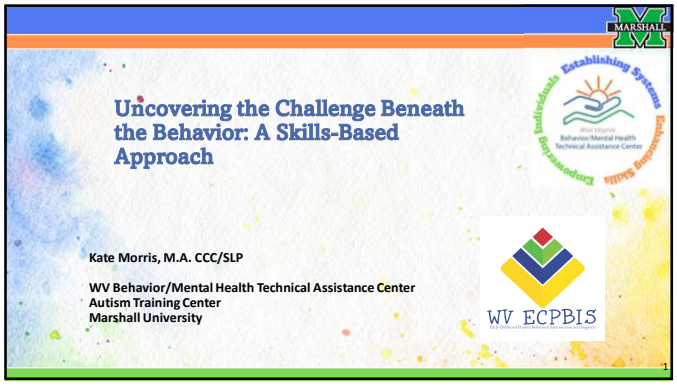
Uncovering the Challenge Beneath the Behavior: A Skills-Based Approach
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Autism Training Center
Marshall University
WV ECPBIS

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WV ECPBIS Project is a collaboration between:
West Virginia DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
WEST VIRGINIA AUTISM TRAINING CENTER
AT MARSHALL UNIVERSITY
West Virginia
Behavior/Mental Health
Technical Assistance Center

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Our Mission
Establishing Systems
Enhancing Skills
Empowering Individuals
West Virginia
Behavior/Mental Health
Technical Assistance Center

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Agenda

- Behavior Equation
- Skill vs Will
- Informal Assessment of Problems to be Solved
- Pause and plan
- Preventing challenging behavior by building skills

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Behavior Equation

- Skills ≥ Demands/Expectations/Stressors = Desired Behavior
- Skills ≤ Demands/Expectations/Stressors= Challenging behavior

Ablon, J. S., & Pollastri, A. R. (2018). The school discipline fix: Changing behavior using the collaborative problem solving approach. W. W. Norton & Company.

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Show me a challenging kid, and I will show you they have delays or differences in…

Attention and working memory skills
Emotion and self-regulation skills
Cognitive flexibility skills
Language and communication skills
Social thinking skills

(Ablon, J.Stuart. 2016…Research on Skill Deficits)

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Floodlight Attention

- Fuels rapid learning between 0-5

Flashlight Attention

- Starts to develop at 4-5 years old
- Necessary for most school tasks
- Requires regulation and effort
- Guided by sensory experience
- Sustained attention = ability to refocus over and over

Sumpter, Tera. (2021) Seeds of Learning: Processing Model for Speech, Language, Literacy, and Executive Functioning. ELH Publishing, LLC

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- **Working memory**:
  - hold, manipulate information
  - Store in and retrieve from long-term memory

Verbal working memory: sounds, inner voice

Non-verbal working memory: symbols an pictures, mind movie, meaning and concepts, internal visual map of the world. hindsight and foresight, imagination

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Building Skills to balance the equation

- Automatic vs. Intentional responses to stress
- Inhibition: the ability to interrupt current behavior, stop, plan and choose another behavior
- Plan ahead, set goals, initiate first steps
- Build through practice in situations that matter

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Make it automatic

- How do I start?
- How do I know I'm making progress?
- How do I know I'm finished?

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Balancing the behavior equation

Improve	• Improve the child's ability to meet our expectations
Help	• Help the child build resilience and solve problems with long term solutions and decreasing adult supports
Build	• Build thinking skills
Strengthen	• Strengthen relationships with adults and peers.
Reduce	• Reduce challenging behavior

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Dead end thinking vs. Skills based reframe

Dead end thinking

- Lack of motivation
- Disrespectful
- Aggressive
- Needy/attention seeking
- Immature
- Selfish
- No family discipline
- Controlling

Skills based thinking

- Trouble getting started?
- Difficulty with impulse control?
- Difficulty regulating?
- Developmental delays or differences?
- Difficulty with perspective-taking?
- Still learning skills?
- Difficulty being flexible?

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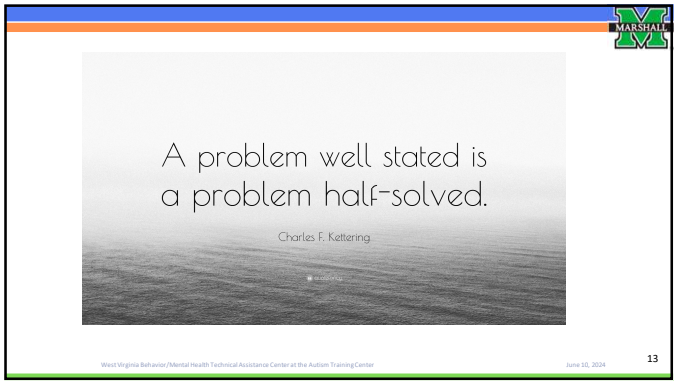

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What are we going to work on? What are we going to let go?

- Plan A: Insist on the adult solution (challenging behavior will increase, no skills are taught)
- **Plan B --- (challenging behavior will decrease as skills increase)**
  - Empathize, clarify the child's concern
  - Share adult concern
  - Brainstorm the solution (solution kit)
- **Plan C- Strategically drop the expectation (challenging behavior will decrease, no skills will be taught)**
- **Process will look different depending on the skill level of the child**

Ablon, J. S. (2018). *Changeable: how collaborative problem solving changes lives at home, at school, and at work.*

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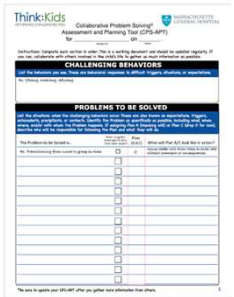

www.thinkkids.org

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Step one:

- List Challenging behaviors

Instructions: Complete each section in order. This is a working document and should be updated regularly. If you can, collaborate with others involved in the child's life to gather as much information as possible.

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS

List the behaviors you see. These are behavioral responses to difficult triggers, situations, or expectations.

Ex. Yelling, swearing, refusing

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Step 2: Determine your Problems to be solved

- What are the situations where the challenging behavior occurs?
- Ask yourself:
  - Who is there?
  - What time of day?
  - What are the expectations?
  - Where are we in the building?
  - When is it happening?
  - What is going on inside the child?
  - What is going on outside the child?
  - At what point does the child get dysregulated? (Walk yourself back to the most recent time the child was "calm")

PROBLEMS TO BE SOLVED

The Problem to be Solved is...		Plan (A,B,C)	What will Plan A/C look like in action?
Ex. Transitioning from lunch to group on time	☐	C	

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Step 3: What skills are we asking children to use in our routines? What skills are they struggling with?

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The problem is:

- The child wanders, hides, or otherwise does not participate in clean-up time

Skills involved:

- Awareness of time (5-minute warning)
- A plan for what to do with 5 minutes
- How to get started
- Memory of what comes next on the schedule
- Ability to stop a preferred activity
- Flexibility to start a potentially non-preferred activity
- Ability to imagine/remember what clean looks like

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The problem is:

- The child does not participate in back-and-forth interactions during play

Skills involved:

- Awareness a peer wants a turn
- Inhibiting the impulse to continue their turn
- Future thinking to imagine their next turn
- Delayed gratification: giving a turn might improve relationship with peer
- Flexibility to imagine that play can involve others

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The problem is:

- The child does not sit on their spot at morning meeting

Skills involved:

- Ability to ignore competing sensory stimulation
- Ability to refocus attention when it wanders
- Ability to inhibit movement, speech, vocalizations, etc.
- Awareness of peers
- Language skills to understand verbal directions
- Working memory to hold info in mind and use it to participate

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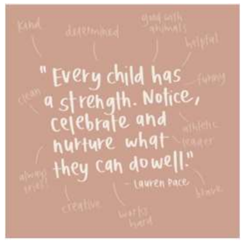
Step 4: What strengths does the child have?

- What calms the child?
- What do they move towards?
- What do they move away from?
- Can they do part of a skill?
- Can they do a skill sometimes, but not always?
- Can they do the skill for a short period of time, but not as long as expected?
- What does their play look like?
- Are there medical or environmental factors contributing?



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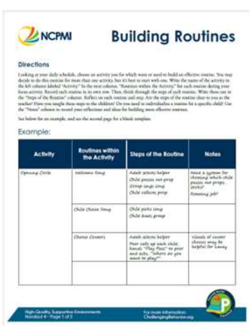

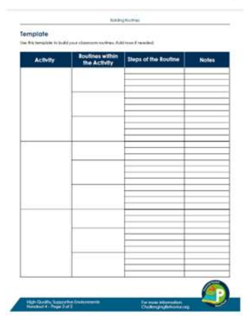

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Step 5: Make a plan to balance the behavior equation…

1. Which problems are we going to solve? (no more than 3)
2. How are we going to respond to Plan A and Plan C problems?
3. Who will attempt a plan B conversation with the child?
4. What thinking skill supports are we going to put in place?
   a. Language and Communication
   b. Emotion and Self-Regulation
   c. Cognitive Flexibility
   d. Attention and Working Memory
   e. Social Thinking
5. What materials do we need and who will gather them?
6. When in the daily schedule are we going to practice new skills?
7. How are we going to take data?

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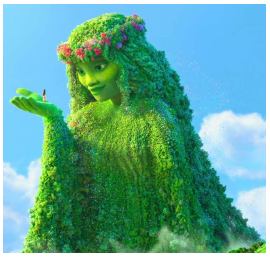
Who can help?

- Counselor
- SLP, OT, BCBA, Psychologist
- Itinerant teachers
- Community in Schools
- Social Worker
- Caregivers
- Link
- WV BMHTAC
- WV Autism Training Center
  - ATC Registration for Services Form | Dynamic Forms (ngwebsolutions.com)



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Strive to Be Curious, Not Furious

- **Watch**—Become a great observer of child behavior
- **Pause and plan**: use plans A, B and C strategically
- **Wait**—Give the child an opportunity to initiate
- **Prompt** when needed, but work to avoid prompt dependence
- **Follow the Child's Lead**—Let them show you what they can do and what's hard
- **Praise** the process not necessarily the outcome

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When children enter kindergarten, the key question is not whether they know the alphabet or can add and subtract.

Instead, the important skills include impulse control, attention span, emotional regulation. These abilities don't develop on their own. Instead, the relevant regions of the brain need to be activated — and often, since the brain's networks are strengthened through practice.

Amanda Tarullo, P.h.D., director of the Brain and Early Experiences Laboratory at Boston University

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https://www.bu.edu/cdl/

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Resources

https://thinkkids.org/books-resources/

www.challengingbehavior.org

https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/a-guide-to-executive-function/

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- Sumpter, Tera (2021). *The Seeds of Learning: A Cognitive Processing Model for Speech, Language and Executive Functioning,* ELH Publishing

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Thank you!

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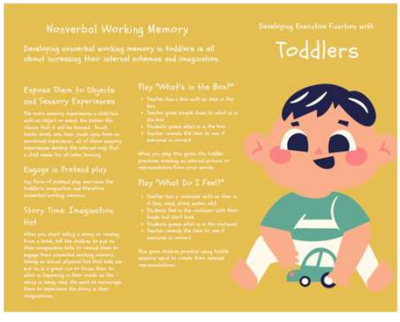

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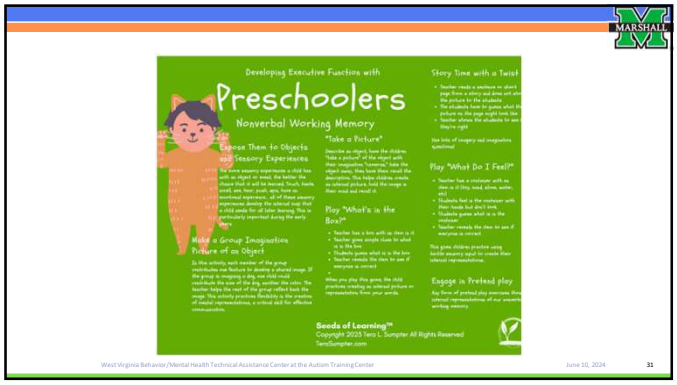
Developing Executive Functions with
Preschoolers
Nonverbal Working Memory
Expose Them to Objects and Sensory Experiences
Make a Group Imagination Picture of an Object
"Take a Picture"
Play "What's in the Box?"
Story Time with a Twist
Play "What Do I Feel?"
Engage in Pretend play
Seeds of Learning℠
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June 10, 2024
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