

How do transportation personnel change challenging behaviors?

Changing behaviors takes thoughtful, systematic planning...and a team approach. Challenging behaviors can be resistant to change but there are effective techniques that can help to turn difficult behaviors around. Your school district will have a behavior specialist that can be helpful in designing a plan for behavior change. The general steps for planning a change in challenging behaviors on the bus include:

Focus on a specific problem such as spitting or kicking. Do not describe the student's behavior in terms of "being bad" or "being aggressive". This is not specific enough. When determining a target behavior, you might want to start with a less serious problem that has not become a habit or too ingrained in the student's riding experience.

Prioritize the difficult behaviors by asking these questions:

- Is anyone in danger?
- How much stress does the behavior cause?
- How frequent and how intense is the behavior?

Identify the setting. This means to describe the environment where the behavior actually occurs. For example, if the student is spitting in class, at home, and on the bus, a more global approach that includes more people in the planning process may need to occur. If the student is only spitting on the bus, you may assume that the bus ride in some way is triggering the behavior. You can best describe the setting by answering these questions:

- When, where and with whom does the problem occur?
- What *should* the student be doing at that time and in that situation?
- What is the student's emotional and physical state?
- When does the problem NOT happen?

Identify the triggers. This means to figure out what is causing the behavior to occur.

You can best identify the triggers by answer these questions:

- Are particular demands made that make the situation impossible for the student handle? For example, are the demands of maintaining balance on a bumpy ride, filtering out noise, and alleviating boredom making appropriate behaviors more difficult to maintain? Is the loading procedure over stimulating the child by hearing multiple adult commands, statements to “hurry up”, or having personal space invaded by other students?
- Is the trigger something that the student does not expect such as a substitute driver, a left turn instead of a right turn, or a new student?
- Is there a reduction of structure, positive reinforcement, or attention from adults? The withdrawal of these supports may escalate a student’s challenging behavior.

Identify what happens after the behavior. The consequence of the behavior, or what happens after the behavior, can inadvertently reinforce and strengthen behaviors. You can understand consequences by asking these questions:

- Is the student reinforced in some way by that behavior?
- Is an adult request withdrawn so the student escapes the demand?
- Are other students reacting to the behavior thus reinforcing it in some way?
- Does the behavior help the student to avoid unpleasantness such as boredom, teasing from other students, fear, or confusion?

What does the behavior mean? Making sense of the behavior will help the adults to find a solution. Challenging behaviors often are attempts of the student to communicate. You can make sense of the student’s behavior by asking the following:

- Is the behavior telling you something? The student may be trying to communicate, “I am tired,” “I am scared,” or “I don’t know what to expect next.”
- Is the behavior a way to escape? Students may develop difficult behaviors to alleviate boredom, sensory overload, or fear and confusion.

- Is the behavior a way to gain access to something? The student may be feeling a loss of control and may use his behavior to get something that he wants.
- Is the behavior a way to calm or express excitement? For example, a student may scream to express joy or scream to express anger. Ask how you want the student to express these emotions and then teach the skill by example, pictures of desired behavior, and reinforcing other students.

Plan for prevention. Prevention of the behavior is the most effective way to change it. Allowing the student to access calming manipulatives, music, video, or finding ways to help the child cope with the noise and chaos on the school bus has been very effective in many situations. When planning prevention, contact your school district for more ideas that work for your student.

Teach a new skill and behavior. For example, a student could learn to high five instead of hit, to play with manipulatives instead of scream, chew on a chew toy instead of bite, and follow a visual bus route schedule instead of think the bus driver is lost. Regarding masturbation, consider the possibility of asking the parents allow the student to engage in the activity in a designated place at home then minimize the opportunity for the student to masturbate by having him wear clothing that is difficult to get into or keeping the students hands busy doing something else.

If the student has a difficult time sitting in the bus seat and buckling the restraint, consider donating a bus seat to the classroom so the students can learn the skill in a controlled classroom environment from teachers and aides when the demands of loading the bus and keeping a schedule are not as stressful.

Change the payoff. Behaviors that seem to be increasing have been reinforced in some way – either by creating needed sensory input, other students’ reactions, adult attention, emotional regulation, or escape from demands. *Transportation personnel should try to ignore behaviors that they want to extinguish, and reward behaviors they want to increase.* This may be easier said than done but the concept is sound and

worth developing. It is important to realize that the student may be reinforced by attention (negative or positive) to the tantrum. Keep in mind that the tantrum may be calming, in and of itself, to a stressful event. Planning how to react to a student's challenging behavior so that the behavior is not reinforced, may be one of the most important steps to success.

How do bus personnel prevent challenging behaviors?

The most effective strategy for helping students have successful experiences on the bus is *preventing patterns of challenging behavior* from becoming established in the first place. The following suggestions will help:

Have an arsenal of motivating stuff available to the student. (See the “What are strategies that work?” section.) Remember that normal adults have a difficult time riding a noisy bus twice a day with limited access to motivating activity without getting cranky.

Beware the new student. Without planned support, a new student may react to the new situation with challenging behaviors. Speak with parents, teachers, and previous transportation personnel regarding possible triggers or effective strategies for the new student.

Keep yourself and other students safe. If the student likes to bite, keep your arm out of his way. Wear long sleeves if your arms are likely to get scratched. If the student likes to pull hair, keep his hands busy with something else and your hair out pulled back and out of reach.

Adult behaviors that are effective in helping students stay calm include:

- Teach an alternative behavior that fulfills the same need – this is magic. If the student wants to bite you, try having him bite a chew toy instead.
- Use positive language – try to find yourself saying “Good job” instead of “Don’t”.
- Do not use a question format ... (What’s wrong? What do you want?) ... because the student will likely not know how to answer. Rather, offer choices.
- Get close enough to capture the student’s attention – but stay out of the range of an inadvertent swipe or kick.

- Use a calm, quiet voice – this might be all that is needed by the student.
- Give the student time after you make a request. He may need time to process.
- Don't nag (asking more than twice). No one likes to be nagged. If your words don't work, use pictures to remind the child what you want him to do.
- Don't give multiple verbal requests (shift to a visual prompt)
- Describe the request – Say "Use your quiet voice" rather than "Settle down!"
- Be non-emotional – if the child is escalating, he does not need you to escalate also.
- Make more "do" requests than "don't" requests – try to wipe the word "don't" out of your vocabulary.
- Reinforce compliance – When the student is walking down the bus aisle, say "Good job walking" or "Good job keeping your hands in your own space". Find things you can say "good job" to.
- Allow opportunities to make choices – have acceptable choices available i.e. "Would you like to sit in this seat, or this seat?" or "Would you like to hold this koosh or this koosh?" "Would you like to get off the bus first or last today?"
- Provide an ongoing schedule of reinforcement – consider making a tally mark every time you tell the student something positive. Tracking your own behavior and positive comments will likely result in an increase of your positive comments.
- De-escalate the behavior cycle – learn what the student's initial stages are that lead to outbursts. In the initial stages, you want to diffuse the student's need for an outburst because once the tantrum has started, there is not much you can do other than wait for the cycle to run its course.

What are strategies that work?

There are effective strategies that work well for students with autism who ride the school bus. The nice thing about these strategies is that they generally work well for all students.

Visual Supports are often more effective than verbal instructions. The following information can be put into a visual format:

- Driver/Attendant and route schedules – including anticipated changes
- Daily and weekly schedules – including changes, reinforcements
- Transition schedules – home/bus/school (list all the behaviors necessary to board the bus i.e. wait for the doors to open, step up, use the hand rail, walk down the aisle, keep hands in own space, sit in designated seat, click the seat belt, engage in an appropriate riding activity).
- Bus rules – loading, unloading, in seat (See appendix for example)
- Task completion skill cards – steps required to complete the task such as buckling a seat belt including how to know when the task is finished.
- Pictures of other kids displaying good bus-riding behavior
- Pictures of smiling adults such as parents or teachers who are happy when the student follows the rules

Social Stories are written in the first person and contain information to increase students' understanding of problematic situations. Begin with the child's understanding, develop the story by describing what is happening and why, how people feel and think. If you do no other strategies suggested in this manual, use Social Stories. They have been effective for many students with autism.

See Appendix for examples

Cognitive Picture Rehearsal is an activity that allows the student to look at cartoon drawings or pictures on cards to remind the child what reward a certain behavior will receive. For example, if the student keeps hands in own space, the bus driver might give him a “good job ticket” that can be used at the school store or if the student keeps a quiet voice, his mom might be proud.

See Appendix for examples

Choice Board

Depicts available choices of behavior, reinforcement, activity. This could be as simple as a laminated card with pictures of desired activities attached with Velcro.

See Appendix for example.

Power Cards

Connects desired responses with student’s interest. Create a card that has a picture of the student’s favorite item or interest so he is likely to carry it around and look at it often. Write the bus rules, or desired behaviors, on the card.

See Appendix for example.

Fifty Good Ideas

Create a Climate of Reinforcement

1. Post pictures of landmarks along the bus route. Provide reinforcement when the buss passes the landmark.
2. Provide a choice board of activities appropriate for the bus ride.
3. Ask parents and teachers for a list of reinforcers that motivate the child and that are appropriate and conducive to use in the bus environment.
4. Provide fiddle bags with hands-on activities.
5. Provide stress relieving manipulatives such as silly putty, stress ball etc.
6. Provide a rich schedule of positive praise – use reassuring and soothing voice tone.

7. Tell the child specifically how he is a good rider: “You have a quite mouth.” “You are doing a good job keeping your hands in your own space.”

Alter Triggering Events

8. Seat the child away from teasing and perceived threats.
9. Seat the child in close proximity to reassuring adult.
10. Seat child in a stable part of the bus (over front wheel base)
11. Be aware of how child responds to bright sunlight.
12. Note that a child may fear a heating vent.
13. Provide headset to muffle noise.
14. Provide headset to listen to preferred music.
15. Provide fidget items such as a Koosh Ball that can enhance the child’s control on the ride.
16. Watching favorite videos can distract from the stress of the bus ride.
17. Provide favorite books.
18. Provide a scrap book with pictures of children riding on the bus. Avoid pictures of negative behaviors.
19. Provide a book with pictures that the child enjoys viewing (family, favorite toy).
20. Provide activities interesting to the child, lap games, magnetic puzzles, comics.
21. Engage the child in group singing or soft rhythmic clapping.
22. Post pictures of children engaging in positive bus behavior. Point to the pictures to prompt good behavior.
23. Post bus rules accompanied with picture of the rule. Point to the rules to remind child. State rules calmly if necessary.
24. Allow the child to get on the bus early if he reacts to the typical jostling from standing in a line.
25. Have the student hold or squeeze a large pillow held in lap.
26. Honor the student’s ritual whenever possible if it doesn’t interfere with the bus ride.

Teach Skills

27. Identify skills that the child may be lacking i.e. tolerating a substitute bus driver, keeping hands in own space, climbing the stairs to the bus. Enlist the help of the school's teachers and aides to teach these skills. Ask how you can support and follow up.
28. Develop new behaviors by reinforcing behaviors that are closer and closer to the desired behavior. Reinforce a quiet mouth or the absence of screaming.
29. Students can wear different hats (fireman, construction) and imitate how they have to act on the bus.
30. Break down tasks to smaller steps. For example, instead of saying "you're your seat", reinforce the subsets such as stepping up, moving down the aisle, sitting in seat, clicking belt, using quiet voice.
31. Teach songs or raps that the student can sing to self while riding the bus.
32. Teach self talk scripts that the student can repeat when trying to follow instructions. "Listen for the click, then I can pick" (a fidget toy or other activity).

Use Positive Behavior Supports

33. Post a schedule of the child's day. Highlight bus time.
34. Post a schedule of route changes. Prime the child for changes in routine and reassure that the change is okay.
35. Be willing to change situations that cause stress and fear i.e. proximity to other children, seat belt too tight.
36. Adults should be willing to change voice tone, volume, reactions to accommodate the child's style.
37. Provide short stories written with the child as the main character depicting good bus behaviors. (Social Stories)
38. Provide short stories about child's favorite characters (Thomas the Train, Judge Judy, Michael Jordan) and how they follow bus rules.
39. Provide visual or physical boundaries for personal space such as colored tape, carpet square, or inflatable disc.
40. Ask the school to allow the student to engage in large motor activities such as jumping, pulling and pushing before the bus ride.

41. Place the student in the front or back of the line rather than the middle.
42. Create a visual map for getting ready to get off the bus.
43. Discuss the morning routine with parents with the goal of having the student as calm as possible before boarding the bus.
44. Consider preferential seating to decrease opportunities for unintentional physical contact with other students.
45. Have student carry something heavy to provide deep sensory input.
46. Have the student hold a weighted blanket over his lap.
47. Prepare student in advance for anticipated change. This includes change in other environments as well.

Earning Rewards

48. Adopt the classroom token system; i.e. if the classroom uses “classroom bucks” check with the teacher to see how you could leverage that system on the bus.
49. Create a “blue ribbon” award for good bus behavior that can be redeemed at home. Be sure to coordinate with parents on this.
50. Reward yourself for using positive language (good job walking) instead of negative language (stop running).

How do transportation personnel enjoy students with autism who ride the school bus?

Have a Positive Attitude

Celebrate the uniqueness of your student.

Treat your student with respect.

Never Give Up

Know when to seek alternative solutions. One student who lives in a remote area had a 2-hour bus ride one way. After many months of prevention and behavior management attempts that resulted in worsening behaviors, the school district arranged to have a car rather than a bus, transport the student. His extreme tantrums before, during, and after the ride significantly decreased. A side benefit was that the student's transportation now allowed the school to be more flexible with the student's start time...an accommodation that benefited him greatly.

Know when to change transportation personnel. One student's behavior was found to be significantly worse with a particular bus attendant. Upon observation, transportation administration noted that this aide used a loud, booming voice and rough handling. A new aide with a softer voice and a more gentle style was assigned to the bus. The student's behavior improved and continues to improve.

Know when to utilize funds for unusual solutions. A school/transportation team removed the seat back directly in front of the student and strapped a laptop to the seat that would play favorite videos...out of range of the student's reach of course. The bus ride became enjoyable for everyone, students and staff.

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