

## CHAPTER TWO

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# *Conjunction Junction, What's the Behavior's Function?*

I have heard many explanations given for why children engage in behaviors that are undesirable to adults. “He’s just like his brother (daddy, uncle, godmother, imaginary friend Pogo),” “He’s just bad,” “He’s being manipulative,” and “He’s trying my nerves on purpose” are some popular explanations. Genetics, personality disorders or flaws, assuming the mother or father (or both) are frequent imbibers of crack cocaine, and expressing the firm conviction that the student in question is possessed by demons are yet other explanations of behavior problems I have heard from school personnel. In the interest of intellectual honesty, I must confess that functional behavioral assessment (FBA) has not been shown to be useful if a target behavior is the result of demonic possession.

It is certainly true that genetics play a significant role in human behavior, but even genetics, at least to an extent, are at the mercy of the environment. For example, perhaps you carry a gene that could result in your becoming an Olympic-class weight lifter under ideal circumstances and with world-class training, but rather than maximizing your Olympic weight lifting potential, you live off of the land in the middle of a virgin forest (if you can still find one). You live in such a manner, in fact, that you are offered your own television program during which, on a weekly basis, you teach survival strategies to people who need to know the survival skills associated with ordering

takeout pizza; also, you dig through piles of scat and look for clues that will tell you what animal left them, and you eat bugs. Under these circumstances, genetics or not, it is unlikely that you will become an Olympic weight lifter. The other explanations mentioned above have not been found empirically to matter (or even, at least from an empirical perspective, exist). So, what are factors that are actually involved in most undesirable school behaviors?

## THE REAL BEHAVIORAL CULPRITS

Research has shown that only a few things serve as the function for the majority of misbehavior at school: attention, escape, tangible items, and sensory input issues (sometimes called automatic reinforcement). Though you may see alternative lists of functions in other places that vary somewhat, the four listed above are invariably going to be on those lists and probably cover everything that you need to think about. It is not unusual for “having control” to be on a list of behavioral functions. However, if you ask yourself “Control over what?” we often get back to our listed four. For many people, thinking about behavior in terms of these four commonly identified functions represents a true paradigm shift in behavior intervention.

In education, we throw around terms like *paradigm shift* all the time without really knowing what the terms mean. Your lunch date, despite his claim, did not experience a paradigm shift when he decided to order a salad instead of a cheeseburger. He simply experienced what is referred to as a bad choice. A paradigm shift refers to a change in your worldview. Again, for many people, approaching assessment and intervention from the perspective of behavior serving a purpose instead of behavior reflecting internal inadequacies and personality flaws is a paradigm shift that is capitulated by Waller's Sixth Rule of Child Behavior Management: *Any undesirable childhood behavior can be made inefficient, ineffective, or unnecessary unless you forget that the behavior serves a purpose for that child.*

### Attention

Attention is one of the most powerful phenomena that impact the development of human behavior. This point will be repeated because it is crucial. All of us have the need for interaction with and

attention from others, although some few people may not seem to have the desire. In children, attention from adults is a developmental need that they must have met. If you compare our current human condition to our very distant ancestors, you will notice that, over time, as we adapted and learned, our brains grew bigger and bigger except for our brother-in-law. Other mammals are usually born with rudimentary skills necessary for survival. They have instincts, they know some creatures are friends and some are dangerous, they can swim or walk and run almost immediately after birth, so they can keep up with the herd.

Not us. Our brains got bigger and bigger. Convolutions in the brain appeared, resulting in the ability for even more brain to be wadded into our skulls. We cram a lot of brain into our skull. If you go and look into a mirror, you will probably notice that the head you see with all the brain in it is much larger than that very same head was as it left the birth canal. Our heads continue to grow long after we are born, and the brain is not completely developed until a person is in their twenties. If human babies were born with heads the size of the one you see in the mirror, I think it's safe to say that the birth rate would be drastically lower than it is and that those offspring who were born would resemble bobble heads.

The trade-off that humans make for our brains continuing to grow substantially after birth is that our newborns are much more dependent on us—and for a much longer time—than most other animals. Because of the enormous amount of growth and maturation that occurs in humans and human brains after we are born, our newborns depend on us for everything. They depend on us for their survival much longer than most of our planetary partners.

To survive, babies must be able to efficiently obtain attention from adults. Within minutes of life, they start to get our attention by crying. If hungry, afraid, thirsty, dirty, cold, scared, or maybe just bored, they will cry to get our attention. Not long thereafter their attention-getting technique has refined itself into their attempting to get our attention by consuming dust bunnies and an occasional moth. Developmentally, and to survive, children continue to need our attention and to try various methods of getting it, such that, by the time they are 13, they get our attention by ridiculously asking if they can borrow our credit card and feigning surprise when we say no. Both crying and asking to borrow our credit card are getting our attention in ways that might be described by

some adults as unpleasant. Loud recordings of crying babies, in fact, is a method of acceptable torture to those who find torture acceptable.

Regardless of whether we find the mechanism by which they get our attention pleasant or unpleasant, children have a developmental need—in fact, they have a developmental mandate—to be able to get our attention as efficiently as possible, and they have that need for a very long time. Sometimes children get our attention most effectively by doing something that we find unpleasant such as moving back into our homes when they are fully grown because we foolishly neglected to change our locks or move when they left for college. In the classroom, they may get our attention in ways we find unpleasant, such as frequently calling out in class about things unrelated to the academic content being taught.

Attention is also something that children may sometimes want to avoid. For example, a kindergarten boy with an autism spectrum disorder learned that he could avoid the attention of his teacher by saying and repeating the phrase, “Smacking that ass, smacking that ass. . . .” While repeating this phrase, his right hand would begin at about shoulder height with palm facing inward, then completing a semicircle by arcing this hand in a half moon motion that drew a pattern representing a backward letter “c,” then coming to an abrupt stop at the level of his waist, truly imitating the type of hand movement that one would indeed use to spur a reluctant plow mule to move onward. When he did these things in class, a paraprofessional, whose attention the boy desired a great deal, would remove him from the room and walk him around until he stopped these somewhat distracting verbalizations.

## **Escape**

We are born with limited ability to escape. A baby can escape from something painful by twitching a limb away. We quickly acquire more ability to escape from things that are emotionally painful—things that are frightening, things that make us anxious, and things we find unpleasant. Advanced adult escape techniques include feigning illness from work so that we can go to televised sporting events featuring vehicles with large tires and mud. Escape is a common phenomenon in schools as well and can take many forms. Even extremely young children can become unreasonably and strongly avoidant (sometimes, depending on severity of avoidance, referred to as “phobic”) to different things, settings, and circumstances.

Many of us have heard the famous story of Little Albert. Psychologist J. B. Watson was interested in anxiety and avoidance and set out to see if he could actually cause someone, in this case Little Albert, to be afraid of something (a white rat). Stated very simply, Little Albert was shown pictures of a white rat and, as soon as he looked at the rat, a loud bang was made behind him. When the noise was made, Little Albert would be startled, begin to cry, and attempt to move away. After combining the picture with the noise a few times, Little Albert started to cry and tried to escape from just the picture of a rat whether the noise was paired with it or not. Little Albert now escaped from the rat whenever it appeared. Not only did he escape from the rat, but he escaped from a lot of other hairy white things that had not been paired with the unpleasant noise because his fear generalized to other similar objects.

Think about this in relation to a child in the school environment. Children are taken from settings in which they often are comfortable—if for no other reason than because it is familiar to them—and know the adults and children around them. They are placed in a milieu in which they may be acquainted with nobody. They are not allowed freedom of access and freedom of choice that they have probably had before. Any of these new people, situations, or settings could cause anxiety and trigger the desire to escape. Further, by definition, children are in a place where they don't know how to do the things they are being asked to do! It is not uncommon, therefore, for students to develop a tendency to avoid numerous stimuli associated with the school environment.

## **Tangibles**

We live in a capitalist society. We are a people that love stuff. From the time that they can process information with their sensorium, children are bombarded with words, sounds, and images, the aim of which is to convince kids that they need stuff, that they absolutely cannot live without stuff. By the time they have entered school, most children have seen thousands of advertisements and have actually already established many brand preferences. It is neither unusual nor unexpected, given our obsession with stuff, for a problem behavior to serve the purpose of giving the child access to tangible items.

Even in the school environment, children often have material needs that parents are expected to meet such as notebooks, pencils, paper, and other supply-related things. The possession of some stuff

or some brands of stuff can provide more status to students with these popular brands than those students without such socially desirable things. Our societal emphasis on stuff affects our behavior in some ways that may be good but certainly in other ways that are not.

To attempt to have every student ready with all supplies they need, parents often get supply lists of the stuff that students are supposed to bring when they start school. However, some parents, whether unwilling, unaware, or unable, fail to provide supplies that teachers request that their students have. A graduate student came to me one night before class and told me that, at the school in which she taught, a bulletin board in the main hallway was dedicated to publicizing the names of students who had not brought in their listed supplies. My student told me that the teachers in the school called the bulletin board "the wall of shame." I was certain that she must be mistaken, that no responsible adult would allow such a thing, let alone create such a situation.

The next day, I called the school and found out that my student was correct and that the wall of shame stood as surely and more dramatically, at least to students in that school, as does the Wall of China. I expressed my opinion strongly about the inappropriateness of this display and was told that the wall of shame would come down immediately. Children are under more than enough pressure to meet certain standards, to see certain movies, to have a certain type of binder and book bag, and to wear brand-name clothes to easily explain why they might engage in certain behaviors to get preferred tangible items.

## **Sensory Stimulation**

If you drive down any road, and I hope that you won't for the following reason, you will observe adults who are driving down the very same road as you while meeting their own need for sensory input in a number of ways that distract them from the task of driving; in doing so, they put themselves at risk of acquiring the sensory stimulation one receives by guiding a motorized vehicle into a tree. I have seen all manner of activities occurring in motorized vehicles, and I will only list activities that I have personally seen from drivers of moving cars: reading, singing, eating, watching DVDs, and engaging in hygiene activities that I would not want them to do in my car. Among the most interesting was a person who passed me when driving on an interstate highway while consuming a quarter section of what had recently been a large watermelon.

### **Multitasking in a busy world**

In the constant quest for stimulation, we can watch podcasts while walking, listen to music on elevators, and I even saw television screens installed and playing away above the pumps at a local gas station. We have important family conversations with a really good movie playing in the background. At work, we can use our computers to alternate between work that we do for money and shopping-related Web surfing that we do to throw away our money while talking on the phone while listening to the radio while a peaceful personal desk-size water fountain flows behind us, its meditative trickle filling us with that Zen-like serenity that characterizes American life.

We are multitasking. Of course, we are not really multitasking. We are switching our attention from one task to the next. Our brains can only attend to one cognitive task at a time—some coworkers not even that many—but we pretend we can do many things all at the same time. It suits our fast-paced society. We are constantly bombarded with stimuli. So it comes as little surprise that among the most common behavior problems I hear teachers talk about include behaviors like pencil tapping, humming, drumming, and seat dancing. These behaviors enrich the sensory environment, with students attempting to create for themselves the raucous and unceasing sensory input that they typically experience in other settings and that your geography lesson strangely doesn't gratify.

Our children are not immune to the expectation of constant sensory input that we have created, so it is inevitable that they will sometimes, probably even frequently, engage in behaviors like the ones mentioned above. We have become stimulation junkies. Today's children are, in a sense, especially during lectures and other passive learning activities, in a state of sensory deprivation. These behaviors, however, are unpleasant or annoying to many teachers and might be considered undesirable school behaviors.

### **To thine own self be true**

Ironically, if we place a teacher who doesn't like student pencil tapping into a room with no computer, radio, television, or handheld battery-operated poker game, with no source of sensory input besides the drone of a college professor, he will almost certainly, within minutes, begin a pattern of fidgeting that often rapidly progresses to humming, drumming, seat dancing, and pencil tapping. I know this because the teacher I'm describing is in my college classes right now.

My point here is that, believe it or not, adults have the same basic needs and responses that children have. Sometimes it helps with intervention planning to acknowledge that children doing similar things to what we might also do in similar circumstances are not lazy or distracting, they are normal. Children and adults share the same types of need and respond, whether positively or negatively, to similar stimuli. Further, I find it quite interesting that the same instructional strategies that facilitate the most learning and retention in children facilitate the same outcome for adults. Regardless of age, we are all human.

### **SKILLS DEFICITS IN UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIOR**

A phenomenon frequently implicated in the development and maintenance of classroom behavior problems is the issue of skills deficits. Skills deficits deserve to have a discussion of their own because skills deficits are frequently associated with disruptive school behavior. As a matter of fact, it is wise to assume that the function of any disruptive behavior seen in the classroom is either correlated with skills deficits or a skills deficit was the cause of the development and is involved in the maintenance of the behavior. Skills deficits can be the seed from which any classroom behavioral problem grows. Skills deficits can synergistically impact any of the above four functions of a target behavior and worsen that target behavior.

An area of skills deficit that is intuitively associated with classroom behavioral challenges is academic skills deficits. If a child is not, for example, reading as fluently as same-aged peers, she will quickly find herself behind in this instructional area. How does this relate to behavior? A student who cannot keep up with class work may be left sitting, unable to participate. In the best of circumstances, boredom can ensue, and you know the saying about idle hands. The student who cannot keep up academically is also less likely to have access to positive adult attention from the teacher, and, as discussed previously, children will get attention from adults one way or another because they must.

Without access to positive attention that the other students receive by actively and successfully participating in the lesson, the student who is struggling academically may well begin to access teacher attention in a negative way. A dangerous downward spiral of



undesirable classroom behavior, often accompanied by coercive attempts to stop this behavior, can be the undesirable outcome. A student unable to keep pace academically may also, in very subtle ways, become ostracized from other students in the classroom. If the teacher gives the struggling student a preponderance of negative feedback related to the content area of difficulty, other students may begin to view the struggling student in a negative way. This is particularly true for children in the younger grades.

The effect can be similar if, rather than giving attention comprised mostly of corrective feedback, the teacher gives a struggling student more negative attention than is given to the other students. If the classroom teacher is very diligent in not giving a struggling student a lot of negative attention and focuses on being positive with all children, the students may gravitate away from a struggling student all the same. Kids know who “gets it” and who doesn’t. A struggling student is also likely to experience negative emotions—like embarrassment—if she feels that she is not as smart as the other students. Negative emotions can build upon themselves—in fact they tend *to* build on themselves—so embarrassment may ultimately become frustration and anger. In any event, these negative emotions are highly unlikely to make school feel like a safe, nurturing place to be or to promote a lifelong love of learning.

Such negative emotions are completely contrary to learning. If the struggling student feels isolated enough to eventually drop out of school, we know that statistically she has placed herself in a very high-risk category for additional, ongoing problems in life. If the struggling student gets ostracized from peers, statistically the odds are likewise against her experiencing positive outcomes. If exiled from a positive peer group, a student is much more likely to get in with the wrong crowd and begin a cycle of problematic behavior that can be difficult to change. This leads inexorably to Waller’s Seventh Rule of Child Behavior Management: *In school, there is no wrong crowd, and don’t create one.*

### **Consider Their Point of View**

As adults, we have the ability—at least to some extent—to contextually avoid things that we find aversive. For example—if a family member calls us on the telephone—usually a family member who has a history of calling on the telephone when he wants to borrow some

money—we can use caller ID to avoid answering these undesirable calls. We will do this because the family member in question wants to borrow money in the same sense that he would borrow a piece of chewing gum. Thanks to caller ID, we do not have to forego talking on the telephone to sincere and empathetic telemarketers just so that we can avoid someone who wants to unscrupulously talk us out of our money.

Children, however, have much less freedom to contextually avoid. Thus, the student doing badly in math—since his coming to school at all means that he is unlikely to be able to avoid math—may generalize his dislike of one academic subject to becoming a student who doesn't want to come to school for any reason, similarly to the way that Little Albert generalized his fear from white things to many white objects such as the beard of Santa Claus.

## **THE PROBLEM OF STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT**

Many children today do not seem to be invested in the school environment. We, the adults and rulers of the world, express concern about what we perceive to be their lack of investment because we want our children to grow up and be functional enough to remain employed and contribute their payroll taxes, indirectly, to our social security retirement benefits. Adults, therefore, are likely to perceive children's lack of interest or success in school as a bigger problem than said children. It is often heard in popular media sources that our schools lag academically behind the educational programs in other parts of the world such that it is more reasonable to expect to receive accurately computed right angles from a (marching) penguin in Antarctica than from a high school student in your neighborhood.

### **Increasing the Difficulty of Unmet Standards**

One of the primary ways that this perceived lack of smarts is being addressed is that federal and state educational mandates are putting in place much stricter curriculum requirements. More simply, the solution to the problem of assuming children are not invested or successful in schools is that the government mandate approached solving the problem by making school harder. This is the kind of reasoning that would lead you, if you were the manager of a baseball team, to solve the problem of addressing your best pitcher's

poor performance tonight by gluing the fingers of his pitching hand to the toes of his left foot prior to his next game. Imposing more rigorous curriculum standards for students who may already be struggling is not the only corrective policy being implemented. We are also addressing the needs of students who are not invested in the school community and feel disconnected from school curriculum by providing them with fewer curricular choices. For example, some states have already done away with the vocational high school diploma track. In these places, students can choose any high school diploma track they want as long as it is the college preparatory track.

It certainly may be more challenging to maintain the interests of students who are understandably more concerned with mastering a video game involving the safety and welfare of a character whose very lives—all three of them—depend on his avoiding barrels being thrown at him by a large monkey than with getting students to maintain attention on school content that seems to have no purpose to them. However, children can become invested in pursuing and obtaining school success. A child's largest social network is made available to them by and, in essence, a child's job is going to school. She may gripe about school, but, if school is a safe and interesting place and if she were given a few days off, she would probably begin to ask to go back to school, if for no other reason than being able to fight the craving for those tasty cafeteria steak nuggets no longer. My youngest daughter, for example, recently received a peanut butter and jelly sandwich from her school cafeteria that was frozen. Think of the extra love and effort that went into providing a child with a frozen PB&J.

Academic skills deficits can be difficult to identify because children often try to mask such insufficiency to avoid negative attention and embarrassment. In contrast, a student in the school setting who has deficits in important social skills is often as immediately obvious as having surgery with a deficit of anesthesia. Any child is capable, under the right (or wrong) circumstances, of developing social skills deficits that can have a dramatic negative impact on the school experience. It is not an issue of character, genetics, or intelligence; it's a matter of learning.

### **There's Nothing Social About Social Skills Deficits**

We can assume that Peanut, handsome rascal that he is, simply radiates social gravitas. However, any child can miss learning an important social skill, and you can't tell that a needed skill is absent

by how a child looks. Once a needed social skill goes unlearned, it is easy for the unlearned social skill to negatively impact Peanut's social interaction and to begin even in small ways to limit his social environment. The more isolated he becomes, the more likely Peanut is to miss learning even more social skills, so much so that within weeks Peanut has become so socially ostracized that his only realistic vocational opportunity is hand modeling. Strangely—and this is one reason that social skills can be easily misinterpreted as willful problem causing—Peanut may be able to verbally tell you what the social skill involves, though he can still be unable to perform that skill in applied social situations.

Before you assume that I have recently consumed a beverage derived from certain varieties of mushrooms, consider the following. Has there ever been anyone in your social world who, though not particularly unlikeable, inspired in you a desire to avoid their company, similar to the way that the smell of dog food inspires you want to avoid eating it? This person maybe looked at the wrong place on your face when talking to you. Maybe this person blinked his eyes way too much. Maybe this person stood too close to you when talking. How could this person, an otherwise reasonably intelligent adult related to you only by marriage, arrive at the point of making you so uncomfortable and so strongly filling you with a desire to avoid him? A subtle dearth of social skills, that's why. Whatever the reason the social skills were not learned, the result is that among your most cherished longings is not to have to sit next to this person every stinking year at Thanksgiving, just like your students will avoid ostracized students at lunch or in group work and other situations.

Think about the social skills listed above that are so genetically deficient among your in-laws. How did you learn these skills? Did your mother tell you how frequently to blink your eyes when conversing with another person? Did your father walk around the mall with you, going up to people with a yardstick in his hand and teaching you how far to stand from someone you talk with (although, as the father of daughters, I may give this idea some more thought). These are social skills that we learned by interacting in social situations with others and from the model provided by others. Through the process of watching others and by trial-and-error practice, you learned to interact with people in a way that is not bizarre to them.

## Looks Can Be Deceiving

Peanut is a bright, good-looking kid. There is no obvious reason that his social skills would not be at least as good as his peers. But assume for a moment that Peanut is just not a good visual learner. He didn't learn how far to stand from somebody he was talking with the same way that most other people in the world except your brother-in-law learned. He consistently stands too close to people. As a result, people may become inclined to avoid Peanut. Unfortunately, because most people learn many of their social skills from the models provided by other people and by trial-and-error practice and correction, being avoided by others results in Peanut acquiring fewer age-appropriate social skills, too. The process builds on itself, and Peanut becomes the kind of social pariah that invariably sits right behind you every time you go to the theater and has what sounds like a highly communicable coughing illness.

Even if you told Peanut to stand exactly 27 inches away from someone he is talking with, he is unlikely to pick up the skill just from receiving verbal instructions. Do you have a yardstick in your pocket? Do you know how far 27 inches from another person is? You can tell Peanut to stand 27 inches from someone he is talking with *every* day for a year, and there is still a good chance that Peanut will not be able to put the skill into real-world application without lots of real-world, applied practice and positive corrective feedback.

After extensive practicing of social skills involved in making conversation with you, and even after getting good at them with you, he may still fail miserably if he tries to engage in conversation with, say, a girl his age. Those two conversations are entirely different, so he may or may not generalize skills in having conversations with you to having a conversation with a peer. We do not need to strive for perfection in Peanut's social skills repertoire, such that he is likely to be invited to enjoy high tea with the ridiculously dressed royal sovereign of another country or maybe even a third runner-up from American Idol, but we do want Peanut to have functional social skills that promote successful peer interaction.

The outcomes of not possessing social skills that facilitate successful interaction with peers can vary, but the path often leads to behavior challenges. I have seen social skills deficits manifest in Peanut in a variety of ways. Unable to start conversations in a way that promotes peer interaction, he may resort to frequent name calling as a method of initiating social interaction. I have seen Peanut smack peers

and laugh or smack and then run away giggling. I have seen Peanut grab purses and pencils and notebooks. These behaviors are often Peanut's attempts to engage his peers socially, and the attempts are successful at getting attention and responses. Unfortunately, these behaviors, getting the wrong kind of attention, create a larger social schism between Peanut and his peers as well as disrupting the classroom. I also have seen Peanut become completely unproductive in terms of academic output and begin to sleep through the school days. In fact, the most challenging students I have ever worked with have been adolescent males who were completely isolated from peers and who had responded by sleeping through the school day. These problems, though, can be caught early or circumnavigated completely. The most important thing to remember in striving for these goals is that social skills can be taught, taught, TAUGHT.

Knowing that skills deficits can be the starting point for behavior problems, you may have made the next logical inference: some target behaviors exist entirely because a student has skills deficits. If you, therefore, catch these target behaviors early and remediate skills deficits quickly, you will probably not need further intervention. Very recently I conducted training on function-based intervention planning for a group of school psychologists. During a break, one of them approached me and told me a story of a situation at her school that perfectly illustrates a very undesirable target behavior solely resulting from skills deficits. Prepare yourself mentally, physically, and spiritually, and I will share:

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### **The Sordid Saga of the Mystery Pooper**

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As the first day of school came to a close, the administrative staff reflected on how things had gone. There were no major behavior problems, no major parent problems, and no major teacher problems. There had been a few minor disruptions, but nothing that exceeded the normally expected issues endemic to first days back at school. Not until, that is, the nightmare began.

This nightmare began where all school nightmares begin—in the principal's office. The principal had already labeled today a success and his mind had shifted away from school and to his evening. His reverie was shattered when a custodian burst into the office. The custodian's face told the whole story—follow me, we have big trouble. The principal followed the custodian into the bathroom and the custodian stopped in front of the last urinal in line. The custodian took one step sideways, and the principal saw. Saw and

remembered. Someone had entered this room for the typical reason, but they had used the urinal for a purpose it was not designed. This grizzled veteran of educational leadership had two reactions: shock and awe.

After thinking about this event, surely the strangest he had ever seen outside of a parent teacher association meeting, the principal decided that this adulteration of school property was probably just a horrible prank to begin the school year with an event worthy of a yearbook write-up. Better to just let things pass quietly and move forward with the business that he was paid to tackle—keeping talking to a minimum in the lunchroom. Or so he thought until he was struck low by a dirty bomb the very next day. The elusive excrementitious errant had done it again.

The principal decided on a course of action. Wanting to tolerate no quarter, his course involved calling in the big guns. Thus, he circulated a memorandum carrying the full weight and power of the office from which it came. The decree was that teachers would periodically walk into the bathrooms and make sure that there was nothing heinous occurring. This show of force, surely the most intimidating the world has seen since the NATO Alliance, would serve the purpose of preventing such a disrespectful display from fouling his school again. Unfathomably, though, the fearsome might and terrible visage of a vigilant teaching staff did not serve as an effective deterrent. The fouling continued day after day without interruption. By Friday, the teachers were in a state of unrestrained terror, not knowing where or when the culprit would strike next. This state of unrestrained terror was probably unnecessary, however, since the crime, committed with the stealth of a coconut-scented tropical breeze, occurred in exactly the same bathroom and in exactly the same urinal every time. The faculty lounge was unlikely to be the next target of evil. By Friday the teachers had put a name on their nemesis. He was now known as the Mystery Pooper. And this same day one school administrator stood up and said no more to scatological tyranny. This man, already battle scarred from service with valor as the sergeant at arms of the Rotary Club, declared war on the Mystery Pooper.

There were casualties, to be sure. The custodian, after witnessing the conflict rage for two weeks, developed an acute stress reaction and was placed on workers compensation (actually, I made that part up because I thought it added personal tragedy and dramatic flair to the story). Rumors began to circulate that the fracas involved unconventional tactics for achieving the goal of winning. The board of education was approached for funding for DNA tests. The identity of the Mystery Pooper became more coveted than succulent pork loin. The Mystery Pooper was avowed by all to be a psychopathic miscreant with absolutely no appreciation for fine porcelain. One teacher told everyone that she thought she remembered reading somewhere that a child willing to so flagrantly violate a urinal was almost certain to grow up preferring cats over dogs and getting his underwear secondhand from Goodwill. This teacher was wrong.

A fog of battle fatigue and despair settled over the school. The principal's most fundamental article of faith and his personal slogan—"right always prevails and I am always right"—began to feel uncertain (the part about right always prevailing, of course, not the other part). But history, as it often happens, was subject to whim, accident, and serendipity. Just as the battle seemed unwinnable and surrender appeared to be the only solution to the stalemate, the secret alarm sounded in the east wing hall. The principal fled his office and ran toward the call. Entering the bathroom, he saw two teachers flanking the frequently fouled fountain, upon which sat a boy in the prekindergarten program. At the scene of the atrocities sat the Mystery Pooper.

The original records have been heavily redacted. The story has faded from civil memory, though it can be heard occasionally whispered in small unlit places by the shunned of society to younger siblings at bedtime. And history, fickle history, is written by the victors of a campaign, so we may never know all of the details of the story. We can tell you with certainty a few things. The Mystery Pooper was from the most rural section of a rural county. He was being raised by a single mother, as he had been since infancy. The two of them rarely left home such that the use of public restroom facilities was needed, and on these rare occasions, he went to the restroom with his mom. The Mystery Pooper was not a fledgling psychopath, nor did he have conduct disorder or oppositional defiant disorder. Heck, he didn't even have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. He was just a boy who saw his first urinal on the day he started school. It hung lower on the wall than the other urinals, yet was slightly higher than the toilets. It was just right. And like Goldilocks before him, he took his respites where he was most comfortable.

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This story relates directly to Waller's Eighth Rule of Child Behavior Management: *If there is a negative and a positive interpretation that can be made about her behavior, the child deserves and should always get the benefit of the doubt.*

## **TEACHING ALTERNATIVE BEHAVIOR**

Academic and social skills deficits are not the end of teaching opportunities in behavior change. I do not remember who originally said it, but I once heard a quote that can be paraphrased as "behavioral science is like natural science in that nature abhors a vacuum." In the classroom, this suggests that any behavior intervention plan (BIP) that we develop is much more likely to be effective if we identify an alternate behavior that we teach to replace the target behavior.



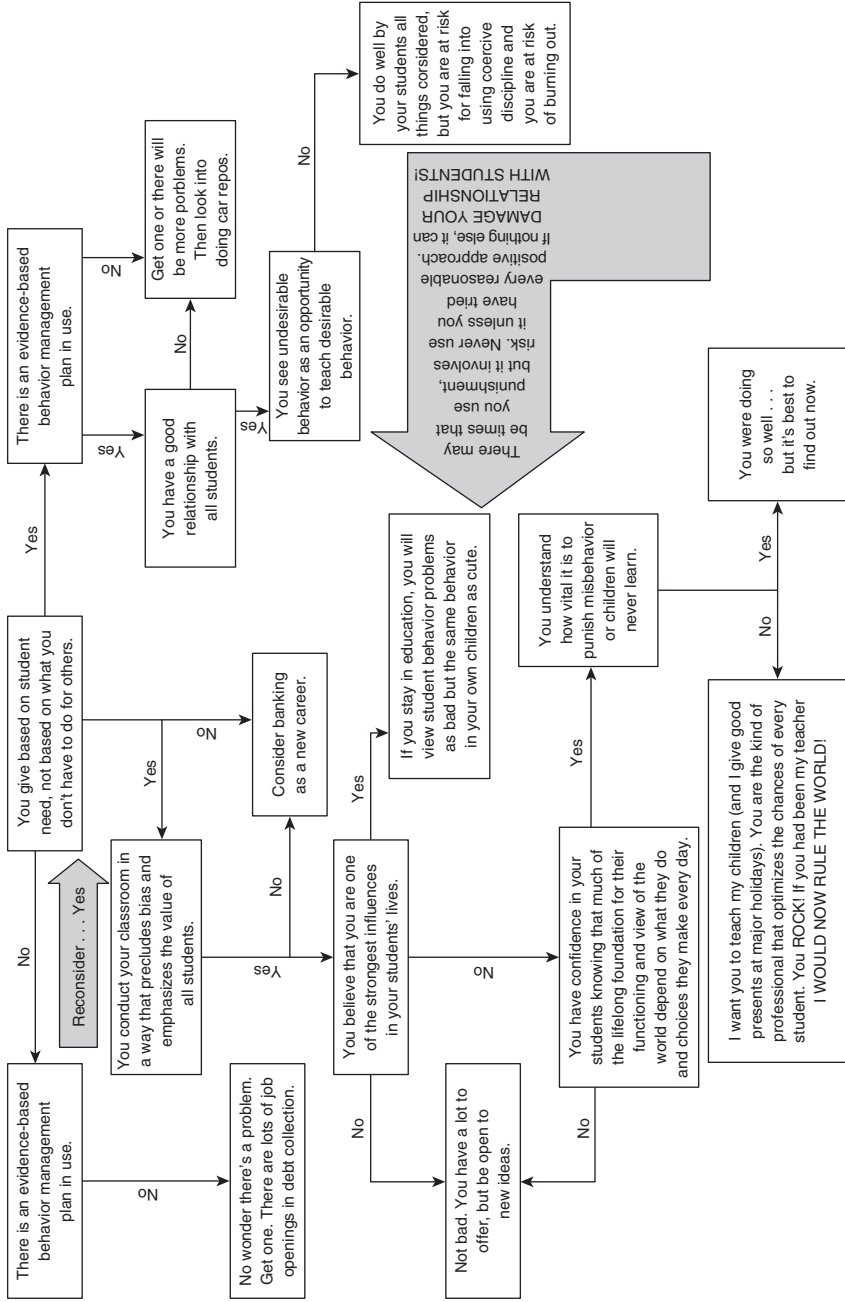
Behavior that has been practiced repeatedly and over time becomes stereotyped or habitual. When you are initially learning to drive, driving takes a lot of your attention in order for you to do it well. With more practice, driving becomes a behavior so automatic that you can drive without thinking about it. In fact, on your way home from work, you may drive for miles and pull into your driveway and realize you remember almost nothing of the trip home. You were on autopilot; you have practiced so much that you can do it without thinking or while eating watermelon.

Once home, you start work on your newest home-improvement project based on a television show that suggests all sorts of improvement projects that it assures that you can do yourself because this television show does not know you. You are in the yard trying to attach two pieces of lumber together with nails, when, during a particularly mighty hammer swing, you strike your thumb instead of a nail. If you are anything like me, the hammer causes a signal to transmit along the nerves in your arm straight into a section of your brain that automatically causes your mouth to open and loudly say a bad word. You didn't plan to do this and make the neighbors look at you and wish that you would move to another town. But in times of stress and emotional arousal, our ability to think and problem solve is dramatically curtailed. We do not resort to a plan or something that we have previously been told because in times of stress we go with practiced behavior.

From an evolutionary standpoint, this has served an important purpose. When a saber-toothed tiger appeared before a distant ancestor, our ancestor didn't contemplate whether the tiger was hungry or not or whether, perhaps, this big cat was a vegetarian. Like yourself, your ancestor during such a time of peak stress went with stereotyped behavior by, like yourself, saying a bad word and then by running. Suppose a child in your classroom with a history of doing badly in math began saying bad words whenever it was time to do math. Saying bad words is extremely effective at getting someone out of math, so your student has been doing this a while.

Your punishing this student for saying a bad word is unlikely to change his behavior—even if you have remediated deficits in math. He learned that math is unpleasant, he has experienced failure and embarrassment during math, so being presented with math work causes an increase in his emotional arousal. In this state, during times of arousal when it is not the thinking part of the brain that is

**Figure 2.1 Professional Educator Personality Matrix**



in charge, he will likely engage in stereotyped behavior. Further, trying to punish such behavior relies on the hope that the punishment will be even more unpleasant than math, which is not certain by any means. Part of a good BIP, therefore, involves identifying an alternative behavior and supervising the practice of the alternative over and over again until the alternative behavior becomes a habit.

Changing behavior is going to be a huge portion of your job. This will call on your strongest area of professional competence almost every time—your teaching ability. The rest of your intervention will be largely based on the way that you approach and assumptions you make about behavioral issues. Answer the questions in the Figure 2.1 decision tree and, if you are allowed to continue in the education field, move to the next chapter, where the ways to get started problem-solving for student undesirable behavior are discussed.

## CHAPTER NOTES

Remediating academic or social skills is best approached by using evidence-based practices, or practices that have strong research support. The following Web sites provide such research-supported practices for academic and social skills areas:

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities  
[http://research.nichcy.org/Evidence\\_TOC.asp](http://research.nichcy.org/Evidence_TOC.asp)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse  
& Mental Health Services Administration: National Registry of  
Evidence-based Programs and Practices  
<http://nrepp.samhsa.gov/index.htm>

National Education Association  
<https://www.nea.org>