of behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom management skills Self-injurious behavior experience
Varied Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with new teachers Work with experienced teachers
Board Certification as a Behavior Analyst	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adheres to ethics code to seek assistance when work is outside the scope of experience

Trends in behavioral strategies recommended to classroom teachers over the four-year projects emerged. Table 2 lists the ten most frequent recommendations with corresponding examples of classroom concerns.

TABLE 2. Top Recommendations During Behavior Consultations

Top 10 Recommendations	Sample classroom concerns to change through consultation
Teach a child to follow directions by clearly communicating expectations*	Chaotic transitions Unestablished routines
Teaching child to request	Child difficulty requesting help Limited vocabulary
Encouraging/supporting peer interactions and play skills*	Aggression during play and group time Wandering
Use reinforcement effectively	Disruptive behavior to seek attention Attention given to unwanted behavior
Individual expectations with consideration for classroom community	Elopement due to different expectations Imitation of disruptive behavior as an escape
Communication system	Tantrums Limited receptive or expressive language
Supporting self-help skills	Child inability to complete the task Learned helplessness with high teacher attention
Using visual supports	Unclear classroom schedule and expectations Unsure of appropriate behavior
Prevent disruptive behaviors, identify the function and teach replacement*	Time out or child sent home Teacher responding incorrectly to child’s needs
Meet sensory needs	High classroom noise level Chaotic activity level

Table 3 shows common reasons children engage in disruptive behaviors in ECSE classrooms along with recommended strategies to prevent disruptive behavior, responses, and replacement behaviors.

TABLE 3. Common Disruptive Behaviors Observed in ECSE Classrooms

Child Reason for Challenging Behavior	Prevention Strategies Taught to Teacher in Consultation	Behavior Taught to Child by Teacher (Replacement Skills)
Obtain Attention	1. Provide frequent attention and reinforcement 2. Schedule time with adult or peer 3. Engage in activity with the child 4. Give choice of partner	Raise hand Say “help” or “person’s name”

Obtain Tangible	1. Give choices of items/materials 2. Prompt appropriate request for items 3. Scheduled access to desired object	Teach appropriate request for items (later teach waiting and accepting no)
Obtain Activity	1. Give choices of activities 2. Prompt appropriate request for activities 3. Use activity schedules 4. Provide something the child likes for completion of activity 5. Scheduled access to desired activity	Teach appropriate request for activities (later teach waiting and accepting no)
Escape Attention	1. Scheduled breaks 2. Modify seating arrangements	Appropriate request for time alone
Escape Tangible	1. Prompt appropriate refusal of items	Teach appropriate refusal of items (e.g., no thank you, I don't want any)
Escape Activity	1. Teach appropriate refusal of activities 2. Add fun materials 3. Modify task length, expectations, materials, instructions, response mode, and seating arrangement 4. Break task down to make it easier 5. Reduce distractions 6. Provide peer supports	Teach to tolerate activity Teach appropriate refusal of activities (e.g., no thank you, I don't want to do that) Teach following directions Teach to request help

CONCLUSION

Administrators can suggest behavioral consultation to train teachers in ECE/ECSE classrooms to meet the needs of a diverse population, including children with developmental delays and differences. A qualified behavior consultant can decrease challenging child behavior and increase developmentally appropriate teaching strategies. The behavior consultation model described here is just one example of consultation options for early educators. While it is recommended that schools seek outside support to address challenging behavior, administrators should review the behavioral consultant's qualifications for the best fit. The strategies presented in this report are some strategies a behavior consultant should have expertise in implementing in an ECE setting. While behavioral consultation can provide training in various situations, the outcome is for teachers to receive the necessary training from an expert, so they can, in turn, become experts themselves in decreasing challenging behaviors in their classroom environments.

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