

# Designing Behavioral Interventions That Work: The Triple T – Triple R Competing Pathways Model

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An estimated 25% of students will experience a mental or behavioral health problem in any given year (von der Embse et al. 2018, 372) and increasing numbers of these children are being included in general education classrooms (Flower, McKenna, and Haring 2017, 163). When left untreated, problematic behaviors often increase in severity and can have detrimental effects on the students' academic outcomes and interpersonal relationships (von der Embse et al. 2018, 372). Further, problematic behaviors, especially those that are externalizing in nature, are often disruptive, impeding the learning process of classroom peers (Watson et al. 2016, 519). Given that most elementary teachers spend over 1,000 hours per year in direct contact with their students, they are in a prime position to detect and provide support for students experiencing behavioral problems (von der Embse et al. 2018, 373). However, research has suggested that general education teachers feel unprepared to manage problematic behaviors and have reported diminished student learning outcomes, increased stress, and low levels of job satisfaction associated with poor classroom management skills (Flower, McKenna, and Haring 2017, 163). Moreover, teachers who feel unprepared to work with student behavioral challenges are usually less willing to implement individualized behavior support plans and document student progress within interventions. Consequently, behavior support plans implemented in the elementary general education environment often fail, leading to placement of students in more segregated settings (Oliver and Reschly 2010, 189).

It is not surprising that teachers feel under- or unprepared to handle problematic behaviors, given research findings. Studies have suggested that the most important knowledge and skills relative to classroom management that preservice elementary teachers need to acquire fall into three broad categories: a) universal approaches b) reinforcement of appropriate behaviors, and c) behavior reduction strategies (Flower, McKenna, and Haring 2017, 164). Understanding of and proficient skills in these areas translate to more effective classroom management of behavior. Yet, reviews of pre-service teacher training programs have evidenced that very few include entire courses dedicated to classroom management and that course materials often do not incorporate research-based practices. Further, many training programs emphasize reactive, rather than preventive, strategies for managing problem behaviors. These findings most likely are related directly to survey responses of teachers who report limited knowledge, competence, and confidence in key behavioral domains (Flower, McKenna, and Haring 2017, 163). Many of the skills that elementary teachers need to manage classroom behaviors effectively are grounded in the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA). ABA has decades of research support and has been deemed as best practice for students with and without disabilities (Trump et al. 2018, 382). Succinctly, the principles posit that the effective management of problematic classroom behaviors requires teachers to hypothesize the function, or purpose, of a student's behavior. When teachers understand why challenging behaviors are occurring, they are readily able to meet a student's needs by teaching and reinforcing more desirable behaviors that satisfy the same function (Oakes et al. 2018, 534). Typically, behavioral function is determined through observation of the environmental conditions that elicit (antecedents) and reinforce (consequences) the behavior. Identification of antecedents (A) and consequences (C)

surrounding challenging behaviors (B) enables a teacher to minimize triggering events (A) and instruct more appropriate behaviors (B) that result in a student's desired "pay-off" (C). Function-based interventions can be quite powerful in evoking behavioral change (Lloyd, Weaver, and Staubitz 2016, 325-326).

Another important aspect of ABA is the collection of quantitative data, in addition to A-B-C information. Typically, numerical data are collected on the frequency, duration, or latency of a student's behavior—the behavioral topography will suggest the appropriate type of data to collect (Trump et al. 2018, 383). Prior to intervention implementation, baseline data are gathered to determine levels of problematic, or desirable, behaviors before treatment. Baseline provides a starting point against which a student's behavior can be compared during intervention to measure effectiveness of the plan. Graphing data enables teachers and other professionals to visually analyze the data and make informed decisions about a student's progress within the treatment package (Trump et al. 2018, 383).

When implemented properly, ABA practices put the learner front and center by designing instruction and intervention that meet his/her needs and promote success (Trump et al. 2018, 391). Unfortunately, research has suggested that teachers, especially those in general education, often receive inadequate training in behavioral principles (Flower, McKenna, & Haring 2017, 163). As more children are entering general education classrooms with emotional and behavioral disorders (Flower, McKenna, and Haring 2017, 163; von der Embse et al. 2018, 372), we contend that all teachers require pre- and in-service training in behavioral tenets to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to manage behavior effectively and efficiently. Within this paper, we present a framework, the Triple T – Triple R Competing Pathways Model, that is grounded in ABA and that simplifies the competing pathways chart frequently utilized by behaviorists. This model was developed by the second author, a nationally-renowned behavioral trainer, in response to anecdotal observations she made regarding the accessibility of ABA terminology to teachers during trainings. We believe that this simplified version makes the process of behavioral change easier to understand and, thus, readily accessible to teachers, especially those at the elementary school level, who might not have the previous training and/or experience with application of behavioral tenets.

### **Components of the Triple T – Triple R Competing Pathways Model**

**Triple T: Trigger, Target, impact.** The Triple T component of our model is focused on determining behavioral function. "Function" is the effect that a behavior has on the environment, or the purpose the behavior serves for the individual. Additionally, "function" can be thought of as the relationship between two variables, an environmental event and a behavior, in which one varies given the presence or absence of the other (Hanley, Iwata, and McCord 2003, 148). To make this concept more tangible to teachers who might not have a background in behavioral terminology and concepts, we have designed this aspect of our model as follows.

First, consider these three questions:

1. What started the behavior in motion? (**T**ripper)
2. What is the behavior we want to change? (**T**arget)

3. What is the student trying to get, or get out of, by engaging in this behavior? (Impac**T**)

Once the questions have been answered, a summary statement is formed:

1. When this happens.... (**T**rigger)
2. The student does this.... (**T**arget)
3. To get, or get out of, this.... (impac**T**).

To illustrate, we provide the following example for a student who makes inappropriate and unsolicited comments in class. The chart includes the three Ts (**T**riigger, **T**arget, and impac**T**) and responses to the questions we ask about behavior in forming a functional hypothesis statement.

Figure 1 Triple T

| Trigger                 | Target                                | impac <b>T</b>  |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|---|
| Teacher gives directive | Taylor makes an inappropriate comment | The teacher goes to Taylor’s desk and gives a reprimand (teacher attention) |

Now that we have answered the three questions, a summary statement can be formed: “When the teacher gives a directive, Taylor makes an inappropriate comment to get, or to gain, the teacher’s attention. (Remember, a reprimand is attention.)

The first T in our model is the **T**riigger. The trigger is the antecedent event that occurs directly before the behavior is displayed and elicits, or pushes, it to occur (Iovannone, Anderson, and Scott 2017, 105). Often triggers are readily observable, as in our example wherein the teacher’s directive serves as a trigger for Taylor’s inappropriate comments. However, it is also important to consider behavioral triggers that are more distal in time, or setting events. A setting event can occur at a time removed from the behavior by hours or days that sets the chain in motion (Iovannone, Anderson, and Scott 2017, 105). In our example, Taylor’s family may have welcomed a new sibling recently, causing her to seek attention at school.

The second T, **T**arget, refers to the problematic behavior that we are trying to change. Problematic behaviors often are categorized into two classes—externalizing and internalizing. Generally, externalizing behaviors are those described as aggressive or rule-breaking; this class of behaviors is directed outward and in opposition to others or against property. Internalizing behaviors, on the other hand, are directed inward and are characterized by symptoms of depression and anxiety (Fomby and Mollborn 2017, 1633). Whether a behavior is classified as internalizing or externalizing, it is important to operationalize its definition to provide a clear indication of its occurrence for purposes of data collection. Operational definitions make behaviors specific, observable, and measurable (Hojnoski, Gischlar, and Missall 2009, 33-35). Let’s consider our previous example of Taylor. Taylor is often disruptive during class lessons. The term “disruptive” is an ambiguous one, which might lead to spurious data collection. To operationalize Taylor’s behavior, we might say that, “Taylor makes inappropriate, unsolicited comments that are irrelevant to class discussion and/or questions.” To narrow the definition

further, we can provide non-examples of the behavior that would denote instances when the target behavior should not be recorded (Hojnoski, Gischlar, and Missall 2009, 33-35). In Taylor's case, a non-example of the target behavior might include Taylor yelling out in pain, if she were to become injured or sick at her desk. Operational definitions promote consistency in data collection, which is important to accuracy of data and decision-making (Hojnoski, Gischlar, and Missall 2009, 33-35).

The final T in our model is the **impacT**; in ABA, this is called the behavioral function. An individual's voluntary behavior serves one or more of the following purposes: a) to gain or avoid social attention, b) to gain a preferred item or activity, c) to avoid a demand or activity, and d) to gain or avoid sensory stimulation (LaRocque, Brown, and Johnson 2001, 61). In our example, Taylor makes an inappropriate comment (**Target**) whenever her teacher gives a directive (**Trigger**). In response, the teacher attends to Taylor by walking to her desk to reprimand. Thus, the **impacT** of Taylor's behavior is gaining teacher attention. A behavior plan should focus on ameliorating the problematic **Target** behavior by teaching a more appropriate replacement behavior that results in the same **impacT** for the child (LaRocque, Brown, and Johnson 2001, 60). For example, Taylor could be provided with a card or signal to display when she would like the teacher's attention. The replacement behavior in this case provides Taylor with the same **impacT** (i.e., teacher attention) as the problematic behavior of commenting inappropriately, but reduces disruption to classroom instruction. The next section explains how to structure the environment for student success once the three **Ts**—**Trigger**, **Target**, and **impacT**—have been identified.

**Triple R: Revise, Replace, Reframe.** Once the **impacT**, or why, of the behavior has been determined, the teacher can **Revise** the environment, **Replace** the target behavior with one that is more acceptable, and **Reframe** the response. The first R, **Revise** the environment, relates to the trigger in our model and is akin to antecedent stimuli manipulation in ABA. In broad terms, antecedent manipulation involves changes to the environment and procedures that are expected to produce specific outcomes (Johnston et al. 2006, 55-56). Simply put, the **Revise** in our model represents steps that teachers can take to prevent the problematic target behavior from occurring. In our example with Taylor, the **Trigger** for the **Target** behavior, inappropriate commenting, is a directive from the teacher. Within the Triple T phase, we determined that Taylor most likely is calling out inappropriately to gain the teacher's attention. The teacher could make revisions to the environment, by providing attention to Taylor prior to the lesson, giving Taylor a special classroom job, or teaching Taylor a signal to display when she needs attention. These revisions should lessen the need for Taylor to make inappropriate comments to gain the attention she desires.

The second R in our model, **Replace**, pertains to replacing the problematic **Target** behavior. The replacement behavior must be functionally equivalent to the target behavior, and be efficient and effective (Hieneman 2015, 104-105). In other words, the replacement behavior should offer the student alternative means to achieve the same function, or **impacT**, of her **Target** behavior and require the same or less effort to perform. For example, Taylor could be taught to display a card or signal when she desires teacher attention, as a replacement for calling out inappropriate comments. This behavior results in the same **impacT**, teacher attention, and requires no extra effort on Taylor's part. To be successful, replacement behaviors must be taught through

modeling, prompting, and providing independent practice and reinforcement. We like the acronym “TIPP It” to help teachers remember the steps:

1. **T**each the replacement behavior;
2. **I**mprint by modeling it;
3. **P**ractise the behavior across settings;
4. **P**raise the replacement behavior when it occurs.

The final R in the Triple T – Triple R Model, **R**eframing the response, is relative to the impact **T**. In ABA, the reframed response would be the functional consequence, previously associated with the problematic target behavior (e.g., attention, avoidance, tangible, sensory), applied to the replacement behavior. The idea is to withhold reinforcement for the target behavior and apply it to the desired replacement behavior (Hieneman 2015, 105). In our example with Taylor, the teacher would ignore the inappropriate comments (i.e., withhold attention) and give Taylor attention for the replacement behavior of using the card or signal. Eventually, the target behavior should extinguish because it is no longer serving the function, or gaining the impact **T**, of teacher attention.

### **The Triple T – Triple R Competing Pathways Model: Putting It All Together**

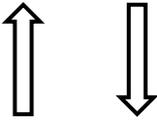
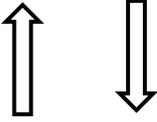
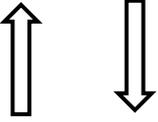
Now that the components of our Triple T – Triple R model have been explained, we present an example for a preschool student, George, who hits other children during free play time. Specifically, Miss Samantha’s fifteen 4-year-old students are permitted to play with toys of their choosing in the play corner for 30 minutes each afternoon. George frequently hits children who have taken a toy with which he would like to play. In response, Miss Samantha sends George to his seat for 4 minutes, where he sits and cries. Once 4 minutes have elapsed, Miss Samantha tells George that it is his turn to play with the desired toy and he returns to the play corner.

Figure 2 illustrates the Triple T – Triple R Competing Pathways framework. Here, we have provided Miss Samantha with ideas to revise the environment to set George up for success. If George knows that he will be assigned to a particular station for a period of time, this should prevent the problem behavior from occurring, as George will know that he will eventually have time with the desired toy. We also have suggested teaching George prosocial replacement behaviors through a social story and practice with requesting phrases. As George gains experience and success with requesting and using the timer for play, his need to hit other children for toys should decrease. Finally, we have provided Miss Samantha with ways to reframe her response to the problem. Prior to plan development, Miss Samantha would send George to his chair for 4 minutes, then give him access to the desired toy. He learned that he could get what he wanted through hitting! Now, George will only be permitted to play with the desired toy for a time when he requests appropriately.

Our examples of the Triple T—Triple R Model with Taylor and George have been simplified to enable the reader to follow the process. ABA and, in turn, our model are designed to identify the environmental variables that influence behaviors and to inform the process of training for behavioral change. Decades of research have documented ABA as a proactive, direct instructional approach that is more effective in producing meaningful change than are traditional punishment-based methods (Bloch & Axelrod, 2008, 53-54). However, this environmental

approach to behavior does not preclude consideration of other variables, such as child traits and abilities, teacher time and attention, and student body size and resources. Of course, when designing interventions, it is important to consider more than the contextual variables and address the student’s unique needs and preferences. Human behavior is much more complex than a simple A-B-C chain and, thus, it is important to consider person-level variables, including social-cultural milieu, learning differences, and other factors (e.g., history of abuse, physical pain, etc.) that can influence behavior at any given time (Bambera, 2002, 17-18). Furthermore, it is vital that behavioral interventions address varying backgrounds and experiences of teachers and needs of the classroom to promote sound implementation (Webster-Stratton, Reinke, Herman, & Newcomer, 2011, 510). In other words, the treatment package must be both accessible to and feasible for the teacher to implement with fidelity, as well as acceptable and accessible to the student.

Figure 2 Triple T – Triple R Competing Pathways

| Trigger   | Target   | impacT   |
|---|--|--|
| <p>The children are permitted to go to the play corner</p> <p>Another child takes a toy that George wants</p>   | <p>George hits the child who is playing with the toy he desires</p>  | <p>Miss Samantha sends George to his seat, where he cries</p> <p>After 4 minutes, George is permitted to play with the toy</p> <p>(George obtains desired toy)</p>   |
|    |   |   |
| <p><b>Revise the Environment</b></p>  | <p><b>Replace the Behavior</b></p>   | <p><b>Reframe the Response</b></p>   |
| <p>Assign children to specific play areas (e.g., blocks, kitchen, etc.) on a daily basis</p> <p>Have children cycle through play stations on a daily or weekly basis</p> <p>Use a timer to limit how long any one child has possession of a toy</p> <p>Make more than one of each toy available to children</p> | <p>George requests a toy and takes turns</p> <p>Provide and practice with George phrases that he can say (e.g., “Can I play with you?” or “Can I take a turn?”)</p> <p>Read and discuss a social story about requesting and sharing with George</p> <p>Use a timer and teach George that when the timer sounds, it is time to relinquish the toy</p> | <p>When George requests a toy appropriately, he is provided a turn and uses the timer</p> <p>George should be praised for requesting (e.g., “Good asking!” or “Nice job sharing!”)</p> <p>If George hits, he should be redirected to another toy and reminded to ask for a turn</p> <p>If George hits a second time, he should be sent to his chair for 4 minutes; when the time has elapsed, he should not be provided access to the desired toy for the remainder of the play period</p> |

## Conclusion

More children are entering general education classrooms with social-emotional and behavioral disorders (Flower, McKenna, & Haring 2017, 163; von der Embse et al. 2018, 372). However, teachers in these classrooms report feeling unprepared to manage student behavior problems, which leads to diminished student learning outcomes, increased stress, and low levels of job satisfaction (Flower, McKenna, & Haring 2017, 163). The skills that elementary teachers require are grounded in the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), which has decades of research support and has been deemed as best practice for students with and without disabilities (Trump et al. 2018, 382). Unfortunately, many general education training programs do not offer coursework in ABA (Flower, McKenna, & Haring 2017, 164) and the terminology can be confusing for one who has not studied in depth. Within this paper, we offered a framework that simplifies the process of conducting a brief functional behavior assessment, that should be readily accessible to elementary teachers, where our model is most applicable, who do not have advanced training in ABA principles. The appendices include forms and resources that teachers should find helpful when managing problematic behaviors. Appendix A is a blank Triple T – Triple R Competing Pathways chart that can be used for planning purposes, whereas Appendices B, C, and D offer ideas for elementary teachers to incorporate for preventing and managing problems in the classroom. The reader is encouraged to consult our example within the body of this article when planning.

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## Appendix A

### Triple T – Triple R Competing Pathways Planning Chart

| Trigger                | Target               | impacT               |
|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
|                        |                      |                      |
| Revise the Environment | Replace the Behavior | Reframe the Response |
|                        |                      |                      |

## Appendix B

### Revise the Environment Examples

| What                         | Why/How  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Anchor Charts & Prompt Cards | An anchor chart can be displayed to remind students of expectations and procedures, or to remind them of steps that can be taken when one feels angry or like s/he is losing focus. These charts can be displayed on a wall for all students, or printed and laminated as prompt cards for individuals to place in notebooks.  |
| Calm Corner                  | The Calm Corner is an area in the classroom where a student can elect to go when feeling angry or upset. The area should have a comfortable place for a child to sit and should include objects such as stress balls, headphones, and anchor chart that details a deep breathing technique. An area such as this in the classroom can prevent a child's behaviors from escalating because it provides a place to escape the upsetting situation until s/he feels ready to return to the group. |
| Furniture and Work Options   | Research suggests that exercise and movement increase oxygen levels in areas of the brain that support memory and learning.<br>Rather than requiring students to sit in hard chairs all day long, provide alternatives such as standing work stations, cushions, foot fidgets, brain break activities that require movement, etc.  |
| Declutter                    | Students can become distracted when there is too much clutter in the classroom. Store materials neatly and make sure that every item has a place. Also, leave some wall space free of posters and children's work.   |

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Nature Pictures and Videos                | Research exists that suggests that nature can reduce anxiety. Nature pictures and videos, and live plants can be placed in the classroom to evoke a sense of calm.  |
| Classroom Job                             | Ask the child who needs a break to do a classroom job. For example, she can be asked to water the plants, pass out paper, or take a note to the office. This provides a break that should alleviate the need for display of a problematic behavior that is functionally avoidant.   |
| Vibrating Watch                           | A vibrating watch can be worn by an individual as a private cue to self-monitor on-task behavior. These watches are programmable to enable the teacher to set the desired interval for monitoring.  |
| Break Card or Object                      | Provide a student with a break card or object that can be used a predetermined number of times per day. When a break is requested, the student can carry the card or item as he walks up and down the hall to practice his self-regulation technique. Other adults should be notified that when the student is carrying the card or object, he is not wandering, but calming.   |
| Scaffolded Notes and Copies of Board Work | For students who have trouble taking notes or copying from the board, offer copies of notes. These can be scaffolded to require the child to fill in some information, or full copies. This should reduce anxiety and prevent task avoidance behaviors from occurring.  |
| TUMS at the Door                          | Research has shown that teachers who have a good relationship with their students experience fewer behavior problems in the classroom. To start the day or class session, a greeting can create a positive tone. As students enter the room: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><u>T</u>ouch</b> (High five or fist bump)</li> <li>• <b><u>U</u>se</b> each student's name in a positive way</li> <li>• <b><u>M</u>ake</b> natural eye contact</li> <li>• <b><u>S</u>mile</b></li> </ul>   |
| Check In/Check Out (CICO)                 | This is a research-based strategy that has been used at the elementary and secondary levels. Choose a positive and consistent adult for a student to meet in the morning prior to school starting. This allows the student to share and process anything that was irritating or upsetting on the bus or during the morning routine. The adult should check to ensure that the student has all of her supplies for the day and can pre-teach lessons or review behavioral strategies. At the end of the school day, the adult helps the student process how things went that day, makes sure she has supplies needed for home, and continues to build a relationship with the student. Typically, a recording sheet is used that enables communication between the adult managing CICO and the student's teachers. |

## Appendix C

### Ideas for Teaching Replacement Behaviors

| What                | Why/How   |
|---------------------|---|
| Video Modeling      | A video model includes a student or group of students who demonstrate what an expected behavior looks like, sounds like, and feels like when exhibited in each location of the school. The video is then used to teach behavioral expectations.   |
| Video Self-Modeling | This form of video modeling has the individual demonstrating the behavior. Research has suggested that watching oneself perform a behavior is an effective way to teach and reinforce.  |
| Social Stories      | Social stories are tools designed to teach students how to interact and behave in an effective and appropriate manner. The stories model appropriate interactions across a variety of settings and can be tailored to the student's needs. A social story can be printed like a book or watched as a narrated slide show.                         |
| Carnival Style      | As children are learning behavioral expectations, they move from area to area within the school building. It is helpful to have a designated person in each location who is responsible for teaching, imprinting, practicing, and praising (i.e., TIPP It). This consistency will support students in learning and maintaining behaviors quickly. |

## Appendix D

### Ideas for Reframing Your Response

|  |
|--|
| Research suggests a 5:1 ratio of positive statements to negative to support and sustain positive student to teacher relationships and encourage prosocial behavior. Below are a few ideas for keeping track of positive statements.  |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>3 x 5 Card</b></p> <p>Keep a 3 x 5 index card in your pocket. Each time you make a positive behavior-specific comment, make a tear on one of the long edges. Whenever you make a negative comment to a student (e.g., stop, quit, don't, no, etc.), make a tear on one of the short edges. At the end of the day, count and compare how many positive statements you have to negative ones. Try to increase your ratio each day.</p> |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Beads</b></p> <p>Place 30 beads on a shoelace and slide them from one end to another each time you make a positive comment. Aim for a certain number of positives each hour. You also can place beads or paper clips in your pocket and move one to the opposite pocket for each positive comment you make.</p>  |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Sports Clicker</b></p> <p>Keep a clicker in your pocket and press it each time you make a positive comment. Wear a vibrating watch to help you remember to make positive comments.</p>   |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Pennies in a Jar</b></p> <p>Keep a small container on your desk, or other convenient location. Each time you make a positive statement, drop a penny or similar object into the jar. You can even use two jars—one for positive statements and one for negative statements. Can you get more pennies in the positive jar than the negative?</p>  |