

# Gathering data to understand student behaviour

“Always assume that a motivation for a particular behaviour is positive but expressed in a negative way.”

– Richard L. Curwin and Allen N. Mendler,  
*Discipline with Dignity*

To effectively support students, school staff must understand the reasons why students behave as they do. This understanding helps them devise plans to support students as they develop new and more positive behaviours.

In many instances, students engage in negative behaviour to obtain something they want or to avoid something they don't want. Each behaviour serves a function, but the functions are different for different students. For example, one student may hit others in order to be left alone, another student hits to get possession of an object (such as a soccer ball) or to gain power, and a third student hits to get attention.

Collecting data about the functions of problem behaviours and the frequency of these behaviours provides classroom teachers with the information they need to:

- decide which behaviour supports and strategies will be most effective in their classroom
- measure the success of the supports they choose.

A common method of identifying the functions of behaviour is ABC Recording.

## A for Antecedent

Record anything that came before the identified behaviour.

- **Who** was involved in the situation? For example, “The teacher asked Bill to do the work,” “Another student (Sally) stood in front of Bill in the line,” “The teacher stepped out of the room just before Bill stood up on his desk and yelled.”
- **What** happened just before the challenging behaviour? This can include:
  - *tasks*, such as having to stand in line, participate in a group activity, do a specific worksheet, write a test
  - *consequences and reactions to other behaviours*, such as receiving additional attention or a reprimand

- *social interactions*, such as playing an active game, talking with another person or being involved in a conflict with another student
  - *transitions*, such as changing from one task to another or dealing with changes in the regular routine
  - *home and community-related factors*, such as changes in the family dynamics (e.g., death, divorce, a new person living in the home, a sibling leaving home), conflict within the family or changes in extracurricular activities (e.g., no longer being able to use the computer or being cut from the community soccer team)
  - *health factors*, such as illness or effects of medication.
- **When** did the behaviour occur? Include the time and date.
  - **Where** did the behaviour occur and what was the environment like? For example, the student was at circle; in his or her seat; in the hall, bathroom, gym or outside. What was the noise level, activity, structure, proximity to others?

## B for Behaviour

Record the specific behaviour that occurred in a way that provides accurate and useful information. Include the student's words and actions. Use specific descriptions. Instead of saying the student was "emotional," report specific actions such as crying or screaming. Instead of saying a student was "verbally or physically aggressive," report in detail what was said or done.

Report on the intensity and duration of the behaviour. For example, "Sally screamed very loudly (8 on a scale from 1 to 10) for 12 minutes," "Bill hit Sam so hard that he left a bruise."

## C for Consequences

Describe the consequences (what happened to the student following the negative behaviour).

Consequences provided by school staff can include attention, praise and tangible rewards, or reprimands, saying no, requiring the student to repeat the task or sending the student for timeout. Record as well cases where there were no consequences; that is, school staff said or did nothing in response to the behaviour.

Consequences can also include what others said or did. For example, another student may have moved out of the way, given the student the object he or she was asking for or yelled at the student. It is useful to know about the emotional reactions of other students and adults in the area; for example, laughter, crying or showing fear.

Another type of consequence has to do with tasks and activities. For example, “The student avoided doing the activity requested of him or her, got to choose to do another activity or was required to do a specific task.”



See **Tool 3: ABC Chart** for a sample tool for recording data from behaviour observations.

After you have collected and analyzed all the data, choose a specific behaviour to focus on and make it into a goal. This goal identifies the target that will be accepted as evidence of success. Then create an action plan that states:

- three or more steps toward achieving the goal
- the resources required, including people, time and material items such as reinforcers
- checkpoints for monitoring progress.

Explain the plan to students and their parents and, if possible, engage students by asking them to help plan how the goal can be achieved.

As the individual goal-setting plan is being implemented, monitor frequently to determine the effectiveness of the intervention and identify opportunities to celebrate successes. For example, if a class goal is to increase the number of students arriving on time, remind students by drawing a clock with the start time on the board. Keep records of arrival times and celebrate when the goal is reached. As students internalize the behaviour, increase the time lines from a day to a week to a month, with corresponding celebrations.

If the goal is not reached, discuss the reasons why. For more information on individual goal-setting plans, see pages 61 to 67.



For more information on other strategies for gathering data, see *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools: An intensive individualized approach*, pages 73 to 78.