



Social and Emotional Strategies for Students with IDD: The ABCs of Behavior

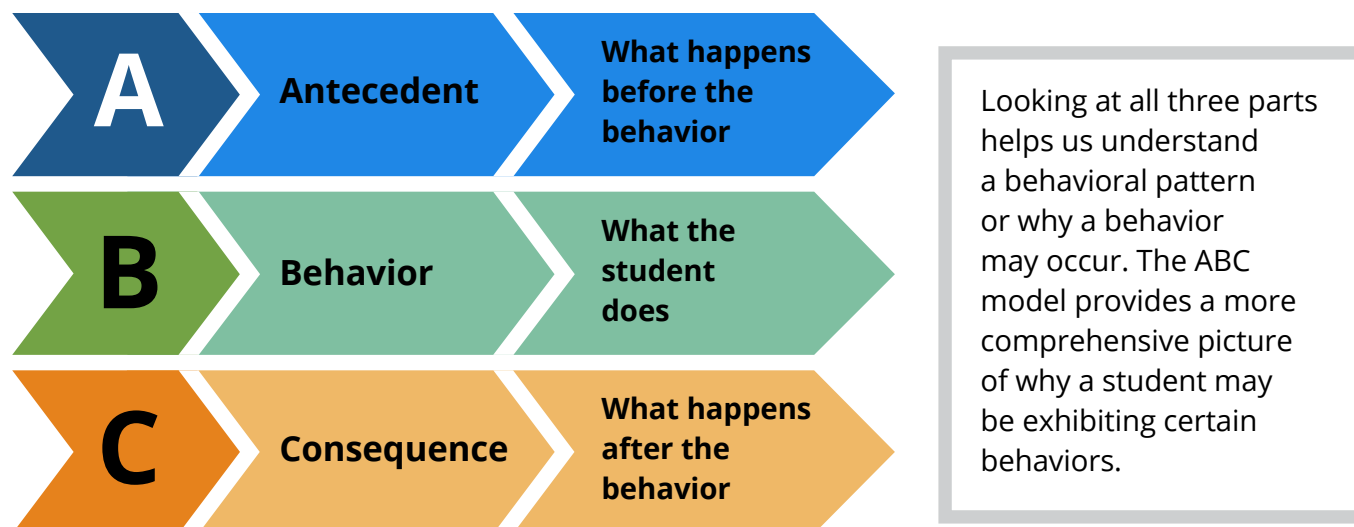
Students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) may use different behaviors to show what they need or how they feel. Sometimes these behaviors can interfere with learning in school or engaging in the community. Interfering behaviors are actions that make it hard for students to learn or interact with others (Powell et. al., 2007). These behaviors are not random. They usually happen for a reason, helping the student communicate a need, want, or feeling.

When a student with IDD feels stressed, confused, or upset, their behavior may

change or become more intense. This is why it is important for teachers and adults to understand what the behavior means and what the student is trying to communicate. One helpful way to figure this out is by using the ABCs of Behavior. This framework helps us learn what happens before a behavior, what the behavior looks like, and what happens immediately after the behavior, pinpointing the relationship between a behavior and the environment (Meaden et. al., 2016). Understanding these pieces can help us identify classroom strategies that promote growth, safety, and success for students with IDD.

What are the ABCs of Behavior?

The Antecedent – Behavior – Consequence (ABC) Model stands for:



A: Antecedent

The antecedent is what happens right before the behavior. It can be something that triggers or sets off a behavior.

Examples include:

- Being told “no”
- Being asked to do a hard or non-preferred task
- Lack of attention
- Loud noises or sudden changes

B: Behavior

The behavior is what the student does. We describe behaviors clearly so anyone watching would understand what happened. For example: “The student hit the table with their hand for three minutes.”

We can describe behavior by looking at:

- How strong it is (intensity)
- How long it lasts (duration)
- How long it takes to start after something happens (latency)
- What the behavior looks like (shape)

Behaviors usually have a function, or a reason they happen (Cooper et. al., 2017). The function or purpose of most behavior falls into two groups:

- Escape: getting away from something (a task, noise, or attention)
- Access: getting something (a toy, attention, or sensory input)

Example: If a student runs away when an adult asks a question, the student may be trying to escape the interaction with the adult.

C: Consequence

The consequence is what happens right after the behavior. The consequence can make a behavior happen more or less in the future.

Example: If a student screams to get a toy — and the toy is given — the student learns that screaming works to get what they want.

Looking at consequences helps us understand what may be “rewarding” the behavior, even if we do not mean it to. Recognizing how certain behaviors are being reinforced is crucial to developing appropriate behavioral interventions (Matthews, 2025).

Taking ABC Data

ABC data helps us to see patterns in behavior that can help us decide which supports or strategies may work best for a student (Friedman, 2001). The first step in taking ABC data is to describe the target behavior in clear and observable terms.

To take ABC data, we:

- Describe the behavior clearly (Behavior).
- Use simple, observable words.
- Write down what happened right before the behavior (Antecedent).
Include events, people, or conditions.
- Write down what happened right after (Consequence).
Note how adults reacted or what changed.

Being specific and clear in our data collection makes it easier to see behavioral patterns over time.

Sample Data Sheet

Here is an example of an ABC data sheet.

Student: Student A

Target Behavior:

- a Leaving a given area without permission (ex. getting out of chair during whole group, running out of the classroom; non-ex. leaving to go to cafeteria during lunchtime)
- b Aggression: using body or objects forcefully to cause harm to self or others (ex. hitting with hand; non-ex. giving a high-five)

Proposed Function:

- 1 Escape (attention or nonpreferred)
- 2 Gain attention
- 3 Gain item
- 4 Sensory

Date/Time	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence	Proposed Function
01/20 8:15am	School bell ringing	<u>a</u> b	Student redirected to seat	<u>1</u> 2 3 4
01/20 10:12am	Directive given to begin work	<u>a</u> b	Student redirected to work	<u>1</u> 2 3 4
01/20 12:42am	Student ignored in cafeteria	a <u>b</u>	Student shown "calm body" visual	1 <u>2</u> 3 4
		a b		1 2 3 4
		a b		1 2 3 4
		a b		1 2 3 4
		a b		1 2 3 4

Examples of Interpreting ABC Data to Inform Decision-Making

Below are some examples of interpreting ABC data to inform decision-making. The A represents the antecedent, the B represents the student's behavior, and the C represents the consequence or what happens immediately after the behavior.

Example 1:

A: The child is presented with a math worksheet.

B: The child screams.

C: The worksheet is taken away from the student.

What this means: The child will learn that screaming gets them out of doing work.

Try instead: Offer a break card or keep the worksheet in place to show that screaming is not how to request a break.

Example 2:

A: The school bell rings to indicate a transition.

B: The child hides in the corner.

C: Adults run over to comfort the child.

What this means: The child will learn that hiding gives them adult attention.

Try instead: Use visual supports like a schedule or picture icons to help with transitions and give attention before the behavior happens.

Example 3:

A: The teacher begins a math lesson.

B: The student flops on the floor.

C: Teacher quickly redirects student to desk.

What this means: The child will learn that flopping does not get them out of doing work.

Try instead: Praise the student when they return to their desk to encourage positive behavior.

References

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