"How Am I Doing?" Teaching Children with Emotional-Behavioral Disorders to Self-Manage Their Behaviors

Lael Tensfeldt, M.A.
Sonoma County Office of Education

Amory Verroulx, M.A., BCBA
Sunny Hills Services

Jennifer N. Mahdavi, Ph.D, BCBA-D.
Sonoma State University

Abstract

Relying on external supports to shape the behaviors of students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) is risky as these classroom supports may not generalize to internal strategies that students can use independently in the community. Two special educators approached building self-determination skills in their students with EBD from different perspectives: applied behavior analysis and sensorimotor regulation. Despite different approaches, each teacher employed consistency of language, explicit instruction, and empowering students to engage in self-management. The teachers observed that after students learned to self-manage, they did so with increasing success, resulting in fewer incidences of antisocial or unproductive behavior. The strategies each teacher used are described, emphasizing practices that both used so that other special educators may follow their examples.

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Teaching children with emotional-behavioral disorders (EBD) is a challenging task for any special educator. Students with EBD tend to engage in unproductive behaviors such as low academic engagement, poor task completion, and disruptive, aggressive, or anxious behavior Gage, 2013; Jull, 2009; Rafferty, 2010). Finding ways to help children with EBD appropriately manage unpleasant events, undesirable work, or their own feelings of anxiety is one of the most important activities these children's teachers can undertake. Even more important, however, is for adults to support children as they learn how to evaluate, manage, and regulate their behaviors independently (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007).

Self-Determination, Self-Management and Self-Regulation

Self-determination comprises a set of skills that helps an individual become an agent in his or her own life. If a person is able to make choices or decisions, to set goals and solve problems, to develop a sense of self-advocacy, and an internal locus of control, he or she is said to be self-determined (Wehmeyer, 2015). Being self-determined allows an individual a greater opportunity to live independently than if those skills are lacking.

Self-management embodies a subset of self-determination skills, incorporating goal setting, evaluating, monitoring, and reinforcing one's own progress toward those goals, and engaging in self-instruction to continue working toward the goals (Alberto & Troutman, 2013). Although self-management skills do not lead directly to academic success, they may be described as "academic enablers," or abilities that enable students to succeed in the classroom setting (Gresham, 2015).

Self-regulation may be one product of self-management. An individual who is self-regulated is one who is able to recognize and control his or her internal thoughts or feelings, and to engage in behaviors that, instead of disrupting environment, contribute to academic success and social acceptance (Smith, Cumming, Merrill, Pitts, & Daunic, 2015). Students with EBD frequently struggle with identifying their internal dysregulation, which leads them to engage in disruptive behaviors (Miller, Reisman, McIntosh, & Simon, 2001; Prior, 2001). Recognition of emotional or sensory states may assist children in making better decisions about how to manage them.

Children with EBD often have difficulty mastering self-determination or self-management skills. Their teachers are frequently able to implement structured and predictable systems of support that help these students maintain appropriate behavior at school. However, these external systems do not generalize well nor facilitate the future independence of individuals with EBD because they do not instill a sense of agency and self-determination in the students (Peterson, Young, Salzberg, West, & Hill, 2006). As such, it is imperative that teachers implement evidence-based practices that cultivate students' agency and self-management techniques.

Evidence-Based Practices Promoting Self-Management and Self-Regulation

Promoting self-management and self-regulation skills in children is a burgeoning area of research. Evidence-based practices that teachers can use as they teach these important social skills to their students include direct instruction, the use of self-monitoring checklists, clear classroom rules, student self-direction, and social validity of methods. Each of these is briefly described below.

Direct explicit instruction. Providing modeling of self-management or self-regulation strategies to students, followed by ample opportunities for them to practice and get coached in their use of those skills, concluding with independent and distributed practice has proven to be very effective in helping students develop self-determination skills (George, George, Kern, & Fogt, 2013; Niesyn, 2009; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Shogren, Williams-Diehm, & Soukup, 2013).

Self-monitoring checklists. Self-monitoring checklists that students can use to evaluate their own performance, then compare that evaluation with one conducted by an adult, can be used effectively to increase student self-management (Bruhn & Watt, 2012; Peterson et al., 2006).

Clear classroom rules and procedures. Teachers who post, directly teach, and consistently adhere to well-defined classroom rules and procedures assist students in understanding and maintaining their own behavior (Niesyn, 2009).

Student-directed learning. There is a wealth of research that supports getting students more involved in their own learning through self-determination activities such as self-monitoring and self-reinforcement, by engaging students in leading their own Individualized Education Plan meetings, and preparing students to be strong self-advocates (Kelly & Shogren, 2014; Wehmeyer, Shogren, & Seo, 2015)

Social validity. When students and teachers believe in an intervention or a strategy, they are more likely to engage with it. In self-determination, social validity is increased when students set their own goals, participate in planning their own learning, and take responsibility for their work (Ennis & Jolivette, 2014). For adults, finding a common language and shared vision for practices also increase social validity (Kelly & Shogren, 2014).

Teaching Children Self-Management Techniques

Having attended the same university to earn their teaching credentials and master's degrees, authors Lael Tensfeldt (2014) and Amory Verroulx (Verrall, 2012) went on to teach children with EBD, but took different approaches to their work. Although each teacher approached teaching their students how to handle their emotional states and behaviors from different perspectives, many of their strategies to employ these practices were similar. These cases, described here, illustrate the practical translation and application of research grounded practices and concepts, with evidence of effect on students.

Social Thinking, Sensorimotor Regulation, and Young Students

Mrs. Tensfeldt has taught kindergarten and first grade students in a county-based special day class for several years. With such young students who have EBD, a class-wide positive behavior support system was crucial. She chose the following social skills and self-regulation curricula:

- *The Alert Program* (Williams & Shellenberger, 1996), and *The Zones of Regulation*, also known as *The Zones,* (Kuypers, 2011), which teach children that their bodies run like car engines at low, just right, or high, and that all engine levels are appropriate at certain times, but an engine must be just right for learning. Helping children understand their engine levels at any particular time, and then choose and use a tool to self-regulate when they are too revved up for learning are the key elements of these curricula.

- *Superflex* (Madrigal & Garcia Winner, 2008), a social thinking curriculum, teaches children about expected vs. unexpected behaviors, big vs. little problems, inner coach vs. inner critic, and how an individual's behavior affects others around him or her. *Superflex* uses comic book style characters such as Glassman and Rockbrain as examples of overblown or inappropriate reactions to situations. Students are taught how to defeat these villains using strategies like taking deep breaths to calm themselves, or evaluating whether the hurtful statement is true or kind.

As part of her classroom climate development, Mrs. Tensfeldt created an "engine room" where children could voluntarily go when they felt too revved up to learn. In the engine room, Mrs. Tensfeldt provided posters that reminded children of the calming strategies they had learned, as well as sensorimotor tools like weighted vests and fidgets. Beyond the engine room was the "chill zone," which was outside the classroom, but supervised, where children who needed to be noisy could go to calm themselves. At all times, Mrs. Tensfeldt emphasized the importance of her students checking in with themselves to understand their feelings and behavior, as well as encouraged them to determine which tools would help them be able to get back to learning. She was working to build their independence by developing their abilities to self-regulate their emotions.

Applied Behavior Analysis into Intrinsic Motivation

Mr. Verroulx has been a teacher and behavior specialist in a non-public school special day class setting. His students were in the middle grades, 5th-9th, and had significant issues related to their emotional-behavioral disorders that prevented them from attending public schools. Mr. Verroulx's school had a robust school-wide positive behavior support system with points-based levels. Access to activities, materials, and incentives was tied to students' accumulated points and status on the level system. However, the broad school-wide system did not adequately support students in developing more intrinsic self-management systems, so Mr. Verroulx chose an applied behavior analytic approach (ABA) to teaching replacement or incompatible behaviors that could be appropriately used in place of the behaviors they typically engaged in for attention or escape. Mr. Verroulx provided behavior support in the classrooms of two teachers, enlisting paraprofessionals to also get involved in the plan.

Students' behavior related IEP goals, which concerned off-task or disruptive behaviors, guided the individual self-monitoring plans that Mr. Verroulx initiated with each student. Mr. Verroulx taught each student how to evaluate whether he engaged in a desired behavior using a 3-point scale. At intervals, the students evaluated their own performance, while Mr. Verroulx also evaluated what he observed. If the student and teacher matched ratings, the student earned a bonus point. The earned points applied to the schoolwide level system.

Mr. Verroulx, the classroom teachers, the paraprofessionals, and the students engaged in role-playing and mock ratings to learn how to implement self-evaluation, self-instruction, and self-monitoring activities. First, the adults acted as both a teacher and a student displaying different target and off target behaviors, while the real students of the classroom rated the behavior of the adult acting as a student. Everyone participated in the discussion about how ratings were chosen. Role playing continued until the group reached consensus in their ratings. This role playing, practice, and discussion allowed the whole classroom community to be a part of developing shared definitions and expectations.

Active student engagement was essential not only for understanding how and why to self-monitor, but also for the success of the intervention. By putting his students in charge of evaluating their own behaviors, Mr. Verroulx helped empower them to be in charge of their performance in school.

Similarities in a World of Difference

Social thinking and sensorimotor regulation techniques would not seem to have much in common with the behavior-focused nature of ABA because the strategies are rooted in differing theoretical paradigMrs. Yet, each of these teachers experienced a great degree of success with supporting children in becoming more independently self-regulated. Detailed reports from each teacher about their systems, including data collected and analyzed to document students' specific improvements, appear in each teacher's master's thesis (Tensfeldt, 2014; Verrall, 2013).

Despite taking different approaches to building self-management skills in their students, it became clear that these teachers had adopted several overlapping practices when they presented their systems at a question-and-answer session at a professional conference (Mahdavi, Tensfeldt, & Verroulx, 2016). The practices that were common in each teacher's classroom are presented here so that other special educators may follow their examples.

Common Language

Using common language consistently was very helpful in both classrooms as the teachers reshaped their students' behaviors. In Mrs. Tensfeldt's class, the teacher, the paraprofessionals, the speech pathologist, and other service providers were all familiar with the cognitive behavioral therapeutic curricula and strategies she was implementing. Each member of the team was able to redirect undesirable student behavior or praise good choices by using the familiar language of "engine levels," "tools," and "villains." Children were accustomed to hearing an adult calmly ask, "What's your task right now?" or "What will be the consequence if you choose to continue that?" Indeed, Mrs. Tensfeldt's students would talk to one another using the same phrases that were so prevalent amongst the adults. The level of consistency in following the classroom plan and the way in which it was talked about was extremely high, which supported the children in understanding expectations and making better choices.

Mr. Verroulx also developed a common language and set of expectations with his students. Rather than simply tell them to behave appropriately, he worked with the students to develop ways to communicate about and understand classroom expectations like "Stay on task," or "Be respectful." Each of these expectations was demystified by fully describing it in words, experiencing it via role-playing, and evaluating it independently and in concert with the teacher. Students and teachers alike continued to use these shared definitions throughout the school year and students would often say something like, "You can tell I'm active listening because I'm sitting up, not talking to the other kids, not tossing my hat, and looking at you."

In each classroom, children and adults used common language to establish behavioral norMrs. A shared understanding of what the expectations were assisted students in meeting them and assisted adults in pursuing them consistently.

Explicit Instruction

In both classrooms, teachers taught the students how to self-manage through explicit instruction. Rather than leaving students to learn how to regulate their emotions or behaviors by watching proficient models, the teachers directly taught children strategies they could use to evaluate their own feelings and behaviors. Explicit instruction elements included the teacher demonstrating and explaining each expectation, followed by guided discussion among the teacher and students to practice the expectation in a supported way, and concluding with each student independently engaging with the expectation. Teachers commonly describe explicit instruction as the "I do- we do- you do" method (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

Mrs. Tensfeldt modeled for, discussed with, and asked her students to practice differentiating big problems from little ones. Mrs. Tensfeldt first described an incident in which her pencil lead broke when she was writing. That broken pencil made her so angry! But she knew that a broken pencil is easily fixed, so this is actually just a small problem. After a few more examples, students participated in discussions to decide whether other problems were big or small, writing them down and sorting the big and small problems into a chart. Doing so helped the children identify problems that cropped up so that they could modulate their reactions to them. As time went on, children independently and incidentally engaged in self-instruction about whether their problems were big or small.

In Mr. Verroulx's class, opportunities to practice self-management were provided in a no-stress and low-stakes environment, which empowered students to use those strategies when it mattered most. Not only did the students role play and discuss behavior expectations, they were explicitly taught to use a self-monitoring form to evaluate their own behavior honestly so that their own assessment matched the teacher's. Students were taught to evaluate their behaviors at the sound of a chime every 5 minutes during several class periods per week. As this intervention was launched, Mr. Verroulx circulated the room to check on students with each chime, discussing whether the ratings were accurate in a "we-do" cooperative way, but over time he faded that support to individual "I do" check-ins and comparisons only at the end of the period. The chime, as a gentle reminder of the passing of time, might function to orient students to the passing of time and to differentiate their present actions from past experiences. In follow-up check-ins, students also expressed that they used the chime to help figure out how challenging a current disagreement or problem really was. Was the misunderstanding worth missing points for all the marking periods? Or was it a 3-interval miss? Or was it something about which they could have feelings, but still maintain attention on the lesson? The chime also helped to increase active student engagement as it prompted students to refocus on the teacher and the lesson if they drifted with only minimal loss of time if they "zoned out"

In each classroom, the explicit instruction provided during class time enabled children to learn and practice new self-management techniques before they were angry or upset. As such, teachers were able to use only gentle prompting to remind children of the strategies when they most needed to use them.

Self-Evaluation and Self-Regulation

Students with EBD often have difficulties understanding their own thoughts or feelings. Being unable to name their internal states reliably, they may not be able to self-soothe when they feel stressed out, or to make a pro-social choice when in a stimulated emotional state. Both Mrs. Tensfeldt and Mr. Verroulx worked diligently with their students to build their abilities to "check-in" with their own thoughts or feelings with the goal of improving their academic performance and their social functioning.

A visitor to Mrs. Tensfeldt's classroom will often hear the phrase, "Check your engine!" The students in her class are given extensive instruction in how to identify whether they are in a calm mood and ready to learn, if they are too riled up to be attentive, or too tired or sad to engage with classmates and lessons. One might hear a child volunteer that "My engine is in the yellow zone, so I need to choose a tool to settle down!" Later, a teacher might ask a fidgety child, "Do you need to check your engine?” Even the speech pathologist comes into the classroom stating, “My engine is just right for learning today!” Not only do teachers and specialists model the identification and description of their own emotional states, they constantly encourage students to do the same. As children become better able to understand their internal feelings, they begin to see how these affect their work in the classroom and the way they get along with others.

The students in Mr. Verroulx’s class are more focused on evaluating their academic and classroom social skills. Before he began his intervention with them, Mr. Verroulx’s students blamed their poor performance in class on biased teachers, disruptive peers, or anyone other than themselves. During one check-in at the end of a period, Mr. Verroulx asked a student what was going on for him that day, as he seemed confused during independent work that period. The student explained, “Sometimes, I just zone out. I don’t mean to but then I don’t know what work she wants us to do. That’s why I put the so-so’s on my chart.” They discussed ways the student could help himself stay cued in. The next day, Mr. Verroulx witnessed this student adopting his blank “zone-out” face during one of the intervals and noted that the student, without prompting, used the self-management skills they had discussed: he visibly shook his head, reoriented himself to the teacher, smiled discreetly over at Mr.Verroulx, maintaining his focus for the remaining class time. By enabling his students to view their own behaviors objectively, to evaluate whether they met expectations, and to take steps to get on the right-track, Mr. Verroulx was able to stop the blame game. His students developed the ability to say, “My mind was drifting during math today, so I don’t get full credit for staying focused this period.” They could accept that they forgot to raise their hands, which was a positive change from their previous protestations, such as, “If the teacher would have listened to me, I wouldn’t have had to shout out!” Mr. Verroulx’s students learned not only to evaluate their own behaviors, but also to accept that while making a mistake is acceptable, getting angry about it is not.

In each classroom, teachers emphasized that each student needed to work on his or her own triggers, feelings, or behaviors. The locus of control for behaviors was put into the hands of the students, giving them the opportunity to help themselves rather than creating an environment where adults prompt, nag, and manage children into proper behavior.

Teach Children How to Meet Their Own Needs

Simply evaluating one’s own behavior is not sufficient, however. Both Mr. Verroulx and Mrs. Tensfeldt took the further step of empowering their students to take actions to help them meet their own goals.

Mr. Verroulx’s students began taking responsibility for their own actions, a crucial skill for individuals who wish to succeed in school or the workplace. Once they could reliably evaluate their behaviors, they were able to put appropriate replacement behaviors in place of their old bad habits. Students who once denied any responsibility for having failed to complete an assignment were able to state, “If I had paid more attention to my work, I would have finished it.” This ability translated into self-instruction to get on task. A student might say, “I’m spending too much time talking to my friend. I need to get back to work by looking at my own paper!”

According to data he collected, Mr. Verroulx found that over time, his students decreased behaviors of which teachers disapprove, and commensurately increased their abilities to follow classroom rules, complete assignments, and generally behave like scholars (Verrall, 2012). Even more, as students experienced increases of time on task, more awareness of their own behaviors, and a sense of responsibility for their actions, they also began to independently set their own personal goals. During check-ins at the end of the period, it was common for students to tell Mr. Verroulx, “I had one more happy face today than yesterday!” or “I had three so-sos yesterday and I was going to do better today.” The goals they set for themselves were meaningful, and as such, likely to be met.

Choosing tools to assist with self-regulation was an important feature of Mrs. Tensfeldt’s program. Not only could her students reliably identify their internal states, they gained confidence in selecting a small stuffed animal to fidget with, a seat that rocked slightly, or deep breathing exercises, among other strategies, to help themselves stay ready to learn. Increasing their ability to self-regulate was self-reinforcing for children who were able to stay calmer for longer periods of time, according to classroom behavior data collected (Tensfeldt, 2014).

In each classroom, the focus was on helping students discover the strategies and tools that were effective for them to keep themselves calm, centered and productive. The intent of each teacher was to let each student develop an internal locus of control in deciding when and how to implement self-regulation strategies. An adult swooping in to provide external supports does not facilitate students’ self-regulation. Each teacher’s goal was to fade the prompt and reminders that adults typically direct toward children, so that the children would naturally and independently make choices that would lead to their own needs being met.

Final Thoughts

Keeping students with EBD on the right track can be exhausting for teachers. Worse, when teachers spend so much time and energy trying to corral or channel their students’ behaviors, they are not fostering the skills and strategies that those children require to be independent. As teachers, we should ask ourselves, “Why am I doing this for my students? How can I teach them the strategies they need to self-manage and make better choices?” When Mr. Verroulx and Mrs. Tensfeldt, each in his or her own way, relentlessly worked with their students to develop self-monitoring, self-regulation, and self-evaluation abilities, they saw more productive behavior in the classroom, along with a greater ability of their students to engage in prosocial behavior on the playground and in the classrooms of other teachers (Tensfeldt, 2014; Verrall, 2012). Furthermore, Mrs. Tensfeldt reports that the parents of her students often tell her that their children ask their parents, "How is your engine running?" as a way of helping the adults in their lives self-regulate!

Explicit instruction, consistent communication, and development of self-regulation and self-management abilities, and the development of each student's ability to meet his or her own needs all provided a strong foundation for self-management in each classroom. A well-developed program for empowering students to manage their own behaviors is good for teachers, who will need to spend less time doling out consequences for behavior, and for children, who will gain independence and self-efficacy.

What does that mean for special education teachers? We suggest that you examine your own practices for increasing your students' abilities to self-regulate their emotions and self-manage their behaviors. Continue using the evidence-based strategies that have been successful in the systems you have built in your own classroom. Then make sure you have built a strong foundation for student success by implementing some of the practices that were so useful for Mrs. Tensfeldt and Mr. Verroulx. Determine the extent to which you are communicating your expectations clearly with other adults and with your students. Evaluate how well you are using explicit instruction to teach students to use the strategies you teach. Consider how you support students as they learn not only how to evaluate and regulate their own emotional states and academic/behavioral performance, but also how to identify and meet their own needs.

How are your students doing?

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About the Authors

Lael Tensfeldt, M.A., is a Special Education teacher for the Sonoma County Office of Education. She has been teaching kindergarten and first graders in a program named the Positive Emotional Behavioral Learning Launch that she helped develop ten years ago. Mrs. Tensfeldt is also an adjunct faculty member at Sonoma State University where she instructs beginning teachers through the induction program. Her focus in research and instruction include best practices for promoting positive outcomes for individuals with emotional and behavioral difficulties in addition to differentiated instruction designed to engage all learners.

Amory Verroulx, M.A., BCBA, is an Adjunct Professor of Special Education at Sonoma State University and a Program Specialist for Windsor Unified School District. A credentialed special educator in the state of California with a background of working primarily in Non-Public Schools, his professional focus is twofold: increasing students' skills to independently self-regulate and self-advocate and increasing the skill sets of teachers to facilitate student learning and growth. His research interests include progress monitoring, self-determination, and behavioral interventions for students with challenging behaviors.

Jennifer N. Mahdavi, Ph.D, BCBA-D, is Professor of Special Education at Sonoma State University. A credentialed special educator in the state of California, Dr. Mahdavi's professional focus is on developing future special educators who are committed to helping children with disabilities reach their potential. Her research interests include progress monitoring, multi-tiered systems of support, and academic and behavioral interventions for students with LD or EBD.