



JONAH: A Positive Behavior Strategy

By Dr. Kathleen VanTol

Module 7: Building Effective Behavior Plans

“You also know that the beginning of any kind of work is its most important part, especially when it deals with young and tender things during the period when they are most easily formed.”

(Plato, The Republic)

*“Above all and before all, do this: Get Wisdom!
Write this at the top of your list: Get Understanding!”*

(Peterson, The Message, Proverbs 4:7)

JONAH: A Positive Behavior Strategy

The JONAH framework continues to guide this work, highlighting that growth unfolds through Just Opportunities, New Actions, and Hope. These principles, grounded in grace, accountability, and the belief that every learner is capable of meaningful change, invite educators to support students with understanding, consistency, and compassion.

- **Just Opportunities.** Creating fair, predictable, and supportive conditions that give students what they need to succeed, along with the structure and second chances that build trust.
- **New Actions.** Teaching and reinforcing the skills, routines, and positive behaviors that help students replace old patterns with healthier ones.

- **Hope.** Believing deeply that change is possible for both students and educators and committing to walk with students through challenges, growth, mistakes, and success.

In Module 6, the focus was on strengthening Hope practices for Tier 3 behavior responses by looking beneath observable actions to ask, “Why is this behavior occurring?” To help educators answer this question, the module introduced strategies for gathering data, identifying patterns, and seeking input from the target student. This mindset reflects the Biblical Hope that can be seen in a steady and patient belief that progress is possible, even when the path is difficult.

Module 7 continues this journey by guiding educators from observation to understanding. Now that teachers have been equipped to begin well by using meaningful data collection tools, this module focuses on interpreting that information, forming thoughtful hypotheses, and designing Tier 3 supports that address student needs with insight and intentionality. In this sense, creating a hypothesis is an act of hope. It communicates that behavior has a purpose and that, by seeking to understand that purpose, educators can respond wisely and effectively.

Forming a Hypothesis

Once teachers gather information using the [ABC observation framework](#) and other data-collection methods, the next step is to make sense of the patterns that emerge. A [hypothesis statement](#) summarizes what the teacher or the intervention team believes is happening and why in a single, clear sentence that captures the likely trigger, the student behavior, and the possible function. This statement serves as the bridge between data collection and designing an effective plan to support the student.

🔗 A helpful template is:

When [**antecedent** or trigger] happens, the student [description of **behavior**] in order to [**function of the behavior**].

Typical examples include:

- When given a multi-step writing assignment (antecedent), the student crumples the paper and puts his head down on his desk (behavior) in order to escape a task that is above his instructional level (function).
- When the teacher begins working with another student (antecedent), the student loudly calls out jokes and silly comments (behavior) in order to gain the teacher’s attention (function).

Writing a hypothesis does more than describe behavior. It communicates that the behavior is purposeful and understandable. This shift helps teachers move away from “How do I stop this behavior?” and toward “How do I help the student meet this need in a better way?”

Using the Hypothesis to Design Supports



Unmet needs can create a domino effect on student behavior in a classroom. Supports for students are designed to meet the function of the behavior in a way that allows the student to meet the need in a more appropriate way.

Image: Atlantic Ambience. (2022, July 23). *Hand stopping domino effect*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Once the team feels confident that they have determined the likely function of the behavior, they can begin identifying supports and teaching strategies that will help the student meet the same need in a more appropriate and sustainable way. The goal is not

simply to eliminate the behavior but to replace it with a new action that fulfills the same function without disrupting learning.

Examples of function-aligned supports include:

- **Escape/Avoidance:** Reduce task difficulty, address any skill deficits, provide structured breaks, help the student build increased stamina for the task, teach the student how to appropriately ask for help, offer choices in how to complete the task.
- **Adult Attention:** Build predictable positive interactions throughout the day, use planned check-ins, teach the student respectful ways to gain attention and connection.
- **Access to Tangible Items or Activities:** Create clear routines for earning, requesting, and transitioning to preferred activities.
- **Sensory Needs:** Offer access to sensory supports and tools, incorporate planned sensory breaks, make environmental adjustments that help the student stay regulated.

The focus is not on simply eliminating the target behavior. The goal is to replace a concerning behavior with a new action that works better for both the student and the learning environment. The key to success is ensuring that the function of the behavior is still being met, even though the form of the behavior changes.

Developing a solid hypothesis is most effective when it is done collaboratively. Teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers, and family members see the student across different settings, and their insights can strengthen the accuracy of the hypothesis.

Sometimes behaviors that look like attention-seeking at school serve a different purpose at home, or the attention a student receives in the classroom is simply a byproduct of a necessary adult response to disruptive behavior, not the true function.

It's also important to treat the hypothesis as a working premise, not the final answer. As supports are implemented, it is important to collect data on how the target behavior changes. If the plan does not lead to meaningful improvement, the team should revisit the hypothesis and adjust the plan. People are complex and responding to challenging

behavior is complicated. Hope reminds educators that progress is possible, even when the process includes challenges and mistakes along the way.

Case Study: Jeffrey



Oppositional behavior may mask a lack of confidence. With support, students learn new behaviors and grow in confidence.
Image: RDNE Stock Project. (2021, June 26). *A boy wearing a school uniform and eyeglasses.* Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Jeffrey, a sixth-grade student, often refuses to turn in homework and occasionally tears up his assignments when asked to hand them in. At first glance, the teacher assumes Jeffrey is being intentionally oppositional. However, two weeks of ABC data reveal a different pattern.

- Antecedent: Homework is collected at the start of class with students passing their papers to the front of the row. While this is happening, the teacher reminds students that incomplete work must be finished during recess.
- Behavior: Jeffrey crumples or tears up his homework and puts his head down.
- Consequence: To avoid escalation, the teacher allows him to skip the recess work time.

A follow-up conversation reveals that Jeffrey is embarrassed when he doesn't understand his homework and worries that classmates will notice his mistakes and missing answers. The ABC data pattern shows that the consequence, escaping the homework, was unintentionally reinforcing the behavior.

Using this new understanding, the teacher revises her approach. She adds guided practice during whole class instruction and builds in other opportunities for Jeffrey to receive feedback while he works. Together, they set up a private check-in routine for reviewing

homework before it is turned in. As support increases, Jeffrey’s avoidance behaviors decrease, and his confidence grows.

Key Takeaway: *Systematic observation gives teachers a more accurate understanding of what is happening. Data can reveal the “hidden logic” behind challenging behaviors, allowing teachers to respond with empathy and targeted support rather than frustration. This approach helps students feel seen, understood, and supported.*

(Bowler, 2022; Cooper et al., 2020; Minahan & Rappaport, 2018; Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, 2018)

Asking the Right Questions



Educators use questions and observation to form a hypothesis statement. This leads to better understanding of student behavior.
Image: Leeloo The First. (2020, September 23). *Question marks on paper crafts*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Before drafting a **Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)**, it is important to pause and take a comprehensive look at the situation. This step builds on the work already begun in developing the hypothesis. By examining the behavior from multiple perspectives, the team can continue to refine their understanding of the student’s needs, the purpose the behavior may be serving, and the environmental conditions that shape it. This intentional reflection lays the foundation for a plan that is accurate, compassionate, and aligned with the realities of the classroom.

Begin by considering the student’s lived experience.

- How are the student’s struggles impacting their learning or well-being?

- How does a typical situation unfold from the student’s point of view?
- What are the early signs, such as changes in posture, tone of voice, or facial expressions, that signal that the student may be drifting off track?
- What tends to make the situation worse, and what helps de-escalate it?
- What does the situation look like when the student is at their best?
- Which activities, supports, or interactions bring out their strengths?

Listening to the student’s perspective can be just as important as observing their behavior.

- How does the student describe the situation? Does it reveal underlying frustrations, needs, or desires that are not obvious from observation alone?
- Are there important [setting events](#), such as hunger, fatigue, conflict earlier in the day, or unexpected changes in routine?
- Are there feelings of embarrassment or confusion about expectations?
- Is the student worried about peers or skills they haven’t learned?

Finally, reflect on the broader classroom context.

- What challenges do teachers face in managing the situation?
- How does the behavior affect peers, routines, and the overall learning climate?

Understanding this context ensures the plan supports the individual student and the functioning of the entire classroom. Taking time to ask these questions helps the team shift from reacting to behavior toward understanding and addressing the conditions that shape it. The result is a plan that is more accurate, effective, and sustainable.

Questions to Guide Goal Setting

Once the team has a clear understanding of the situation, the next step is to identify measurable goals that are realistic for the student, developmentally and culturally appropriate, and suited to the instructional setting. Goal setting should shift the focus from what the student should stop doing to what they can learn to do instead. A helpful starting point is asking, “What behaviors do we want to see more of?” Framing goals in positive,

observable terms allows everyone to measure success in concrete ways and helps the student clearly understand what success looks like.

Start by revisiting what was learned about the function of the behavior. How can the student meet the same need in a more appropriate way? For example, if the function is escape, a [replacement behavior](#) may be requesting a break. If the function is attention, a more appropriate alternative might be raising a hand or using a teacher-identified signal phrase such as “Can you check on me when you’re done?” It is also important to consider whether the behavior reflects a skill deficit. Are there academic gaps that need to be addressed? Is the challenge related to struggles with communication, emotional regulation, problem solving, task persistence, or general readiness skills?

When multiple areas of concern emerge, the team should pause and ask, “If we could prioritize just one area for improvement, which would make the biggest difference in the student’s daily functioning?” Choosing a smaller number of well-targeted goals increases the likelihood of meaningful progress. Early success builds confidence and momentum, making it easier to add additional goals over time.

Finally, look for opportunities to adjust the environment. What routines, expectations, or supports can be modified to make success more likely? In many cases, small changes such as previewing transitions, temporarily modifying tasks, offering guided practice, or building planned breaks into the routine can make a meaningful difference. Asking these questions before writing the BIP ensures that the plan is a good fit for the classroom setting and is aligned with the student’s needs, strengths, and developmental level.

Writing the Plan

After taking time to understand the “why” behind a student’s behavior and considering the student’s strengths, challenges, needs, and the broader classroom context, the next step is to turn insight into action. A well-written Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) describes how the adults in the learning environment will support the student, which new skills will be taught,

and what progress will look like over time. It serves as both a practical guide for the team and a working document that is reviewed and adjusted as the student grows.

A strong plan balances care with clarity. It recognizes that meaningful behavior change takes time and that success relies on consistent routines, shared expectations, and supportive relationships. The most effective BIPs are collaborative, realistic, and grounded in both data and hope, ensuring that students receive the guidance they need to develop new, more effective ways of meeting their needs ([Bowler, 2022](#); [Cooper et al., 2020](#); [Minahan & Rappaport, 2018](#); [Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, 2018](#)).

The Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP)



Behavior Interventions Plans are not punishment. Instead, they provide a structured way for educators to help students thrive.
Image: Tarazevich, A. (2020, October 25). *Here to help lettering text on black background*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

When developing a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP), the most important step is to ensure that the supports and strategies are well matched to the student's needs. At the same time, it is essential to ensure that the school has the resources and staffing necessary to implement those supports reliably. Even the strongest plan will fall short if it cannot be carried out consistently. A well-designed BIP should also aim to prevent frustration for the student by aligning assignments, expectations, and routines with the student's current skill level.

As the school year progresses, the plan should be revisited regularly to assess its effectiveness. If the student is not making progress or if certain strategies are not producing the intended outcomes, the plan should be revised in order to better meet the student's needs. Likewise, when the student can consistently achieve the stated goals, the BIP should be adjusted to promote continued growth. The plan should clearly define the

criteria for fading supports and describe how that fading will occur. This helps promote independence while ensuring that changes are made thoughtfully and at a pace that supports the student's ongoing success.

A key feature of an effective BIP, which was described earlier, is the inclusion of clear, observable, and measurable goals that allow the student to see growth and experience success. To make that growth visible, ongoing and frequent [progress monitoring](#) is essential. This monitoring enables the team to closely track patterns, celebrate gains, identify what is working, and make timely adjustments as needed.

In addition, these plans are intentionally proactive rather than reactive. Instead of focusing solely on stopping challenging behaviors, BIPs are designed to restructure the environment in ways that increase the student's likelihood of success from the start. This reduces the need for disciplinary consequences and minimizes opportunities for power struggles.

These proactive features of the BIP are carried out through the specific supports and responses that are built into the plan. To support the student in learning new behaviors and achieving the identified goals, an effective BIP clearly describes how these supports will be delivered. As a component of these supports, the plan should also specify how and when [positive reinforcement](#) will be provided. When reinforcement is implemented effectively and consistently, the team should see an increase in the number of successful days the student experiences.

In addition, the plan should identify quick, effective strategies for helping the student reset and reregulate when challenges arise. It is important to include a clear response plan for difficult moments so that all staff respond in a consistent, calm, and confident manner. Consistency across adults is essential. When everyone responds in predictable ways and the environment supports skill development and emotional safety, students are better able to meet expectations and make meaningful progress.

Want to learn more about Behavior Intervention Plans? [Developing Quality Behavior Intervention Plans \(BIPs\)](#) by McConkney & Light Shriener (2023) is a good place to start.

Effective BIP Supports

It is important to set students up for success, and providing structure and predictability is one of the simplest ways to do so. Predictable routines reduce anxiety, clarify expectations, and help students feel prepared for what comes next. Tools such as visual schedules, timers, and step-by-step instructions can be used to support this goal. Previewing activities and breaking transitions into smaller steps can make tasks more manageable and help prevent problems before they arise. Scheduled check-ins and planned breaks give students opportunities to regroup before frustration builds, while discreet prompts can remind them to ask for help or request a break when needed.

Teaching new skills directly is another essential part of setting students up for success. Many challenging behaviors occur because students lack the skills needed to respond differently. Role-playing, practicing problem-solving, modeling flexible thinking, and coaching perspective-taking all help students develop the skills needed to handle challenges more effectively. Teaching self-monitoring skills and using peer mentors can further strengthen independence and confidence, helping students learn to take responsibility for their actions in positive ways.

Motivation grows when students feel a sense of ownership and connection to the goals they are working toward. Providing positive reinforcement, sharing progress data, and celebrating small successes reinforces effort and persistence. Linking goals to a student's interests and values helps them see the purpose behind their work and strengthens intrinsic motivation. Even small instructional adjustments, such as using "positive opposites" which emphasize what to do rather than what not to do, can make a meaningful difference. Together, these practices help students build a sense of purpose and competence.

Sensory tools can also play an important role in creating a supportive classroom. For many students, unmet sensory needs play a significant role in their behavioral challenges. When these needs are addressed thoughtfully and proactively, students are better able to regulate their bodies and emotions without drawing negative attention to themselves.

Access to movement breaks, noise-canceling headphones, flexible seating, or calming spaces can provide the sensory input or relief students need to stay focused and engaged. When sensory supports and tools are normalized as part of the classroom routine, the environment becomes more inclusive and supportive for all learners.

At the First Sign of Trouble



Recognizing early warning signs and responding promptly may keep a situation from escalating.
Image: Glitter, V. (2015, May 13). *Boy wiping his tears*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Even in the most supportive environments, moments of frustration or overwhelm are inevitable. At the first sign of trouble, the goal is for the adults to step in and help the student regain calm so they can regroup and re-engage before the situation escalates. Early warning signs often appear as subtle changes in tone of voice, body posture, facial expression, work pace, or social interactions. When adults recognize these cues and respond promptly, they can often prevent the situation from becoming more challenging. Effective plans will also include strategies students can use independently or with gentle prompting when they become dysregulated. These may involve using a prearranged break pass, taking a brief walk, moving to a different workspace, accessing water, snacks, or sensory tools, visiting a designated calming area, or using breathing and mindfulness strategies. Students may also request help, clarification, or a short movement break to reset before continuing, helping them return to the task with improved focus and confidence.

The way adults communicate during these moments also matters. A calm tone and a validating comment such as, “It looks like this is getting frustrating,” can defuse tension

and invite problem-solving without triggering defensiveness. Offering extra time, previewing the next step, or breaking tasks into smaller parts can further support students who feel stuck and help them regain momentum. Timely, consistent support helps maintain student engagement, preserves dignity, and strengthens trust. When adults respond early and with empathy, students learn that they will be supported as they work through challenges. This proactive approach builds emotional safety and creates the conditions students need for long-term skill development.

On the Toughest Days

Despite strong preventative supports, some days will still be difficult. When a student becomes significantly distressed, the teacher's role shifts to ensuring safety, maintaining a calm presence, and helping the student re-regulate. In these moments, logic, reasoning, and problem-solving are ineffective. This is not the time for teaching, lecturing, or penalties.

Signs that a student has entered crisis may include:

- Aggression toward others
- Self-harm behaviors or attempts
- Intense emotional distress or rage
- Property destruction
- Attempting to run from the room
- Making credible threats

When these behaviors occur, guide the student to a space that offers both physical and emotional safety and gives them the time and space they need to self-regulate.

Communicate support through calm body language, minimal talking, and a non-confrontational posture, such as remaining at eye level and allowing plenty of space. Offer quiet reassurance and simple, soothing options like sensory tools or repetitive calming activities (e.g., deep breathing exercises). Harmless distractions such as reading, drawing, or listening to music can also help the student regain control. Reasoning, reflection, and

problem-solving should wait until the student feels secure, regulated, and ready to engage ([Bowler, 2022](#); [Cooper et al., 2020](#); [Minahan & Rappaport, 2018](#); [Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, 2018](#), [Parrish, 2025](#)).

Types of BIPs



A behavior intervention plan might include headphones to block excess classroom noise or earned time for preferred activities.
Image: Trapani, T. (2019, May 8). *Photo of boy wearing headphone*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

A Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) is a practical roadmap for helping students learn positive and effective ways to meet their needs so they can be successful in the classroom. Instead of emphasizing consequences for misbehavior, a BIP describes the situations that commonly lead to challenging behavior for the target student and identifies the teaching strategies, environmental supports, and adult responses that will help that student use new actions in place of those behaviors. A BIP is student focused and individualized. It provides a level of detail that enables everyone to implement the plan with consistency, ensuring that the appropriate environmental supports are provided, that everyone uses the same strategies, and that everyone responds in predictable ways. When implemented well, a BIP builds student success, reduces frustration for students and teachers, and creates a more positive learning environment for everyone.

[Bowler \(2022\)](#) provides a helpful framework for understanding how BIPs can be tailored to different student needs. She describes three common focus areas for plans: those centered on general behavior challenges, those driven by academic skill needs, and those

designed specifically to support transitions. Bowler emphasizes that each plan should align with the specific skills a student is working to develop. She also highlights the importance of adjusting the level of support over time. Most plans begin with a high level of structure and adult guidance, then shift to medium and eventually low levels of support as the student shows increased proficiency. This gradual release of responsibility allows students to build independence while still receiving the scaffolding they need. With this framework in mind, the following sections explain how each type of plan functions and illustrate how support can be adjusted to promote steady, meaningful growth.

Behavior-Focused BIPs

Behavior-focused plans are designed for students who need targeted support to meet school behavioral expectations. These plans provide structured help at first, then gradually fade that assistance as the student gains skills and competency. The goal is to promote independence, moving from high support to low support as the student becomes more capable of managing expectations on their own. When the student consistently meets the indicators of success at a given stage, it signals that they are ready to move on to the next level of support, allowing the plan to evolve in step with their growing skills.

The student who requires a high level of support needs consistent structure, encouragement, and guidance to be successful. Supports might include visual prompts, step-by-step reminders, a token economy, scheduled breaks, working with a peer partner, frequent positive feedback, and close supervision. The teacher or support staff member needs to remain physically present and provide immediate redirection or reassurance as needed. Success at this stage means the student meets behavioral and academic expectations with significant help and careful preparation.

As the student begins to show success in managing their behavior and learning, the plan can be adjusted to provide a medium level of support. This student will still benefit from proactive strategies such as scheduled check-ins across the day, visual reminders, and structured routines. Tools like self-monitoring checklists and breaks can support the student to make better choices when frustrations and challenges arise. Success at this

level means the student meets expectations with strategic cues and structured supports in place.

The student is ready for the lowest level of support when they begin functioning successfully alongside peers using the skills and strategies they've developed. The teacher still checks in regularly and provides positive reinforcement, but the student increasingly takes ownership for their own self-regulation and problem-solving. Success looks like asking for help only when needed and meeting classroom expectations independently or with minimal teacher input.

Case Study: Mitchel



Defiant behavior may mask overwhelming feeling when faced with challenging tasks.
Image: Friedmann, A. (2021, July 16). *A boy in black long sleeves shirt*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Mitchel is a fourth-grade student who often struggles to meet classroom behavior expectations, especially during independent work time. When tasks feel challenging or when routines change unexpectedly, he tends to shut down, glare defiantly at the teacher, and wander around the room, bothering his peers. These behaviors disrupt his learning and distract his peers, but they also signal that Mitchel becomes overwhelmed when he is unsure what to do next. Based on classroom observations and ABC data, his team develops a behavior-focused BIP designed to build his confidence, strengthen his coping skills, and help him engage more consistently in learning.

High Support: At first, Mitchel needs substantial structure and adult guidance to be successful. At the start of the school day, he does a quick check-in with his teacher to review the schedule and preview any changes to the routine for that day. His teacher also provides a visual checklist for independent work assignments and checks in briefly both at the start and about halfway through each independent work period. Mitchel sits near the teacher for easy prompting and receives immediate, specific praise for using strategies such as referring to his checklist or asking for help. He is also paired with a peer partner during challenging tasks. With these supports in place, Mitchel begins completing assignments more regularly and experiences more successful school days, though he still relies heavily on adult presence.

Medium Support: As Mitchel's confidence grows, the team gradually reduces the level of support. He now begins work using his checklist independently, and his teacher no longer needs to stay close by. Mitchel uses a self-monitoring card to rate his focus every ten minutes and earns a small privilege for accurate self-reflection. Visual reminders replace many verbal prompts, and he is encouraged to use a break pass if he feels himself getting frustrated. When challenges arise, a nonverbal signal from the teacher is usually enough to help him to remember to use his strategies to reset. Mitchel meets classroom expectations more consistently but still benefits from predictable routines and occasional, targeted supports.

Low Support: At this point, Mitchel has developed the skills he needs to participate successfully with his peers. He manages changes in routine with the same cues used for the whole class and typically begins work during independent work time without additional reminders. The teacher meets with Mitchel weekly to review progress and reinforce growth, but Mitchel now uses coping strategies such as self-monitoring and using positive self-talk mostly independently. He continues using his checklist as needed, but is able to request help appropriately when a task feels challenging. Mitchel's increase in independence reflects the success of gradually fading supports over time. His team notes not only improved behavior but also a stronger sense of self-efficacy and pride in his accomplishments.

Key Takeaway: *Behavior-focused BIPs help students like Mitchel build the skills they need to thrive. By beginning with high levels of support and gradually shifting responsibility to the student, educators can foster independence while ensuring students receive the structure and encouragement they need at each stage of development.*

Skill-Focused BIPs

Skill-focused behavior plans are designed for students who exhibit challenging behavior related to a skill deficit. These students need adjusted expectations while they build the social, emotional, and academic skills that are currently underdeveloped. Along with providing behavioral supports, these plans emphasize directly teaching and reinforcing the targeted skills so that related expectations can gradually increase as the student becomes more capable and confident.

At high levels of support, the teacher provides direct instruction and structured support to help the student learn new skills, enabling the student to begin meeting expectations more successfully. In addition to targeted instruction, supports might include visual step-by-step guides, memory aids, frequent short breaks, modified assignments, and opportunities to work with a peer or to use concrete or visual materials such as manipulatives or drawings. Tasks may also be completed in a preferred location with adult assistance as needed.

As the student's skills improve, the teacher gradually moves to a medium level of support and a correspondingly reduced level of direct assistance. The teacher or classroom assistant still reviews the instructions for understanding. The teacher may also continue to provide adapted assignments aligned to the student's instructional level. Even though the student demonstrates increased independence in using the skill, the teacher or classroom assistant continue to provide feedback, reinforcement, and prompts as needed. The student is still given choices and breaks, but the number of breaks is now limited.

At the low support stage, the student is approaching full participation in general classroom routines. Instructions are delivered alongside peers, the student generally meets

expectations, and the same cooperative learning strategies used class-wide, such as peer support or self-monitoring, are effective.

Case Study: Elena



Even academically capable students may need scaffolding to building confidence and be successful.
Image: Pope, J. (2022, August 12). *Girl holding a book*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Elena is a third-grade student who becomes easily frustrated during writing assignments. She has strong verbal skills and enjoys sharing ideas, but when asked to put her thoughts on paper, she often spends long periods of time staring at the page, doodling, or repeatedly saying, “I can’t do this.” When the work feels too overwhelming, she sometimes crumples her paper, fills it with scribbles, or asks repeatedly to go to the bathroom. An academic-focused BIP is developed to support her writing stamina, build confidence, and help her engage more successfully across writing tasks.

High Support: At the start, Elena needs intensive scaffolding to feel successful. Her teacher breaks writing assignments into short, clearly defined steps and provides a visual writing organizer to guide her thinking. During independent writing, the teacher checks in frequently, offering sentence starters, modeling how to expand ideas, and celebrating each completed step. Elena also has the option to move to a quiet workspace to support focus during independent writing. Throughout the process, she receives immediate, specific praise for effort rather than correctness. With these supports, her writing output increases and she shows fewer avoidance behaviors.

Medium Support: As Elena becomes more comfortable with writing, the teacher fades the level of adult involvement. She now begins each writing task by reviewing the checklist on her own, referring to the graphic organizer as needed. The teacher or classroom assistant checks in once or twice per work period. Elena now responds well to quick verbal prompts and no longer requires step-by-step guidance. Elena practices rereading her writing independently to select one area for improvement, and she earns a preferred activity if she completes the full writing block without avoidance behaviors. Her confidence and writing skills increase.

Low Support: Now, Elena writes for extended periods with minimal teacher input. She uses classroom tools such as anchor charts and peer conferencing just like her classmates. When she feels stuck, she independently uses a strategy from her toolbox, such as sketching ideas, taking a one-minute movement break, or whisper-reading her sentence aloud. The teacher checks in regularly to provide encouragement, feedback, and positive reinforcement. Elena now approaches writing with more confidence, demonstrating independence that would not have been possible without earlier scaffolding.

Key Takeaway: *Academic-focused plans help students build foundational skills gradually and intentionally. By pairing structured supports and direct instruction with strategic fading as skills develop, teachers can help students learn skills and internalize tools and strategies that strengthen both competence and confidence.*

Transition-Focused Plans

Transition-focused plans are designed for students who find it difficult to move smoothly between tasks, classes, or settings. These students often have a difficult time shifting focus or feel anxious when routines change, and benefit from support that helps them anticipate, prepare for, and complete transitions calmly and successfully. The goal of these plans is to increase the student's sense of predictability and control, while gradually building independence.

Students who need intensive transition support may benefit from multiple reminders before a change occurs. The teacher can use tools such as visual timers, countdowns, and verbal prompts to prepare the student. Breaking the transition into clear steps for the student (e.g., “finish task,” “put materials away,” “move to circle”) helps make the process manageable. Adult proximity, encouragement, and positive feedback can maintain momentum and build confidence. Some students might also need to have the schedule reviewed throughout the day. Other students may need opportunities to role-play more difficult transitions before they happen. What success looks like: The student completes transitions with significant support and extra time, showing reduced anxiety and resistance.

The student who needs a medium level of support may require only one or two verbal or visual reminders before a transition. A visual schedule can be available for the student to reference as needed, and extra time can be provided upon request. Positive feedback should still be offered regularly to reinforce successful transitions. What success looks like: The student moves between activities with minimal preparation and occasional support, managing most transitions independently.

Once students have developed stronger transition skills, they can move to a lower level of support. These students can usually respond successfully to the same directions given to the whole class. They regularly use tools such as visual schedules, checklists, or timers independently when needed. Class-wide strategies that promote smooth transitions (e.g., countdowns, music cues) support ongoing success. What success looks like: The student transitions effectively alongside peers without additional help.

Case Study: Jared



Students face many transitions during a school day. Entering and leaving the building are just two of them.
Image: Chopra, A. (2025, November 3). *Yellow school buses in parking lot in daylight*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Jared is a first-grade student who becomes distressed during transitions, especially when moving from a preferred activity to a more structured one. When asked to clean up, he often cries, hides under a table, or yells, “I’m not done yet!” His emotions escalate quickly when he feels rushed or unprepared. The team develops a transition-focused BIP to reduce anxiety, increase predictability, and help him move between activities with greater ease.

High Support: At first, Jared needs extensive preparation and direct adult guidance to support transitions. His teacher reviews his picture schedule multiple times each morning and provides a five-minute and a two-minute warning before every change. During transitions, she stays close by and gives step-by-step prompts (e.g., “Put your marker in the bin... now push in your chair... now walk to the carpet”). Jared is allowed extra time to finish his work and may bring a small transition object when moving between locations. With these supports, he completes transitions more calmly and spends less time in distress.

Medium Support: As Jared gains confidence, supports are gradually reduced. Instead of multiple warnings, he is now given one clear visual cue such as a countdown timer. He begins using his picture schedule independently and practices completing transitions using a simple three-step routine. When needed, his teacher provides a calm reminder from across the room rather than staying directly beside him during each transition. Jared earns a token each time he completes a transition without crying or refusal, and he chooses a small reward after earning a set number. At this stage, he still needs structure, but he is beginning to manage transitions with far less adult involvement.

Low Support: At this point, Jared functions well with the same transition cues used for the whole class. He no longer needs countdowns or extra time and rarely uses his transition object. When he feels disappointed about stopping a preferred activity, he uses self-talk (e.g., “I can finish later”) and takes a calming breath before moving on. The teacher is able to fade the token system but still offers regular positive reinforcement. Jared completes most transitions smoothly and independently. His confidence in managing change has grown dramatically.

Key Takeaway: *Transition-focused plans help students build flexibility and emotional resilience. By gradually shifting responsibility from the adults to the student, teachers support the development of independence and reduce anxiety around predictable challenges.*

([Bowler, 2022](#); [Cooper et al., 2020](#); [Minahan & Rappaport, 2018](#); [Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, 2018](#))

Progress Monitoring

Regularly monitoring a student’s progress allows educators to evaluate whether the supports and strategies in place are truly helping the student succeed. Through ongoing data collection and reflection, teachers can identify what is working well and make timely adjustments to interventions and supports that are not producing the desired outcomes.

Progress monitoring also creates opportunities for collaboration and student voice. Asking the student what feels helpful and what might need to change not only provides valuable insight but also empowers the student to take ownership of their learning and behavior growth. Recognizing and celebrating small successes along the way reinforces motivation, strengthens relationships, and builds confidence.

Finally, consistent review of progress helps teachers make informed decisions about when to fade supports or increase independence. As students demonstrate greater competence and self-regulation, interventions can be gradually reduced without withdrawing support too quickly. Encouraging students to set personal goals based on their progress can be

used to foster accountability and help students see themselves as active participants in their own success. In conclusion, frequent **progress monitoring** ensures that plans remain responsive to student needs, highlights meaningful growth, and nurtures independence (Bowler, 2022; Cooper et al., 2020; Minahan & Rappaport, 2018; Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support, 2018).



A well-designed plan focuses on preventing challenges before they start, reducing stress for educators and students.
Kenneth, O-A. (2025, September 21). *Smiling African girl with backpack and books*. Pexels.com (CC free to use)

Putting it All Together

By the time a team reaches the point of writing a Behavior Intervention Plan, they have already gathered information on what the behavior looks like, when and where it occurs, what seems to trigger it, how long it lasts, the function the behavior seems to serve, and whether there is a skill deficit. Module 7 ties all these pieces together, showing how careful observation, thoughtful evaluation of the data, and intentional planning can lead to effective, targeted support that is both proactive and responsive. A well-designed plan focuses on preventing challenges before they start, teaching new actions that serve the student well, and offering clear steps for supporting the student on hard days.

The central ideas from this module can be summarized in four key principles:

Understanding comes before intervention.

Identifying patterns through ABC data, student conversations, and other forms of data collection helps clarify the “why” behind behavior. This understanding ensures

that support strategies are rooted in the student's lived experience, not assumptions.

Example: A student who shuts down during independent writing may not be "defiant" or "lazy." The student may feel overwhelmed, under-skilled, or fearful of embarrassment. Understanding the "why" is crucial for choosing the correct intervention.

 *Hypotheses guide intentional planning.*

A hypothesis statement links the antecedent, behavior, and function into one clear explanation. It becomes the foundation for choosing supports that genuinely address the need.

Example: "When asked to begin a multi-step task, the student puts their head down in order to escape a task they do not understand." Support now focuses on simplifying tasks, addressing any skill deficits, teaching how to ask for help, and offering structured breaks.

 *Proactive plans prepare students for success.*

Strong plans do not wait for problems to occur. They build systems that reduce frustration and anxiety and teach the skills students are missing. Predictability, structure, and proactive strategies minimize stress for everyone.

Examples of proactive supports:

- Clear routines
- Pre-teaching expectations
- Visual schedules
- Previewing changes to the schedule or routine
- Checklists
- Timers
- Token economies
- Regular check-ins
- Structured breaks
- Opportunities for choice
- Positive reinforcement

 *Support evolves as the student grows.*

As students change, plans must change with them. Regular progress monitoring helps teams notice growth, celebrate wins, and adjust supports as needed. Progressively reduced levels of support ensure that the student builds independence gradually and successfully.

Example: A student who once needed a daily check-in may eventually transition to weekly check-ins and then to self-monitoring as skills strengthen.

Choose and Use Challenge

After studying how to form a hypothesis and use it to design meaningful supports, take a moment to apply these ideas to your own classroom.

Choose one student behavior you've been thinking about and walk through the core steps from this module:

1. **Identify a Pattern.** Look back at what you already know about the learner. Consider your observations, conversations with the student, or informal notes. What patterns are beginning to emerge?

2. **Write a Simple Hypothesis Statement.** Complete the sentence: “When ___ happens, the student ___ in order to ___.” Keep it short, objective, and focused on the “why.”
3. **Pick One Support to Try.** Choose a single proactive strategy that matches the function you identified such as adjusting task difficulty, teaching how to ask for help, offering structured breaks, adding a visual, or planning for a predictable schedule of adult attention.
4. **Decide How You’ll Monitor Progress.** Choose a simple way to check whether your idea is helping. Which type of data collection makes the most sense: frequency, duration, rating scales, quick observation notes, or a brief check-in with the student.
5. **Reflect on how this approach shapes your own New Actions.** How does understanding the “why” influence the way you respond, support, and connect with this student?

Glossary

ABC (Antecedent–Behavior–Consequence) observation framework. A structured observation tool used to identify patterns of behavior by recording the antecedent, the behavior, and the consequence.

antecedent. The trigger or event that happens just before a behavior. Examples might include a teacher direction, a transition, a peer comment, a difficult task, or an internal feeling like frustration.

behavior. The specific action the student does. The behavior is something you can see and objectively describe. Examples might include “left seat,” “put head down,” “shouted,” or “completed work.”

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). A written plan that outlines strategies, supports, and goals designed to help a student meet expectations by teaching new skills, making changes to the environment, and reducing triggers. BIPs can be used to provide high, medium, or low levels of support.

consequence. What happens right after the behavior, including adult responses, peer reactions, or changes in the environment. Consequences help determine whether a behavior is being reinforced.

function of behavior. The reason the behavior occurs, usually identified in terms of something the student is trying to get or to avoid. Common functions include escape, attention, access to tangibles, and sensory regulation.

hypothesis statement. A one-sentence summary that explains when the behavior happens, what the behavior looks like, and what the student is likely trying to accomplish. For example, “When given independent writing tasks, the student leaves the room to escape a task that feels too difficult.”

progress monitoring. Ongoing data collection used to determine whether interventions are helping. Progress monitoring helps teams decide when to revise, fade, or continue supports.

positive reinforcement. Anything that increases the likelihood of a behavior happening again. This might be attention, praise, breaks, preferred items and activities, or sensory experiences.

replacement behavior. A new action the student is taught that meets the same need as the problem behavior but in a more appropriate way. This new behavior must be easier, more efficient, and just as effective for the student.

setting events. Conditions that make a challenging behavior more likely such as hunger, fatigue, conflict earlier in the day, or changes in routine.

sensory supports. Items or activities that help students regulate internal sensations (e.g., movement breaks, noise-canceling headphones).

References

- Bowler, A. (2022). *The teacher's guide to oppositional defiant disorder: Supporting and engaging pupils with challenging or disruptive behaviour in the classroom*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Cooper, J. O., Heron, T. E., & Heward, W. L. (2020). *Applied behavior analysis* (3rd ed.). Pearson.
- Minahan, J., & Rappaport, N. (2018). *The behavior code*. Harvard Education Press.
- Missouri Schoolwide Positive Behavior Support (2018). *Tier 2 workbook and resources*. <https://pbissmissouri.org/tier-2-workbook-resources/>
- Parrish, N. (2025, December 12). 5 strategies to deescalate behavior when students are dysregulated. *Edutopia*. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/classroom-deescalation-strategies>
- Peterson, E. H. (2002). *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language*. NavPress.
- Plato. (2001). *Plato's Republic* (B. Jowett & A.A. Anderson, Trans.). Agora Publications.
- Want to Learn More?**
- Burns, R. (2025, October 13). *Emotion regulation tools for kids: Scripts you can use right now*. Scienceworks: Behavioral Healthcare. <https://www.scienceworkshealth.com/post/emotion-regulation-tools-for-kids-scripts-you-can-use-right-now>
- Iris Center. (2026). *Functional behavioral assessment (elementary): Identifying the reasons for student behavior*. IRIS Center, Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. <https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/fba-elem/>
- Little Victories. (2026). *Little victories in learning* [Blog]. <https://www.littlevictoriesinlearning.com/category/main-blog/>

McConkey & Light-Shriner. (2022). *Behavior intervention checklist for reviewing BIPs*.

Illinois New Teacher Collaborative, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

https://intc.education.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider14/2022-lc/bip-quality-check.pdf?sfvrsn=9b5552a9_3

McConkey, C. & Light Shriner, C. (2023). *Developing quality Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) using the iBIC tool* [PowerPoint Slides]. Association for Positive Behavior

Support. <https://apbs.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/J01-APBS-Evaluating-and-Developing-Quality-Behavior-Intervention-Plans-BIPs.pdf>

Reeve, C. (2019, November 10). How to write meaningful & useful hypothesis statements

(No. 13) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Autism Classroom Resources Podcast*. Autism

Classroom Resources. <https://autismclassroomresources.com/podcasts/ep-13-how-to-write-useful-fba-hypothesis-statements/>

About the Author

Dr. Kathleen VanTol has over 35 years of experience working in the field of education. She holds a doctorate in special education from Western Michigan University and is a professor of special education at Dordt University. She is also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst and a Board Certified Advocate in Special Education.

Recommended citation

VanTol, K. (2026). Module 7: Building effective behavior plans . *JONAH: A positive behavior*

strategy (Version 2). Center for the Advancement of Christian Education; Dordt

University. <https://manifold.open.umn.edu/projects/jonah>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

