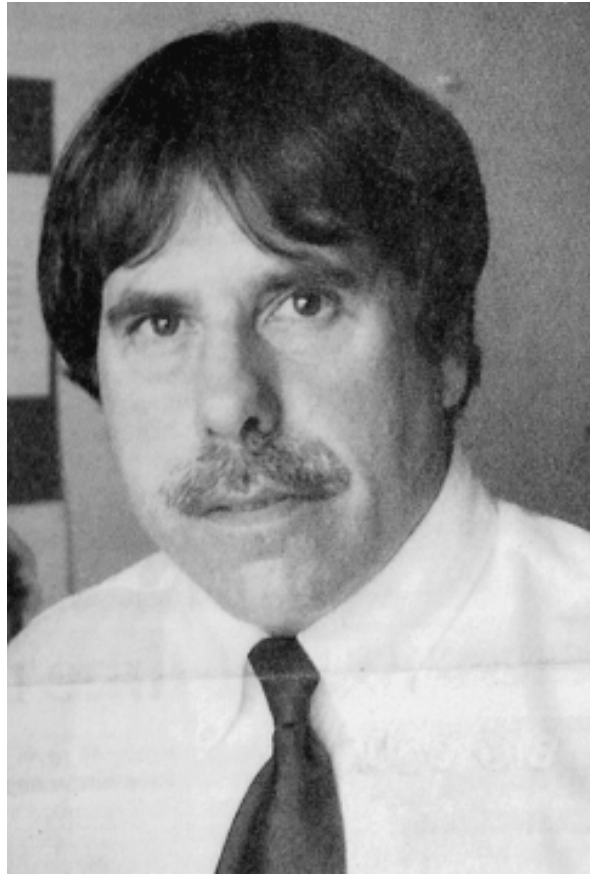


DECODING CHALLENGING CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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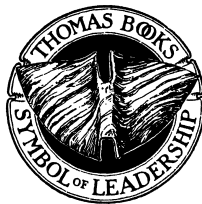
DECODING CHALLENGING CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS

**What Every Teacher and Paraeducator
Should Know!**

By

ENNIO CIPANI, PH.D.

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Fresno, California*



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PREFACE

In many teacher training programs, future teachers are told that student problem behavior is a function of many factors outside their purview and sphere of influence. Challenging behaviors and poor student performance are often attributed to many of society's ills. As a result of the presence of such factors in some students' lives, changing these students behavior in the classroom is seen as futile unless one can change their nonschool environment.

I feel differently. Challenging behavior problems can be understood in the same manner one understands why other child behaviors occur. Once you understand that behavior occurs for a reason, and that the reason for behavior is embedded in the **current social context** of the problem behavior, solving behavior problems is "doable." One does not have to wait for society to ameliorate the level of violence portrayed in the popular media to be effective. A four-decade history of applied research using behavioral interventions in homes and classrooms successfully supports my contention. Such efforts have empirically demonstrated that behavior change occurred as a result of what teachers did inside their classroom!

The current text provides sufficient background in understanding why behavior occurs to facilitate the reader's capability to develop intervention strategies that make functional sense. In order to design and implement effective intervention strategies, the ability to decode the function of challenging behavior is a requisite. To acquire such skills requires a comprehensive approach to skill development. Too often, classroom personnel are taught a few tricks and then encouraged to go and try them. Changing behavior is not a matter of a few tricks! Rather, the professional repertoire needed requires a thorough understanding and analysis of the role of the social environment, both before and after the behavior. Therefore, I have taken painstaking efforts to make sure that this text is not a "cookbook" of menus to try. In contrast, this text provides a conceptual basis for understanding why certain behaviors occur under specific conditions. After reading this material, I am sure you will have a finer appreciation for the role of a behavior's antecedent and consequent conditions.

A SELF-CONTAINED INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACH

I wanted to design a set of materials that would make you feel like you are taking a course from me.¹ To accomplish this goal, I had to advance past offering words on a page to be consumed by the reader. Imagine you are enrolled in a course that I am teaching on the topic of behavioral intervention in classrooms. As a student, you would (hopefully) attend my lectures, where I attempt to impart my knowledge to you. The pages in this book supplant that medium. Realize that presenting lectures is just part of the mechanism I would use in shaping your behavioral repertoire. As your course instructor, I would also want to assess the degree to which you comprehend the content I delivered. In that regard, I would give you tests, and then grade them and provide you feedback on your skill acquisition. To that end, there are two sets of objective measures when you finish reading and studying each chapter: fill-in-the-blank (see Appendix A) and true/false test items that follow the chapter summary. The answers to both these measures are provided in files on the attached CD.

Additionally, I might ask you to discuss how a certain behavioral interaction is indicative of some principle I just lectured about. With your exposition, I would then point out how your discussion addresses (or does not completely address) the principles involved. It is this interactive manner that allows a teacher to effectively impart his (or her) knowledge to students.

I hope a unique feature of this text will accomplish that phenomenon of an on-site course. Since Chapters 1 and 2 form the heart of the decoding behavior approach, I selected them for this unique instructional text approach. Within these chapters, after reading a short section, between one and three short answer discussion questions appear. Subsequent to providing your response to each question, you can listen to the desired answer in a narrated presentation in the attached CD. The labeling system I used in the text for these questions allows you to go directly to the narration needed, e.g., my answers to discussion questions 1a can be found on PowerPoint file labeled 1a, and so forth. When you run these PowerPoint files in slide show, you can listen to my discussion of the answers. You will find seven separate PowerPoint files in the Chapter 1 folder that correspond to the seven sets of discussion questions in Chapter 1. In that same vein, there are nine corresponding files in the Chapter 2 folder. After listening to my response to the discussion questions, you may find the need to review that previous section of the text before proceeding with the next section. This unique instruction-

1. This intention is for students taking a course where this text is used as well as classroom personnel studying this material as part of their professional development.

al component should greatly facilitate your comprehension of this material in the first two chapters. To further self-assess your capability in decoding behavior, Appendix B provides performance tasks for several of the chapters for your consideration.

OVERVIEW OF TEXT

The first two chapters provide the basic conceptual knowledge for decoding student classroom behavior. With these two chapters, you will see that decoding student behavior requires that you examine and analyze the antecedent as well as consequent conditions of the student's behavior. Behavior just doesn't happen; it happens for a reason. Once you realize this, you will be able to solve behavior problems by addressing their environmental function. In the first chapter, a number of hypothetical examples² are used to illustrate that challenging problem behavior does **make sense** when looked at from a functional perspective. An analysis of a student's behavior from its actual surroundings provides the teacher with a greater understanding of why that particular behavior occurs. In Chapter 2, six behavioral functions are delineated and many examples are used to illustrate how behavior can serve such a purpose. The scenarios under which adult attention, peer attention and access to preferred items and events are the function or purpose of the behavior are clearly explicated. Additionally, some challenging behaviors are the result of escaping or avoiding aversive events or activities. Three common factors within classroom environments are offered and examples are portrayed.

The next two chapters present basic principles of behavior. These basic principles undergird the content in Chapters 1 and 2. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with methods of collecting information and data, and are essential skills for classroom personnel in their efforts to decode student behavior. Chapter 7 addresses how to intervene with challenging behavior problems by providing an intervention that enables an appropriate behavior to effectively and efficiently produce the identified function. The final chapter involves a discussion of challenging behaviors that occur in classroom contexts which are not socially mediated.

I hope you find the following pages informative and enjoyable to read. Once you have developed skills in decoding student behavior, you become a resource and mentor to others who may be struggling. Many teachers and

2. Hypothetical cases, an amalgam of real-life cases I have served during my 30 years in applied behavior analysis.

paraeducators leave the field because they become disillusioned with the challenging problem behaviors they face day after day. Let's not lose good people because they were not taught how to be effective behavior change agents!

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Preface</i>	v
 <i>Chapter</i>	
1. DECODING CHILD BEHAVIOR	3
2. SIX FUNCTIONS OF CLASSROOM PROBLEM BEHAVIOR	27
3. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BEHAVIOR	65
4. SHAPING NEW BEHAVIOR	101
5. BASELINE ASSESSMENT	113
6. FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIORAL ASSESSMENT (FBA)	133
7. FUNCTIONAL INTERVENTION STRATEGIES	167
8. NONSOCIALY MEDIATED FUNCTIONS OF PROBLEM BEHAVIOR	197
 <i>Appendix A: Test Items within Chapters</i>	211
<i>Appendix B: Performance Tasks</i>	215
<i>References</i>	221
<i>About the CD-ROM</i>	229

DECODING CHALLENGING CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS

Chapter 1

DECODING CHILD BEHAVIOR

Why does he or she do that? If you are a paraeducator, it is likely that on any given day, some of the behaviors they see in the classroom will bewilder you. Why are some children aggressive in school? Why do some children fail to follow classroom rules? Why do some children engage in oppositional behavior during class assignments and instruction? Perhaps such inappropriate behavior serves a purpose in the student's social environment (Bailey & Pyles, 1989; Cipani, 1990; Cipani & Trotter, 1990; Cipani & Schock, 2007, 2011; Iwata, Vollmer & Zarcone, 1990; LaVigna, Willis & Donnellan, 1989; Lennox & Miltenberger, 1989).

For example, let us say a hypothetical nine-year-old child named Peter, who is verbally aggressive, has been diagnosed by a school psychologist as having severe emotional disturbance. You subsequently hear school personnel explain to you that this child acts aggressively because he has a disorder; severe emotional disturbance. When Peter engages in verbally aggressive behavior, the disorder made him do it. Peter is expected to exhibit such inappropriate behavior from time to time, irrespective of context and consequences.

In contrast, the functional approach I am advocating would explain Peter's verbal tantrum episodes from an analysis of the inherent social context (Cipani, 1994; Cipani & Schock, 2007, 2011). Suppose we find the following. Peter often engages in such behavior when presented with an instructional activity that holds no interest for him. He indicates his displeasure of the instructional task and his desire to terminate his involvement. His teacher obviously is determined to keep him from leaving the instructional activity. Peter will initially complain and argue about the assignment to his teacher.

“Why do we have to do this?” His teacher becomes more assertive in her demand that he finish his assignment and tries to deflect these arguments. When Peter sees that his mild arguments are not helping his cause, i.e., getting out of the assignment, he tries another tactic. He states, “This is stupid. I do not need math in my life. I am going to throw this book on the floor! I won’t do my work!” He follows through on his promise and then proceeds to run around the classroom until the teacher calls the principal. He then sits in the office, missing math period and reading that day while he calms down.

With this information about the social context, what is a more plausible explanation for Peter’s behavior? He does this because he is emotionally disturbed. Or he does this because it “works” for him when he wants to get out of the instructional activity. If you examine the sequence of events, what happens after the episode provides significant information in **decoding** Peter’s behavior. The verbal tantrum and disruptive behavior in the classroom resulted in terminating the instructional activity. If such behavioral episodes from Peter continue to terminate his engagement with the task, the function of behavior is one of escaping the instructional task. Decoding child behavior requires that you identify the behavioral function of the problem behavior in the given context. The catch phrase, *Behavior just happens* is not accurate or valid!

Questions to Answer Before Proceeding (1a)

1. If you had to bet money, when would you predict that Peter would engage in tantrum behavior? Why would you think this bet would pay off for you?
2. Is the social environment enabling Peter’s behavior? How?

Here is another illustration of decoding behavior with a very bizarre example. People diagnosed with mental illness are ascribed to behave in ways that make no sense, due to “faulty brain mechanisms.” If you visit a hospital for psychiatric patients and observe what transpires, you would probably conclude that some of the clients’ behavioral episodes you observe are indeed bizarre and seem to be maladaptive. To you, their behavior might also seem to make no sense. Moreover, I believe you would often be wrong. Here is an illustration. What would you say about a man who spins with arms outstretched

when people approach him? Is his behavior beyond logic and understanding? The following case illustrates a traditional approach to determining why the behavior occurs and contrasts it with a functional perspective.

THE CASE OF THE SPINNING TOP

A middle-aged man, diagnosed with schizophrenia, in a locked psychiatric unit, engaged in an unusual behavior (see Cipani & Schock, 2007). He would spin around with his arms outstretched. When medical staff would approach him to interact, he would simply stretch out his arms and begin to spin in circles. Anyone within arms' distance is struck. The medical staff apparently surmises that such behavior is the result of his mental disorder, thus dismissing an analysis of its behavioral function. Here is a hypothetical conversation between an attending nurse on this patient's unit and a psychiatrist assigned to this patient that portrays the traditional explanation.

Nurse: Dr. Des-Order, as you probably know, we are having some difficulty with your patient, Mr. Smith. As part of his therapeutic treatment, the nursing staff and some of the physicians attempt to interact with him, hoping to bring him "out of his shell." At some point, as you know, he begins spinning in circles, right when you are attempting to engage him in conversation. I am not sure why he does this. Perhaps if we understood what internal process or delusion is creating this response to interaction, we could set up a therapeutic milieu.

Dr. Des-Order: Yes, Nurse Seaver, I have experienced that reaction myself. I believe it is part of his pathology because he suffers from schizophrenia. Mr. Smith becomes involved in some delusion with you and your staff being representative of some feared experience. When he rejects our attempts to break into his world by spinning like that, he is not rejecting us. His paranoid delusion views us and others as people he cannot trust. Therefore, his behavior does not make sense because his thought processes are not logical due to his schizophrenia. His brain mechanisms allow this break from reality, which relieves him of responsibility for his actions.