

# ASK THE EXPERT

## INTERVIEW WITH:

### Linda H. Rammler, M.Ed., Ph.D.

#### INTRODUCTION:

Linda Rammler is an educational consultant specializing in inclusive education and positive behavior supports for students who challenge schools regardless of the disability labels.

**Beth:** Welcome Linda. Thank you for taking the time to share your expertise with our families and teachers!

**Linda:** Hi, Beth. I'm really glad to have this opportunity. Thank you for inviting me to do this!

**Beth:** Many of our parents report that they are constantly receiving calls from school regarding their child's behavioral difficulties. What should this communicate to the parents and what can they do to ensure their child's success?

**Linda:** If parents are constantly receiving calls from schools, this strongly suggests that school personnel are at a total loss for how to deal with the child's behavior.

Teachers and administrators probably already have tried at least some of the "traditional" disciplinary measures -- e.g., scolding the child, humiliating him (and I only say "him" because the majority of these "chronically in trouble" kids tend to be boys), separating him from his classmates, sending him to the office, giving him detentions, etc. Predictably, these measures haven't worked because they aren't real deterrents and the research clearly shows that punishment really doesn't change behaviors. The only time such consequences APPEAR to work is when the child truly has the internal resources to bring his own behavior under control. And, as you know, many of the kids we deal with simply were not hard-wired in their brains to have this level of self-control...at least not consistently.

Also, in the olden days (like when my 88-year-old mother was a child!), students who challenged schools were simply expelled. Because the culture as a whole was less permissive back then, these students were assumed to be "bad eggs" because no one else would dare challenge the school's authority. Today, in recognition that society in general and parents in particular are more permissive (and because almost everyone has heard of Freud's psychoanalytic theory where supposedly every human problem is mommy's fault!), the other underlying message behind these phone calls is that the parents are somehow to blame for their child's behavior at school -- i.e., "if they'd done their jobs well in the first place, then little Johnny wouldn't be behaving this poorly." It's no longer the kid who's the "bad egg," it's the parent. The phone calls in this case are intended as nudges for the parents to somehow take control over something they're not even there at school to handle. And, while it may be true in an extremely small number of situations that things going on at home do lead to chronic misbehavior at school, these rare families are generally struggling too hard to deal with such a "wake-up call" anyway.

Finally, most educators were trained in the behavior modification tradition. They learned about the A-B-C's of behavior (Antecedents, Behavior, and Consequences) but tend to forget the Antecedents, the events that occur *prior* to the behavior -- which are the

very things over which they, as educators, have the most control. Instead they focus on the consequences that follow the behavior – rewards (or “positive reinforcement”) intended to increase behaviors that are acceptable, and punishment, or withholding of rewards, intended to decrease behavior. I already mentioned that we know punishment doesn’t work. And, given their problems with self-control, it’s also extremely difficult for a lot of the youngsters we’re discussing to “be good” sufficiently or long enough to even earn the promised rewards. Needless to say, this creates a situation for these kids in which it is almost impossible for them to be successful ... unless some things change drastically in how their behavior is addressed *before* it occurs. And, if the behavior occurs anyway, whatever follows the behavior needs to change drastically as well because the “by the book” disciplinary measures are just not working.

Toward this end, in addition to reminding teachers of the fact that they need somehow to “step outside the box” in their thinking about the child’s behavior, parents on the receiving end of a lot of “poor behavior” reports unfortunately need to step into the role of advocates for their children and, in some cases, even become teacher-trainers so that their children’s needs are being adequately met. I say “unfortunately” only because too many are not prepared to do so, they’re not viewed by school professionals as being “expert” enough anyway since they’re seen as “just parents,” and/or they simply can’t because their children are also extremely challenging at home and it’s just too exhausting to do double duty in this way.

The critical information parents need to advocate for their children is that both they and their children have certain rights under the law. The Office of Special Education Programs explains the fundamental rights concerning behavior in these terms:

“If a child has behavior problems that interfere with his or her learning or the learning of others, the IEP team must consider whether strategies, including positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports are needed to address the behavior. If the IEP team determines that such services are needed, they must be added to the IEP and must be provided.” (OSEP, 2000)

Many parents with kids who have challenging behaviors probably are already somewhat familiar with the IEP team (sometimes called a Planning and Placement Team, a TEAM, a Child Study Team, or similar term) and a document called the IEP (Individualized Education Plan). I can’t emphasize how important it is for parents to be familiar with this process, the law and regulations that govern it, and the rights the law confers on them and their children.

If parents are able to effectively advocate for their children’s rights under the law without jeopardizing the essential parent-professional partnership necessary for these kids to succeed; AND the school is willing to listen, learn, and change how they handle these kids; AND parents have the strength left to step into yet another role, that’s terrific, especially if they otherwise have a reasonably good relationship with the school. We can talk about what these parents can bring to the table in a little bit.

But, when one or more of these conditions aren’t met, the phone calls are likely to just continue and, worse, their children’s success is likely to be compromised. In this case, parents may need to look to others outside the school system who can help them support their kids and facilitate their success -- academically, socially, and behaviorally.

I do want to mention, though, that with the right support, even the most challenging student behaviorally can theoretically be successful in the public school system with a truly individualized program to meet his or her needs. I say theoretically because the behavior that may most need changing is that of the school!

**Beth:** What is a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA)?

**Linda:** A Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) is currently required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for any child who is receiving special education services who exhibits problem behaviors in school. FBAs can also be including as part of an initial evaluation for students who are first being referred to special education because they exhibit challenging behaviors and may possibly have a disability that manifests in those behavior.

FBAs must, at minimum, a) define the problem behaviors, b) describe the settings under which problem behaviors are and are not likely to be observed, c) identify the function of (hypotheses about why) the problem behaviors occur, and d) collect information from assessment and direct observation to support these hypotheses. An FBA is really a process – an assessment process – that leads to the development of a Behavior Support Plan (BSP). Parents should be aware that an FBA is not an end in itself but rather a means to an end, the end being the interventions that will enable the child to be successful.

From my perspective, good FBAs do more than focus on just the behaviors. First, I like to include a complete look-see at the lifestyle of the student – who his friends are, what his family life is like, what kinds of things he likes to do and what he’s interested in, what his strengths are, what he needs help with, what the visions for his future are (his and his parents), and what works or doesn’t work in maintaining appropriate behavior. This kind of information can be very helpful in identifying potentially meaningful reinforcers for the student as well as helping the team re-confirm what to do and not do in the future. Secondly, I like to review his school records to see if there are any patterns to his problem behaviors (common patterns are when behaviors occur only in particular classes and/or with particular teachers, at particular times of the day, on the bus, during unstructured time, during transitions, at the beginning or end of the school week, etc.). Records also usually contain really clear documentation about what hasn’t been working! Third, I want to find out all I can about the diagnoses the child has received in the past because these often suggest a physiological basis of the behaviors that we must take into account. Fourth, I want to know about the student’s learning style and compare that to each of his teacher’s teaching style. As Tom Armstrong, author of Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom says, these kids are often “the canaries in the mines of public education.” Their behaviors can be indicative, at best, of a poor match between how the student learns and how he’s being taught; at worst, their behaviors can be indicative of poor pedagogy that’s really hurting ALL the students in the room – only the other kids have the resources to suffer in silence (Armstrong, 2002).

Good FBAs also closely examine the whole wealth of potential antecedents to, and context events surrounding, the behaviors – not just the events that immediately precede their occurrence. For example, did Johnny “wake up on the wrong side of the bed?” Is a close relative sick or has someone died recently? Is he being bullied at school in such a subtle way that the adults are missing it? Are there times when he could be “coming down with something?” Is he having a side effect to medication intended to

bring his behavior under control? What else could be triggering the behavior? Are there “early warning signs” that, if attended to properly, can prevent a major incident from occurring?

The essence of the analysis is to *determine what function the behavior serves for the student* – for example, is it communicating something the student doesn’t have the words to communicate? Is the behavior somehow self-protective? Is it a “symptom” of the student’s disability, totally beyond the student’s control? The questions almost seem endless but I think it’s really important to leave no stone unturned – the more ideas or hypotheses we have about why the behavior occurs, the more options we have to address it constructively.

**Beth:** Who conducts the FBA?

**Linda:** Let’s talk about the ideal first. According to the law, the FBA should be conducted by a team – not by any one individual. The team should include, at minimum, the parents, a representative teacher from the school’s general education program, a special educator, an administrator, and any related services staff whose expertise may be able to contribute to the assessment (such as an occupational therapist familiar with sensory issues, the school psychologist, the school social worker, the school nurse, the speech/language clinician, and even the physical therapist). The school people should be competent professionals who are qualified, both by their professional training and inservice training, to participate in the FBA process.

When appropriate given his/her age, the student involved should also at least contribute to the meeting. I have mixed feelings about honoring the student’s right to attend the actual meeting. Sometimes, relationships have deteriorated so much that it’s hard for the adults to remain consistently respectful, nonjudgmental, and uncritical when exploring the student’s behavior. Since I fundamentally believe that kids “would be good if they could,” I really hate to put any youngster through a negative experience. On the other hand, I insist on at least getting their input prior to the meeting through a friendly interview – usually over pizza or ice cream (or while playing with younger kids) – because I am continually impressed with how insightful some of these kids are. They may not know why they blow up all the time but they tend to know exactly why they blow up at least some of the time.

By the way, if the student has any close friends or siblings, I think getting information from these kids in more or less the same age bracket can be invaluable. Classmates, for example, often notice and report things about their teachers’ relationships with students that adults won’t be likely to voice (for example, “Joe does great in Mr. Warren’s class because Mr. Warren is such a cool teacher!”). Even if “out of the mouths of babes” is uncomfortable for the adults, I think we need to know what Mr. Warren does so we can help other teachers emulate it.

One student I worked with had such a poor attitude that no one, including his parents, believed he was unintentionally breaking the school rules over and over – it was his sister who shared the fact that he locked himself in his room every night, crying “Why am I so stupid? Why do I always get in trouble? Please, God, make me behave!” Quite an eye opener for the adults, I can assure you.

Again, if it would be too awkward for these students to actually participate in the FBA process, I get their input ahead of time.

By the way, the only effective way I've found to get everyone's input is to rely on the types of brainstorming processes commonly found in business – i.e., a facilitator uses markers and large wall sheets to record participants' responses to fundamental questions. If someone's not going to be at the meeting, I make a determination as to whether to record their input first and have the rest of the team add to it or whether I tack their input on at the end. It depends on the comfort level, collaborative spirit, and congeniality of the group. Recording everything publicly helps participants who are visually oriented or more forgetful about whether a point already has been made. It also stimulates additional contributions from team members.

The ideal isn't always what I've seen happen, though. I've been at meetings where an FBA was presented by, for example, the school psychologist or school adjustment counselor. Families need to know this is not legal – they have a right to be part of the process of the assessment itself, and not just be put in the position of responding to what someone else has come up with by way of an FBA. So, if a qualified, competent team didn't develop it, it's not an FBA!

**Beth:** What if a parent wants their own consultant? What should they look for? What makes a good consultant? How can they find one?

**Linda:** As I mentioned before, parents may need to look outside the school for someone to help them get the right supports in place for their child with challenging behaviors. Generally speaking, schools **MUST** have qualified personnel perform all aspects of a student's education. If parents are constantly getting calls about their child's behavioral difficulties, I need to ask – Does the school or district really have someone on staff who's qualified to address such difficulties in a way that allows (1) that child to be successful, (2) allows his/her classmates to continue being successful, and (3) assures that instructional staff enjoy having that child in the classroom?

If the answer is no, it really is up to the school to provide a qualified individual which may mean that the district has to hire a consultant that specializes in highly challenging behaviors. From the parents' and student's perspective, the first qualification is that such a consultant must really like kids! Secondly, the consultant must believe what I said before – the child would be good if he could. Third, the consultant must not be of the mindset that "one size fits all." Creativity and individualization in his/her approach is essential! Other qualifications include that the consultant must understand the nature of the student's disability and how it relates to behavior, be current in best practices for positive behavior supports, know how to work with school staff, and be available. Lastly, the consultant must have both the education and track record to support working with a student with challenging behaviors. One good way to check is to see if the prospective consultant knows about Ross Greene's book, [The Explosive Child](#), and whether or not they agree with his approach! If they embrace it whole-heartedly, and have at least a Master's degree in an appropriate field, you may be in good hands. If they never heard of the book, you've found a good place where they can start their training!

I always encourage parents to try to get the school to pay for my services, for example, as a related service under the IDEA. Occasionally, the school will refuse, believing that it does have the right personnel to do the job. If the parents are uncertain, they have every right to ask for specific trainings attended by school personnel as well as ask for their resumes as public employees. If parents are still not convinced, or are denied access to this information, they can retain their own consultant. Although this may be

costly, the good news is that any evaluative information (e.g., FBA-related recommendations) that the consultant generates at least must be considered by the PPT. And, a good consultant, regardless of who pays, should be able to win the team over and, if not, be willing to support the family in pursuing other options such as placement of the student in a magnet school or school without walls kind of program or, in the worst case scenario, serve as an expert witness in due process proceedings in an effort to have a Hearing Officer order the district to provide an appropriate program.

Parents can find consultants by asking other parents, attending workshops on positive behavior supports, contacting people who've written articles and books on the subject of challenging behaviors and kids, or getting on the Internet and exploring chat rooms for parents dealing with similar issues. University Centers for Excellence such as the Institute for Community Inclusion out of UMass in Boston or the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire often have staff members who can serve as consultants or who are able to make referrals. Remember that there is a reason I listed education and experience last when you asked me what makes a good consultant!!! Parents really need to interview the person they're considering to make sure that bringing someone in doesn't backfire because the person's values are different from the family's or because the person's paper credentials haven't necessarily made them good practitioners. Parents should interview any consultants suggested by the school before signing any releases for the same reasons. By the way, teachers also should have some say in consultants because they need to be able to work together!

**Beth:** What is a Behavioral Support Plan (BSP)?

**Linda:** A Behavior Support Plan (BSP) is the logical outcome of an FBA. It is a document that becomes part of the student's IEP and specifies what interventions school staff will use to prevent challenging behaviors from occurring and what to do if those behaviors occur anyway. When I work with a team to develop a BSP, I make certain that the following components are in place:

Clear definitions of what behaviors will be ignored and tolerated for now ("Basket C" behaviors), clear definitions of what behaviors will result in instruction to teach the student how to meet the functions those behaviors serve in constructive ways ("Basket B" behaviors), and clear definitions of which behaviors cannot be tolerated because they create unsafe situations for the student or others ("Basket A" behaviors).

A list of measures that adults agree to take to prevent Basket A behaviors from occurring. These may include assuring that frustration is minimized by providing instruction in a manner consistent with the student's learning style, offering choices, providing advance warning of upcoming transitions, not requiring that the student perform a particular activity because to do so will result in a meltdown, etc.

A list of instructional strategies for each Basket B behavior so the student can learn alternative behaviors that are constructive and successful.

Reminders to ignore/tolerate Basket C behaviors ALL THE TIME.

Procedures to follow in the event of a crisis/meltdown. (By the way, I NEVER restrain kids and I've never had to restrain kids even though I've worked with ones whose behaviors can get pretty out of control and whose size makes this a major concern! And even though other staff felt restraint was "necessary.")

Restraints, even by trained people, not only disrespect or humiliate the student simply because of the physical powerlessness they are forced to experience – they also have injured and killed too many students to be worth the risk. There are alternatives to restraint . Knowing when to back off, clear the room, remove objects that could be used to hurt, etc., are among the few alternatives available to someone trained to deal with such behaviors.)

A-B-C and qualitative data collection procedures to track the success of the BSP and scheduled reviews of the BSP in terms of the data collected to revise or update it as needed.

Reminders to anyone reading the BSP of the strengths of the child, his family, school staff, and the community.

Whenever possible, I try to incorporate only natural consequences so the child doesn't become "Punished by Rewards" (as Alfie Kohn warns). For some students, short term motivators are needed because "being 'haved'" is so difficult that they need quick and positive feedback at first to shape this behavior. However, if external rewards are ever used, they MUST be faded a.s.a.p. and the student needs to know up front that not receiving the reward is the best reward because he has been successful!

Just as I don't restrain, I don't punish. Punishment, by definition, reduces behavior. When I'm called in, traditional punishments have already been shown not to reduce the behavior. Certainly it makes no sense to continue using them! There is a HUGE body of literature – good solid empirical research – that shows this as well as the dangers of using punishment. For example, people subjected to punishment tend to satiate on it – that is, even if it's initially effective, it soon stops having that effect and must be increased to maintain the effect. Soon, with this type of approach, all we're doing is punishing – and, in extreme cases, using strategies that would get us arrested if we applied them to a stranger on the street.

But, just because I don't punish doesn't mean I don't believe that actions beget consequences. Students who have meltdowns or exhibit other challenging behaviors need to learn over time that their response hurts themselves as well as others. Maybe not physically but certainly in terms of their social relationships. In my mind, the only effective consequence during this learning stage is restitution – something along the lines of, "You took Mrs. Tower's time when you had your meltdown so she didn't have time to plan tomorrow's lesson. She's going to have to do her planning after school today instead but, you know what? She was supposed to clean out her classroom closets then. How about if you help her clean her closets out later in the week?" Or, with older children, "You probably don't remember what happened this morning but Jessica was really frightened by your behaviors because she thought someone was going to get hurt. Is there something nice you can do for Jessica so she feels better?" A note of apology or sharing a special snack may work.

HOWEVER, the student needs to be completely calm (which can be as long as 3 hours or more) and the suggestion of restitution only made after a successful debriefing period. AND, depriving an active student of breaks (e.g., recess) and a social student of opportunities to connect (e.g., by making them perform restitution chores during lunch or classroom "down times") can be counterproductive and lead to a more trigger-sensitive kid.

Just one more thought – parents who are not sure their children have individualized BSPs should ask for copies of other students' BSPs with the names and other identifiable information redacted for the sake of comparison. If everyone's got the same procedures documented, if the written justification for the behavior is limited to "attention-seeking" or "escape/avoidance," if a standard reward chart is attached, etc., chances are the BSP is not properly individualized, and therefore will not work. The team needs to go back to the drawing board!

**Beth:** What barriers can get in the way of conducting an appropriate FBA and the development of a reasonable BSP?

**Linda:** Unfortunately, there are many barriers. We already addressed the lack of training among some school staff to deal with extremely challenging behaviors when we talked about them calling parents because they are at a loss for what to do. To begin, the problem behaviors themselves may not be described well. For example, I know a student who is not too graceful but is prone to jumping up out of her desk (inadvertently knocking it over) and loudly voicing her opposition to no one in particular about any transition for which she's unprepared ("No! Not gym now! I'm not ready for gym!"). Would you believe there were a whole series of incident reports from teachers on her middle school team which said that, "out of the blue, \_\_\_\_\_ throws her desk and screams at the teacher?" She wasn't throwing her desk, nor was she screaming AT the teacher. When I first observed her, I truly had been expecting to see furniture flying around the room and a kid who was literally in her teachers' faces! And the behavior was so predictable – the teachers just didn't know what they were looking at or how to describe it in terms that others would recognize. As a result, they were not able to develop meaningful hypotheses about why those behaviors occurred, or to implement an appropriate data collection system, or to interpret the data collected correctly.

We also already talked about certain characteristics of practitioners (both school staff and outside consultants) – e.g., those who may not have the best orientation, who are limited in their thinking, or who have strong feelings along the lines of "spare the rod and spoil the child." They are likely to see the approach I advocate as coddling the student or, worse, reinforcing their behaviors because they are "getting away with something" when we don't administer consequences thought to be punishing. But, as those familiar with the whole concept of positive behavior supports can attest, this more gentle, child-centered approach really does work and results in long-lasting behavior change for the better.

Sometimes, students with severe reputations are viewed "under a microscope" so that behaviors that are really developmentally age-appropriate or that fit a particular situation are still seen as challenging. For example, if typical adults have an attention span of 7-10 minutes when engaged in unmotivating activities, how can we expect a pre-teen to sit through a 30-minute lesson she finds boring? Students may engage in behaviors like tapping or rocking that enable them to pay attention yet, because they aren't sitting quietly with their hands folded while looking at the teacher, they appear to be distracted and distracting.

I find frequently that mountains are sometimes made out of molehills. School staff members have the hardest time putting ANY behaviors in Basket C! I worked with one team which was grappling with how to support a youngster whose meltdowns really were dangerous in that, once he'd crossed the point of no return, he'd throw huge

tantrums during which he'd strike out at anyone within reach, pound his head on the floor, and dig his arms until they bled. An early warning sign was that he would "spit" (actually, more like blow raspberries) in the face of his aide or a student sitting near him and, depending on whether or not their reaction was negative, his behavior would then escalate through a predictable series of wails and tears, slumping off his chair, and rolling onto his belly on the floor. Then the severe tantrum would begin. An alternative behavior he exhibited was that he would bolt out of the room and hide in his favorite spot – under the tablecloth of a table in the school nurse's office. Attempts to stop him resulted in – you guessed it – him wailing with tears, dropping to the floor, rolling over and... the tantrum.

It took a lot of discussion before everyone was comfortable not reacting to the spitting ("It's unsanitary and grosses out the other kids which hurts his relationship with them") and letting the bolting happen under supervision ("he could get hurt before we get to him"). Yet, both of these behaviors could easily result in PREVENTION of the meltdown if no one attempted to stop him!!! In terms of the spitting, the behavior was even easily treated with mild redirection -- "Oops, time's up. Would you like to \_\_\_ or \_\_\_(both preferred activities) now?" – while simply wiping up the excess saliva. For other kids, spitting and bolting may well be Basket A behaviors but it depends on the student and the sum total of the behaviors he presents. In this case, self-injury and the potential for injury to others during the meltdown took priority.

Another problem is with any aspect of an IEP – it's only good if it's actually implemented. It's so easy in schools to slip back into old habits and forget, especially when you're dealing with anywhere from 18 to 180 other students, that one student MUST be treated a certain way. And, sometimes, teachers meticulously try to implement a BSP but, because this isn't an exact science, they find that the strategies just don't work in a classroom setting. If they don't immediately call another meeting so that everyone changes the strategies by consensus, you can end up with the behaviors not being addressed at all.

I want to emphasize that it's not always any one individual's fault that BSPs aren't implemented. For example, some administrators refuse to "bend the rules" and there may be too many other things on the teacher's plate (MCAS, "root cause analyses," new frameworks, and the like) to cope individually with a stressful and stressed student. Rob Horner, George Sugai, and some other folks from Oregon are getting excellent results applying the approach I'm advocating – positive behavior supports – to entire schools and systems. Wouldn't it be great if their work extended to every district today? **Beth:** What if a parents disagrees with the FBA or BSP. What can they do?

**Linda:** Parents who disagree can start by reconvening the PPT to discuss their concerns and offer alternatives. They can ask to have the district hire a consultant or bring in their own expert. Remember, the district is responsible for assuring that staff is qualified and by law must provide personnel development around positive practices to address challenging behaviors. Sometimes gentle reminders of their obligations works! If this doesn't work or for some reason this more collaborative approach is impractical, parents may appeal the team's decisions at a "manifestation hearing" which I'll discuss a little later. This type of hearing is similar to other due process hearings.

Although students are normally allowed to stay put in their last placement while future program and placement decisions are contested, there is an exception: Schools are

allowed to remove students immediately and unilaterally from school for dangerous behaviors such as injury to self or others, weapons, or drugs.

**Beth:** Often, these children are given repeated suspensions. What can parents do in this case?

**Linda:** First of all, let me emphasize that the kids we're talking about are generally the LAST kids on earth we want wandering around their communities during the school day! We're basically giving them a license to get into more trouble by hooking up with others who have been suspended, those who have dropped out, those who use drugs, have a party at home while their parents are at work, etc. And, if we adopt Tom Armstrong's theory that they are canaries in the mine, we also have to consider that suspensions are REWARDING their behaviors because we're basically teaching them, "When the going gets tough, act out and we'll end your pain by letting you skip school." I realize that there are times students are so challenging that some degree of separation is necessary in order for a healing process to occur. In this case, we need to consider structured alternatives such as service learning, time in someone else's classroom, or a short-term but full day "school without walls" arrangement.

When disciplinary sanctions such as suspensions occur anyway, there are clear sections of the law that govern their use. Specifically, if the result is any removal of a student eligible for special education (that is, one who already has an IEP) for more than 10 cumulative days from school (pattern of removal) OR when a single disciplinary action results in removal from school for 10 days or more (change in placement), a *manifestation PPT meeting* must be held (within 10 days of the incident) to determine whether the behavior was a manifestation of the student's disability or not. If a student is not already "on" an IEP, this is a good time for the parents to make a formal request that the student be evaluated for undiagnosed learning difficulties or psychological issues that may be contributing to his behaviors.

**Beth:** What is a manifestation PPT meeting?

**Linda:** One of the provisions of the 1997 Congressional Amendments to the IDEA was to allow districts to place a student in an Alternative Educational Program (AEP) for the short term if the student has "seriously disrupted the educational process." As you can guess, what constitutes such a serious disruption may be defined differently by parents and various school staff members. If the school decides serious disruption has occurred, it may recommend a short-term AEP or request an expedited hearing after which a hearing officer may order the removal of the child to an interim AEP for up to 45 days. Another procedural safeguard built into the law, and intended to prevent schools from railroading kids into AEPs, is the manifestation PPT meeting.

This manifestation PPT meeting must occur regardless of the outcome of any expedited hearing and, as I already said, must be held within 10 days of the incident, or within 10 days after a pattern of removal is apparent. The purpose of the meeting is to determine whether the behavior was a manifestation of the student's disability or not.

At that meeting, the PPT must consider whether (1) the child's IEP and placement were appropriate, (2) the child's IEP (including special education and supplemental aids/services, as well as behavior intervention strategies) and placement were provided consistent with the child's IEP, (3) the student's disability impaired his/her ability to understand the impact and consequences of the behavior, AND/OR (4) the student's disability impaired his/her ability to control the behavior.

This is critical: If the PPT has already conducted an FBA and developed a BSP, there *may be* sufficient basis at the manifestation meeting for the PPT to determine whether or not the behavior subject to the disciplinary action was a manifestation of the student's disability. Otherwise, if ANY ONE of these four criteria are met, the PPT cannot apply another suspension or expulsion as a consequence or place the student unilaterally in an AEP (the exception being one of the "big three" – physical aggression, weapons or drugs). Instead, the team has to "go back to the drawing board" and address the behaviors some other way. Often, though, this is the first time the district offers to conduct an FBA and develop a BSP.

So, if the PPT failed to conduct an FBA and develop a BSP already, or either result is found to be inadequate at the manifestation meeting, the PPT must stop what they're doing and develop an "assessment plan." This includes an(other) FBA and any other assessments (e.g., psychiatric, sensory integration evaluations) that the team believes may have bearing on the behavior or its decisions about how to address the behavior. As we discussed above, qualified people must plan and conduct these assessments. Then, as soon as practicable after developing the plan and completing the assessments, the PPT must reconvene to review results, determine, and implement the intervention(s). If at that time the behavior is determined to be a manifestation of the student's disability, the PPT must deal with it educationally through the BSP or revised BSP as part of the student's IEP.

Only if none of these four criteria apply, may the school determine that the behavior was not a manifestation of the student's disability. In this case, the same disciplinary procedures (e.g., suspension or expulsion) that would be applied to a student without a disability may be implemented. However, the IDEA-eligible student does not lose his/her right to a "Free and Appropriate Public Education" with such removal from school. Rather, special education services must be provided and may include homebound instruction (~2 hours/day) or an AEP.

Just a recap that "manifestation" implies the student was unable to control his behavior because of his disability. An easy example is that a student who has Tourette's Syndrome characterized by coprolalia (sudden outbursts of swearing or obscenities that are actually vocal tics) cannot be held accountable for violating a district policy against swearing or saying obscene things. In this case, the student's ticing behavior is without any doubt a manifestation of his Tourette's. Other situations may be less clear. Does Leroy skip classes all the time because he's being defiant or because he's too anxious to attend? Does Jenny try to pick fights by pushing and yelling at the girls in the locker room because she has an intellectual disability that has kept her from learning how to handle their teasing more maturely? Is Jason sullen and obnoxiously rude to his teachers because "he's going through a stage" or because he's clinically depressed? The complexity of analysis needed to answer these questions is why a good FBA is so essential!

**Beth:** What if a parent disagrees with the findings of the manifestation PPT? What can they do?

**Linda:** Parents need to state their disagreement *in writing* or make sure it is documented at the PPT meeting. As with any dispute, either the parent or the school can request a due process hearing over the matter. As I already stated, students are normally allowed to stay put in their last placement while future placement decisions are contested. However,

there are two exceptions: (1) Schools are allowed to remove students immediately and unilaterally from school for dangerous behaviors—injury to self or others, weapons, or drugs and (2) the district may request an expedited hearing after which a hearing officer may order the removal of the child to an interim AEP for up to 45 days.

The most important things for parents to remember if things get to this point is that their child does not lose his/her future right to the “Least Restrictive Environment” simply because s/he has a reputation or a history of exhibiting challenging behaviors. However, there is some case law that the AEP may become the default placement (stay-put) for subsequent PPT decisions.

**Beth:** Suspensions; punishments; detentions, removal of privileges, etc.; and/or involvement of the Juvenile Justice system don’t seem to be effective in preventing future episodes, what other approaches can parents use together with the school to help their child?

**Linda:** The most important function any of us can have when dealing with children who exhibit challenging behaviors is educative. Of course, we need to make sure the child is safe but that’s a short-term intervention. We must also be concerned with the bigger picture, the future of that child, and how we can best prepare him or her to be a well-adjusted, contributing member of society. Therefore, the most effective approach is proactive rather than reactive: We need to maximize every teachable moment to help the child identify her triggers, develop a repertoire of coping skills, use communication effectively when emotions start to become overwhelming, self-monitor, take breaks appropriately, have a supportive circle of friends, etc.

If we assume that all challenging behaviors serve a function (hence the FBA!), we need to teach the child how to meet the same need in a positive, constructive way. Toward this end, we need to incorporate everything we know about Multiple Intelligences, Brain-Based Learning, and other good instructional methodology to help the child. Mostly, we need to remember Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and that belonging and love come BEFORE self-respect and self-actualization. As difficult as it may be at times, we need to separate the child from her behavior, make sure she feels loved and respected as a human being, and always model the calm, soothing, effective strategies we want her to adopt.

Another approach advocated by Mel Levine is to demystify what’s going on – both for the child and for his peers. Children need to know that they have a disability or that their brain is wired in such a way that it causes them to lose control sometimes (and more than others). They need to be reassured that there are strategies they can learn so they don’t get into so much trouble. They need to know that we are there to partner with them because we love them, care about them, and think they’re terrific kids.

**Beth:** What about the use of logical consequences or having the child make amends?

**Linda:** As we already discussed, we do live in a world where there are consequences for our actions. However, consequences are only effective when they actually reduce the behavior and repair relationships that may be damaged by the behavior. Logical – or, rather, natural – consequences are those that happen anyway. Refusing to get dressed in the morning means missing the fun activity Mrs. Baylor planned during homeroom because we’re late for school. Dumping out our book bag in anger means more homework because we got off to a late start on morning work when we had to calm down and then pick up our stuff. Sammy no longer wants to sit with us on the school bus and

his parents are supporting his request so he can't anymore. We need to help the children cope with these natural events so they don't result in yet another meltdown due to disappointment. If the missed activity is meaningful to the child, he will be more motivated to control his own behavior if he has any resources at all to do so.

Making amends through restitution, a process I already described in lieu of traditional consequences intended as punishment, can really help relationships. They don't usually reduce the probability that the behavior will decrease. What does reduce the behavior is clear, consistent explanations and discussion after the child has calmed down completely – debriefing or teaching, if you will – of the “lesson of the day.” Gradually, over time, these have the desired effect.

**Beth:** What are your aspirations for these children in our educational system? What would you like to see happen?

**Linda:** My aspirations for the kids we've been talking about is that they are still welcomed and embraced as full members of their school communities despite their challenging behaviors, that they're supported in learning the alternatives we talked about, and that their families are supported through the rough periods so that the kids grow up feeling loved and secure. I'd like to see these kids fully included in all aspects of school life, participating in general education classes that challenge them intellectually and having access to activities that they enjoy.

I'd really like to see that ALL schools welcome ALL kids, including those whose behaviors challenge us, through flexible application of best educational practices so that every student can be and is successful academically as well as socially and behaviorally.

**Beth:** I do have a “**Sample**” **FBA/BSP Report** that you provided that I can forward to parents and teachers (**email:** [Beth@explosivekids.org](mailto:Beth@explosivekids.org) if you would like to receive a copy), but are there any additional resources that you might suggest?

**Linda:** All of the experts I've mentioned during this interview are good sources. Ross Greene, Tom Armstrong, Alfie Kohn, and Mel Levine have each written excellent and readable books on this subject. Although Herb Lovett's book, Learning to Listen, was geared toward people with more significant disabilities, it holds powerful lessons for respectful treatment of all human beings. Similarly, I've found all of the websites and trainings on Gentle Teaching approaches beneficial. I think Carol Stock Kranowicz's books on the “out of sync” child would be helpful to a lot of families because sensory integration dysfunction often goes hand-in-hand with behavioral challenges, especially among younger students.

In evaluating resources, I can't emphasize enough how important it is to avoid the “one size fits all” approaches espoused by some professionals and to make sure that, whatever the source, it applies my modified Golden Rule: *If you had this same behavioral problem at the same age as this child, how would you want others to respond to you?*

**Beth:** Are there any other thoughts that you would like to share with our parents and teachers?

**Linda:** As I've said during this interview, I fundamentally believe we're dealing with good kids who exhibit not-so-good behaviors. I really like Mel Levine's view that most of these kids are “hard-wired for excellence” in some area not typically valued by schools and that we just may have to look a little harder to find that area and notice the gifts each child has. And to families and teachers I would add, Don't ever give up. We know it

only takes one mentoring adult to “save” a troubled kid from a hopeless future. If each one of us can do our best to be that adult, we’ll be at least halfway there!

**Beth:** Thank you again for the interview and for providing us with a summary sheet:  
**THE I.D.E.A. AND CHILDREN WHO NEED BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS** . I know that this information will be extremely helpful to our parents and teachers.

# THE I.D.E.A. AND CHILDREN WHO NEED BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS

by Linda H. Rammler, M.Ed., Ph.D.  
developed in conjunction with Mark S. Partin, Esq.  
**RAMMLER & WOOD, CONSULTANTS, LLC**  
6 Way Road, Suite 301  
Middlefield, CT 06455  
860-349-7083/Fax 860-349-7084  
email [rwc5@mindspring.com](mailto:rwc5@mindspring.com)

## What the Law Says (IDEA '97 Amendments)

Addressing challenging behaviors must be a *team* process, including parents, general and special educators, and appropriate related services staff. "If a child has behavior problems that interfere with his or her learning or the learning of others, the IEP team must consider whether strategies, including positive behavioral interventions, strategies, and supports are needed to address the behavior. If the IEP team determines that such services are needed, they must be added to the IEP and must be provided." (OSEP, 2000)

The law, therefore, requires schools to conduct *Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA)* and use the results of those FBAs to develop *behavior support plans (BSP)* for ALL students who engage in challenging behaviors.

FBAs must, at minimum, a) define the problem behaviors, b) describe the settings under which problem behaviors are and are not likely to be observed, c) identify the function of (hypotheses about why) the problem behaviors occur, and d) collect information from assessment and direct observation to support these hypotheses.

Personnel development around positive practices is required by the law at the state and local level.

When disciplinary sanctions result in any removal of a student eligible for special education for more than 10 cumulative days from school (pattern of removal) OR when a single disciplinary action results in removal from school for 10 days or more (change in placement), a *manifestation PPT meeting* must be held (within 10 days of the incident) to determine whether the behavior was a manifestation of the student's disability or not.

If the PPT has already conducted an FBA and developed a BSP, there *may be* sufficient basis at the manifestation meeting for the PPT to determine whether or not the behavior subject to the disciplinary action was a manifestation of the student's disability.

At that meeting, the PPT must consider whether (1) the child's IEP and placement were appropriate, (2) the child's IEP (including special education and supplemental aids/ services, as well as behavior intervention strategies) and placement were provided consistent with the child's IEP, (3) the student's disability impaired his/her ability to understand the impact and consequences of the behavior, AND/OR (4) the student's disability impaired his/her ability to control the behavior.

Only if none of these four criteria apply, may the school determine that the behavior was not a manifestation of the student's disability. In this case, the same disciplinary procedures (e.g., suspension or expulsion) that would be applied to a student without a disability may be implemented. However, the IDEA-eligible student does not lose his/her right to a "Free and Appropriate Public Education" with such removal from school. Rather, special education services must be provided and may include homebound instruction (~2 hours/day) or an AEP.

Parents who disagree may appeal at a “manifestation hearing” similar to other due process hearings.

If the PPT failed to conduct an FBA and develop a BSP already, or either result is found to be inadequate at the manifestation meeting, the PPT must then develop an “assessment plan.” This includes an(other) FBA and any other assessments (e.g., psychiatric, sensory integration evaluations) that the team believes may have bearing on the behavior or its decisions about how to address the behavior.

Qualified people must plan and conduct these assessments.

As soon as practicable, after developing the plan and completing the assessments, the PPT must reconvene to review results, determine, and implement the intervention(s). If at that time the behavior is determined to be a manifestation of the student’s disability, the PPT must deal with it educationally through the BSP or revised BSP as part of the student’s IEP.

Although students are normally allowed to stay put in their last placement while future placement decisions are contested, there is an exception: Schools are allowed to remove students immediately and unilaterally from school for dangerous behaviors—injury to self or others, weapons, or drugs.

In other instances of challenging behaviors, the PPT may recommend, or (if the parents disagree) the LEA may request an expedited hearing after which a hearing officer may order, the removal of the child to an interim *Alternative Educational Placement* for up to 45 days.

The student does not lose his/her future right to the “Least Restrictive Environment” simply because s/he has a reputation or a history of exhibiting challenging behaviors. However, there is some case law that the AEP may become the default placement (stay-put) for subsequent PPT decisions.

---

### **Barriers to conducting an appropriate FBA/developing a reasonable BSP**

(<http://cecp.air.org/fba/problembehavior3/obstacles3.htm>):

1. Too vague a definition of the behavior(s) of concern.
  2. Incomplete measurement/data collection regarding the behavior(s) of concern and the interventions selected.
  3. Incorrect interpretation of the functional assessment data collected by the IEP team or others.
  4. Inappropriate intervention (e.g., too weak to deal with the complexity or magnitude of the behavior problem; not aligned with the assessment data).
  5. Inconsistent or incorrect application of one or more parts of the intervention plan.
  6. Failure to adequately monitor the implementation of the intervention plan or to adjust the intervention plan over time, as needed, based on on-going monitoring and evaluation, and to adequately evaluate the impact of the intervention plan.
  7. Inadequate system-wide support to avoid future episodes of the behavior problem (e.g., too many initiatives or competing building-level priorities that may interfere with the time and commitment it takes to develop and implement behavioral intervention plans).
  8. The behavior is an issue of tolerance rather than being something that distracts the student or others (e.g., a specific minor behavior, such as doodling).
  9. Teachers lack skills and support necessary to teach behavioral skills.
  10. Failure to consider environmental issues, cultural norms, or psychiatric issues/mental illness outside of the school/classroom environment that are impacting on the student’s behavior.
-

## **IDEA-ly:**

No barriers to FBAs or BSPs exist because *all* team members know and understand best practices concerning positive behavior supports, adequate systems level supports are in place, and staff competencies are assured.

Proactive FBAs and BSPs are sufficient to enable students inclined to exhibit challenging behaviors to remain in inclusive classrooms in their neighborhood schools and manifestation meetings don't need to occur.

The law both prohibits schools from railroading students with challenging behaviors into AEPs and assures that students with disabilities still receive the FAPE to which they are entitled if they make a really big mistake.

Any time an AEP is used, staff at that program truly values students with disabilities, are themselves trained in positive behavior supports, and the student's time there is a healthy, helpful experience.

PPTs admit when the child's IEP/placement was not appropriate and are willing to fix this situation.

PPTs admit when school staff failed to implement the IEP (including the BSP) appropriately and are willing to fix this situation.

PPTs sufficiently understand the nature of various disabilities to make an informed decision about the direct *and indirect* effects of such conditions on a student's ability to understand the impact of his/her behavior, understand the consequences of that behavior, or be able to control the behavior.

PPTs understand that "one size does NOT fit all" in positive behavior supports and truly takes the time/makes the effort to individualize BSPs based on meaningful and comprehensive FBAs.

***Students who exhibit challenging behaviors are still welcomed and embraced as full members of their school communities because these communities are seen as the natural settings in which to teach ALL students appropriate pro-social behaviors.***