

HOW THE Brain Influences Behavior

Management Strategies
for Every Classroom

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Contents

ABOUT THE AUTHOR	ix
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
Are Behavior Problems on the Rise?	1
Can Neuroscience Help?	1
About This Book	3
Questions This Book Will Answer	4
Chapter Contents	4
Other Helpful Tools	6
CHAPTER 1 — Handling Social Misbehavior	7
The Social and Emotional Brain	7
Emotional Processing	8
Pathways of Emotional Signals	13
What Leads to Social Misbehavior?	15
The Teacher Is the Key	17
Interventions for Handling Social Misbehavior	18
Dealing With Social Anxieties	18
Using Social Stories to Modify Behavior	20
A Case Study: Using a Social Story for a Verbally Aggressive Student	22
A Social Story for Angry Students	26
Summary	29
CHAPTER 2 — Dealing With Impulsive Behavior	31
What Leads to Impulsivity and Violent Behavior	31
Genetic Variations	31
Prenatal Exposure to Cocaine	32
Cerebral Lesions	33
An Important Word About Testosterone	34
Ignorance of Rules of Behavior	35
Some Strategies for Controlling Impulsive Behavior	35
Cognitive and Cognitive-Behavioral Interventions	35
Putting Impulsive Problem Behavior in a Social Context	38

Using Picture Books to Curb Impulsive Anger or Anxiety	38
Other Suggested Strategies	42
Summary	43
CHAPTER 3 — Teaching Self-Control Through Self-Verbalization	45
Examining Self-Control	45
What Is Self-Control?	45
Are Children Learning Self-Control?	46
Brain Structures for Self-Control	46
Do Mirror Neurons Play a Role in Self-Control?	47
Losing Self-Control	48
Helping Students Regain Self-Control	50
Verbal Self-Control of Aggressive, Defiant, or Other Behavior	51
The Power of Self-Talk	51
The ZIPPER Strategy	52
“Say No and Walk Away” to Resist Peer Pressure	56
Self-Control Through Self-Talk and Self-Monitoring	57
The Nature of Attention	57
Self-Monitoring for Other Problem Behaviors	64
Self-Control Through Self-Rating of Emotional Intensity	65
The Anger Thermometer	65
Summary	66
CHAPTER 4 — Managing the Behavior of Boys	67
Why a Concern With Boys?	67
Gender Differences in Behavior	68
Genetic and Environmental Factors	68
Impact of Biology	69
Some Research Findings on Behavioral Differences	72
Using Research-Based Strategies	73
Movement-Based Instruction and Classroom Management	73
Boy-Friendly Instruction and Discipline	77
The Responsibility Strategy	81
And What About Girls?	87
The Rise of Cyberbullying	88
Bullying Versus Cyberbullying	88
Dealing With Cyberbullying	90
Summary	91
CHAPTER 5 — Building Positive Relationships With Troubled Students	93
Relationships and Research	93
Insights From Neuroscience	94
Some Research Findings	95

Developing Teacher-Student Relationships	98
The Importance of Positive Relationships With and For Students	98
Reaching Unreachable Students With Dialogue Journals	100
The Lunch Bunch: An Educator’s Idea	104
Managing Serious Behavior Problems Through Adult Mentoring	105
Summary	114
CHAPTER 6 — Using Peer Relationships to Modify Behavior	115
Examining Peer Relationships	115
Dealing With Peer Influence: A Two-Edged Sword	116
The Desire to Be Liked	118
Peer-Mediated Behavior Management Strategies	119
Peer-Mediated Anger Management	119
Factors to Consider in Peer Mediation	120
Peer Confrontation to Curb Misbehavior	124
The Mystery Motivator/Mystery Character Intervention to Decrease Inappropriate Behavior	129
Group Contingency Interventions	131
Summary	135
CHAPTER 7 — Managing Oppositional Behavior	137
What Is Oppositional Behavior?	137
Causes of Oppositional Behavior	137
Students With Oppositional Behavior in the Classroom	139
Teacher Knowledge of Oppositional Behavior	140
Teacher Frustration and Countercontrol	141
Defiant Students: Explosions Waiting to Happen	144
Avoiding Triggers for Misbehavior in the Classroom	147
Teaching Students to Relax	149
Other Strategies	154
What About Oppositional Defiant Disorder? (ODD)	155
Development of ODD	156
Treatment of ODD	156
Summary	157
CHAPTER 8 — Developing Positive Self-Esteem	159
The Nature of Self-Esteem	159
The Power of Self-Esteem	160
Research on Self-Esteem	161
Guidelines for Building Self-Esteem	164
Building a New Perspective on the Troubled Student:	
The Strength-Based Assessment	165
What Is Strength-Based Assessment?	165

Motivation and Attribution Retraining	168
Motivation Research and Attribution Theory	168
The “Shine My Light” Strategy	174
Summary	178
CHAPTER 9 — Putting it All Together	179
Educational Climate: Are We Happy Here?	179
What is Classroom Climate?	179
The Biology of Happiness	180
Successful Behavior Management in the Classroom	183
Assessing Classroom Climate	184
Classroom Management and Cultural Diversity	188
Guidelines for Managing Diverse Classes	189
Positive Behavioral Supports in the Classroom	191
What Are Positive Behavioral Supports?	191
The Functional Assessment of Behavior	193
The Behavioral Improvement Plan	193
Multitiered Interventions and the Student Support Team	195
Summary	202
Conclusion	203
APPENDIX	205
GLOSSARY	223
REFERENCES	227
RESOURCES	241
INDEX	247

Introduction

ARE BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS ON THE RISE?

Teachers today face many challenges. Not only must they present curriculum content in a meaningful way, but they are also expected to be drug, family, and guidance counselors, health care workers, as well as technology users and monitors. At the same time, they must check for weapons, maintain a safe and positive classroom climate, and deal with disruptive behavior. This last responsibility is demanding a greater portion of teacher time as the number of students with consistent behavioral problems appears to be growing.

The good news is that, despite the public perception, the number of threats and physical attacks against public and private school teachers, as well as the number of fights between students, have actually been declining significantly over the past 10 years. However, the number of disciplinary actions taken by schools in response to less serious behavioral offenses has increased over the same period of time. Whether this increase is the result of more behavioral problems or just more vigilant enforcement of stricter school policies is not clear. What is clear is that teachers report more incidents of disruptive classroom behavior than in the past (Dinkes, Cataldi, Kena, & Baum, 2006).

Can Neuroscience Help?

Trying to figure out what is happening in the brains of students with behavior problems can be frustrating and exhausting. Until recently, science could tell us little about the causes of inappropriate behaviors and even less about ways to address them successfully. For hundreds of years, observing human behavior was the only method researchers had to study how the brain worked. Through these observations, psychologists made educated guesses about which brain systems processed a stimulus and which systems directed the response. However, technology to detect the brain's electric and magnetic waves and, more recently, the development of brain imaging devices have added significantly to our understanding of how the brain controls behavior.

Types of Brain Imaging

Many people today are aware of brain imaging but may not be familiar with nature of the technology. Here is a brief review of the various techniques for looking inside the living brain. The

imaging technologies fall into two major categories: those that look at brain *structure* and those that look at brain *function*. When aimed at the brain, computerized axial tomography (CAT or CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) are very useful diagnostic tools that produce computer images of the brain's internal structure. For example, they can detect tumors, malformations, and the damage caused by cerebral hemorrhages.

Different technologies, however, are required to look at how the brain works. An alphabet soup describes the four most common procedures that can be used to isolate and identify the areas of the brain where distinct levels of activity are occurring. The scanning technologies for looking at brain function mentioned in this book are the following:

- Electroencephalography (EEG)
- Magnetoencephalography (MEG)
- Positron Emission Tomography (PET)
- Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI)

Here is a brief explanation of how each one works:

Electroencephalography (EEG) and Magnetoencephalography (MEG). These two techniques are helpful in determining how quickly something occurs in the brain. To do that, they measure electrical and magnetic activity occurring in the brain during mental processing. In an EEG, anywhere from 19 to 128 electrodes are attached to various positions on the scalp with a conductive gel so electrical signals can be recorded in a computer. In a MEG, about 100 magnetic detectors are placed around the head to record magnetic activity. EEGs and MEGs can record changes in brain activity that occur as rapidly as one millisecond (one-thousandth of a second). When a group of neurons responds to a specific event, they activate and their electrical and magnetic activity can be detected above the noise of the nonactivated neurons. EEG and MEG do not expose the subject to radiation and are not considered hazardous.

Positron Emission Tomography (PET). The first technology to observe brain functions, this technique involves injecting the subject with a radioactive solution that circulates to the brain. Brain regions of higher activity accumulate more of the radiation, which is picked up by a ring of detectors around the subject's head. A computer displays the concentration of radiation as a picture of blood flow in a cross-sectional slice of the brain regions that are aligned with the detectors. The picture is in color, with the more active areas in reds and yellows, the quieter areas in blues and greens. Two major drawbacks to PET scans are the invasive nature of the injection and the use of radioactive materials. Consequently, this technique is not used with typical children because the radioactive risk is too high.

Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI). This newer technology is rapidly replacing PET scans because it is painless, noninvasive, and does not use radiation. The technology helps to pinpoint the brain areas of greater and lesser activity. Its operation is based on the fact that when any part of the brain becomes more active, the need for oxygen and nutrients increases.

The baseline and intervention data showed that this technique was effective for both Henrico and Alfred. Mr. Goff had kept baseline data for five days on both Alfred and Henrico, as shown in Figure 7.2. After the class was trained in this intervention, Mr. Goff used the turtle for various students in the class, and continued to count and chart the misbehavior of Henrico and Alfred. The behavior of each of these students improved considerably, and Alfred's defiant behaviors were almost eliminated.

Using the Turtle Technique

You can use the turtle technique in the following ways:

- As shown in Mr. Goff's scenario, instruct specific students to "Do a turtle" when those students begin to lose control or display inappropriate behavior. This often prevents disruptive behaviors thereby improving the climate for the entire class.
- Individual students should be allowed and encouraged to "Do a turtle" when they feel the need to do so because they are angry or their feelings have been hurt. This teaches students with oppositional behavior that they do have some control over their feelings and over the environment.
- You can tell the entire class to "Do a turtle" when conflict arises that may get out of control, as when students are arguing loudly or when they are fighting. It also removes the audience for the misbehavior.
- In certain situations, you may wish to teach this technique to only one or two students who need help controlling their emotions. This technique is particularly effective for students with oppositional behavior because both the student and you can observe the signs of an impending emotional outburst. In those cases, explain to the class that when Henrico has his head down, the class should ignore him and not talk to him or about him.

Relaxation Strategies for Older Students

Various relaxation strategies have been shown to be effective for students with emotional problems at all grade levels (Kellner & Turtin, 1995; Lopata, 2003; Lopata, Nida, & Marable, 2006).

Adapting the turtle. For older students in grades four to 12, you may wish to use the same general technique as "Do a turtle" described earlier without referring to the turtle. Rather, use the

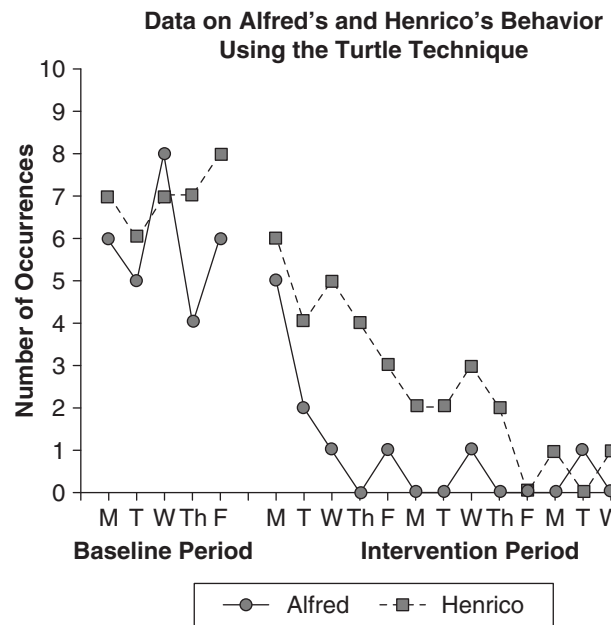


Figure 7.2 The graph shows the frequency of Alfred's and Henrico's misbehaviors during the one week baseline period and the three weeks of intervention using the "do the turtle" technique.

<i>ABC Log of _____ (Student) Anger Behavior</i>			
<i>Day/Date</i>	<i>Antecedent</i>	<i>Behavior</i>	<i>Consequences</i>

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