

# Reducing Irresponsible Talking Out During Class in a 7th Grade Student with an Emotional / Behavioral Disorder

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## Abstract

This paper presents the effects of a function-based intervention bundle including a combination of teacher-directed self-recording, self-monitoring, and prompt cards to decrease inappropriate classroom talking out of a 7th grade student with an emotional/behavioral disorder. The interventions were based on functional behavior assessment that suggested that the talking out was maintained by the co-functions of attention seeking and escape from academic tasks. Ultimately, use of a combination of self-monitoring, teacher-directed self-recording, and prompt card systems resulted in a dramatic reduction of the target behavior. This reduction was maintained at follow up.

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## Keywords

Emotionally disturbed, functional behavior assessment, intervention, self-control, student behavior.

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Irresponsible talking occurs when a student “talks out in class in an irresponsible manner (i.e., excessively or at inappropriate times)” (Sprick & Howard, p. 739). By disrupting the education of everyone, including the offender himself, the student engaging in irresponsible talking becomes a high priority for intercession (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2006). However, determining an appropriate and efficient intervention often requires the teacher to determine the function of the behavior of irresponsible talking.

Failure to determine the function and relying on common approaches to redressing disruptive behavior in the classroom may have the opposite of the desired effect. For example, if you reprimand a student each time she engages in an undesired behavior and the function of her behavior is to acquire teacher attention, using reprimands could actually increase the irresponsible talking. In such a case, the reprimand or attention the student receives from the teacher functions to reinforce the undesired behavior (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2006). Put another way, the reprimand itself provides the attention the student was seeking. Although the teacher may have intended her reprimand as a negative consequence, if an increase in the undesirable behavior occurs, then the reprimand actually functioned to increase (or reinforce) the behavior that the teacher was trying to eliminate.

The better approach to trying to solve the problem of a disruptive behavior is to determine *why* the student is engaging in that behavior. Although behaviors can appear distasteful, unpleasant, scary, or downright gross, most undesirable classroom behavior is maintained by one, or a combination, of three main functions: positive reinforcement (something following the behavior that results in an increase in the behavior), negative rein-

forcement (something following a behavior that results in escaping or avoiding an unwanted activity that results in the behavior increasing) (Alberto & Troutman, 2003), and sensory / stimulation (performing a behavior that meets a student’s sensory needs) (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2006).

Since its inclusion in federal law in 1997 as a requirement for certain students with disabilities having behavior problems, Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) has become a focus of many researchers (Fox & Davis, 2005) and has been used in a variety of classrooms with a variety of students with a variety of needs. In other words, FBA is a good way to stack the odds in your favor that you will effectively help a student with undesirable behavior. O’Neill and colleagues (1997) outlined three broad approaches to FBA--informant methods, descriptive analysis, and functional analysis, for determining the function of disruptive behavior. The good news is that these approaches have been effectively used in the classroom, and they can be effectively used in yours.

### **Informant Methods**

Informant methods include the collection of data from interviews and rating scales, and are an appropriate starting point for conducting an FBA. A review of all student records and past behavioral interventions could also occur at this early stage of the assessment process (Olympia, Heathfield, Jenson, & Clarke, 2002). Information gathered during this phase places the “problem behavior in context” so that a fuller picture of the antecedents and consequences to the behavior may emerge (O’Neill, et al., 1997, p.5). Unless you have no choice (such as the undesirable behavior is wreaking havoc), informant data should be augmented by additional information, such as is discussed below.

## **Descriptive Analysis**

It is far preferable to include direct observation data in your FBA in the setting where the disruptive behavior is occurring. “Direct observation of students with externalizing behavior disorders specifically enhances functional behavior assessments by providing actual samples of behavioral excesses in the settings in which the behavior occurs” (Olympia, et al., 2002, p.142). The most common way that this is done is often referred to as an antecedent-behavior-consequence (ABC) analysis, and involves assessing the factors associated with an undesirable behavior (both before it and after it) so that you can utilize these associated contingencies in your intervention plan (Alberto & Troutman, 2003).

## **Functional Analysis**

A third approach to conducting a FBA, and the most sophisticated technique, “involves the systematic manipulation of specific variables that are or are not associated with the problem behaviors” (O’Neill, et al., 1997, p. 6) and is called a functional analysis. This strategy is the most complex used to perform an FBA, and because the intent is to manipulate the disruptive behavior for the purpose of increasing its presentation, it is not the most common FBA approach seen in schools. FBA done using informant methods and direct observation are often sufficient to effective intervention planning (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2006). However, to really do the job and have an FBA that gives you a high degree of confidence that you know where to go with your intervention plan, conducting a functional analysis provides you with the strongest evidence.

## **A Few More Points**

It is important to remember that the *exact same* undesirable behavior can occur in different students but be maintained by different functions. For example, your classroom may contain 3 students who verbally call out in class. A common response to undesired behavior in the classroom is to use a time out procedure. However, results of FBA may indicate that 1 student calls out to access teacher attention, 1 student calls out to escape from undesirable academic tasks, and 1 student calls out for sensory stimulation. Using time out for each student in this scenario would likely have markedly variable results. While calling out may decrease for the student seeking teacher attention, time out may have no effect at all *or worsen* calling out for the student who was calling out to escape unpleasant work and the student who was calling out for sensory stimulation.

Another point to remember was nicely articulated by Frey and Wilhite (2005). These authors remind us that humans have five basic needs that “have been identified as survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun” (p.156). When students have unmet needs in any of these areas, they will present challenging behavior due to the inability to meet these important needs in other ways. Knowing these five needs “can provide a foundation to assist teachers with identifying the relevant function for challenging student behavior” (p. 158). Teachers need to look at a student’s disruptive behavior through the student’s eyes rather than their own, and remember that “most students are simply trying to satisfy their basic human needs in the only way they currently know how” (p. 159). Thought of another way, students do not engage in undesirable behavior because they are ‘bad’ or ‘evil’, they engage in undesirable behaviors because those

behaviors serve the *function* of helping the student to meet a basic need.

A final point to consider was presented well by Conroy and Sticher (2003). These authors remind us of the importance of focusing on the *antecedents* associated with disruptive behavior, specifying that “an antecedent-based intervention is a preventative strategy and therefore is highly applicable for teachers to use in their classrooms to intervene in or preempt the occurrence of challenging behavior” (p. 22). It is tempting to sometimes focus primarily on the *consequences* following an undesirable behavior. Doing so, as Conroy and Sticher said, relegates us to being reactive instead of preventative in our intervention plans. It also, at least tacitly, promotes the possibility of trying to manage behavior mainly by *punishment* administered after the disruption occurs, and punishment is more likely to give students an unpleasant opinion of school than to promote mental health and a lifelong appreciation of learning (see Waller, 2006).

While informant methods and descriptive analysis are somewhat intuitive, the idea behind functional analysis, involving “the systematic manipulation of specific variables that are or are not associated with the problem behaviors” (O’Neill, et al., 1997, p. 6) is a bit harder to understand. The following FBA includes a functional analysis and presents an intervention plan based on the FBA data. We hope that this example will be useful in conceptualizing functional analysis and is indicative of the potential effectiveness of FBA driven intervention plans.

## **Method**

### *Participant*

John (a pseudonym) was a 13-year-old Caucasian boy in seventh grade. He qualified for special education services under the pri-

mary exceptionality of Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (EBD). He received math and language arts in a resource setting. John received one segment of academic support a day as well as social studies and science instruction in an inclusion environment. Educational testing placed John consistently at the upper third grade level in both math and language arts.

John exhibited disruptive behavior daily during all classes. For the purpose of this study, John’s disruptive behavior was called irresponsible talking, which was operationally defined as talking out without permission and making comments during class that were unrelated to the instructional material.

### *Informant Methods*

The Functional Analysis Screening Tool (FAST) and the Motivation Assessment Scale (MAS), 2 rapid assessment instruments that provide a hypothesized function of an undesirable behavior, were completed by teachers and paraprofessionals familiar with John. They were also interviewed so that a fuller picture of John might emerge and to decrease the chances of important details being overlooked. Finally, a review of John’s student records was done. This review was done to see if any trends in his behavior were evident and to see what previous interventions (if any) had been tried for his talking out and if/how well these interventions worked.

### *Descriptive Analysis*

Observational data following the ABC approach were conducted. During these observations, John’s math teacher used a hand clicker to count the frequency of John’s irresponsible talking during the class’s sixty-minute teaching session following lunch. Because this time is regularly interrupted for computer lab, free-time breaks, and grade-

wide reward systems, the following formula was used to normalize the per-hour frequency data:

$$\underline{f} = \frac{n(60)}{t}$$

In other words, the frequency of the behavior was divided by the amount of time in the classroom on that day. The resulting decimal was multiplied by 60 to give a measure of equivalent time.

## Results

Evidence provided by a review of John's student records, teacher interviews, and the FAST and MAS, supported the preliminary hypothesis that the function of John's irresponsible talking was acquiring attention. ABC supported the hypothesis that the function of the participant's behavior was attention. Thus, the working hypothesis was that John engaged in talking out to access adult attention.

### *Functional Analysis*

To test the hypothesis regarding the function of John's behavior, the teacher responded to John every time he spoke out in class. This is a strategy that involved "manipulating structural variables such as...level of attention provided during an activity", therefore qualifying it as a functional analysis (O'Neill, et al., 1997). She used a gentle tone and each time made the following response: "Please raise your hand before speaking." This was done *every time* John spoke out in class. You will notice that, assuming that the working hypothesis was correct, the outcome was *intentionally seeing if this would increase* the frequency of the target behavior. An increase in the talking out would provide strong support the hypothesis that adult attention was the function of the target behavior. If results of the functional analysis support the

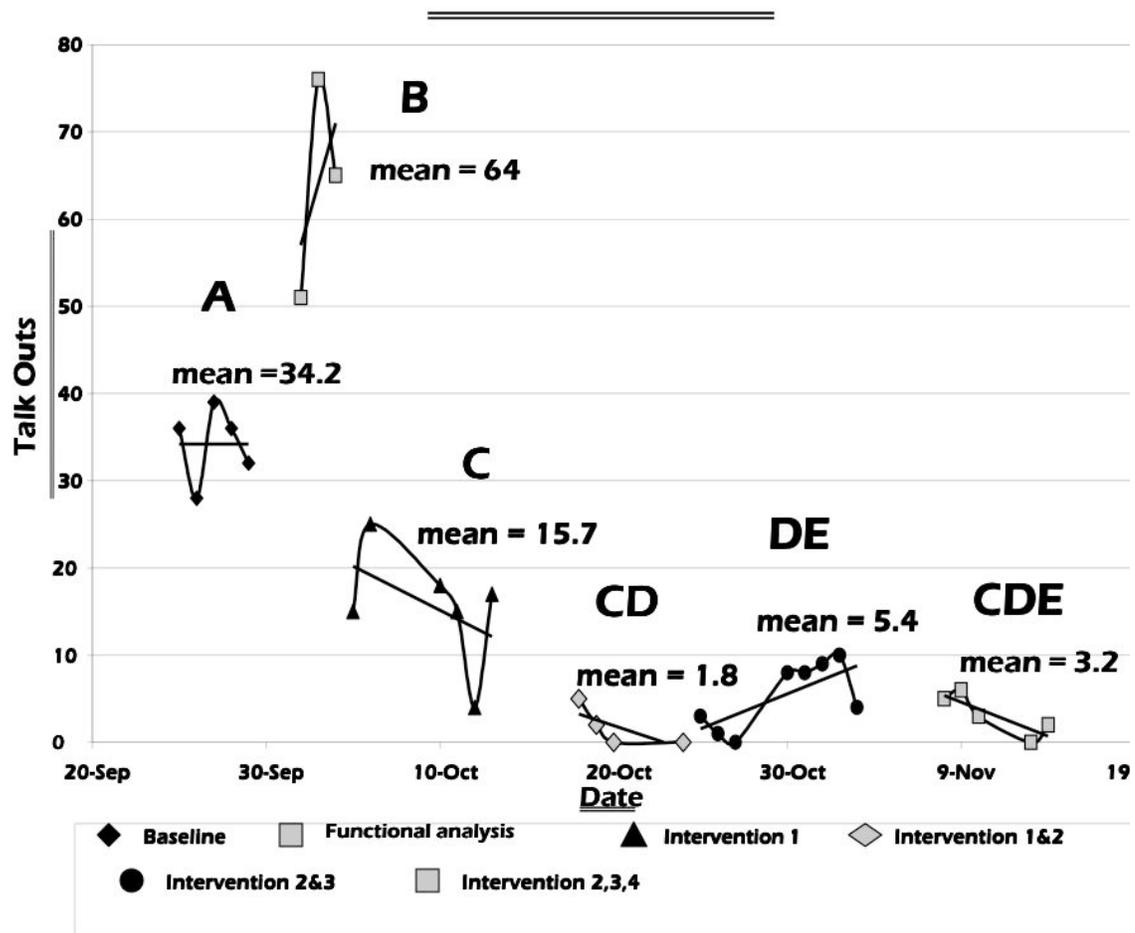
working hypothesis, strong evidence exists to guide intervention planning.

All results are shown in figure 1. The functional analysis, or B phase (mean = 64), lasted only three days. A dramatic increase in talking out was observed when constant teacher correction was used, providing strong evidence that the function of John's talking out was acquiring adult attention.

The first intervention, or C phase (mean = 15.7) involved a teacher directed self-recording system. A form of self-monitoring system, John carried a clipboard with a daily sheet on it on which he was to record behavior related to irresponsible talking out. Because this intervention phase was teacher-directed and prompted, the teacher provided a mechanism by which John could access her attention without engaging in talking out. Importantly, this intervention replaces the negative attention he received or attempted to receive by talking out with positive attention (see Newcomer & Lewis, 2004). Prior to implementing this intervention, a detailed memo was sent to all of John's teachers outlining the purpose of this intervention. The memo stressed the need for teachers to give John positive attention whenever they 'caught him being good', and to encourage John to give himself at least as many checks (signifying appropriate classroom talking) as Xs (indicating inappropriate classroom talking). Teachers were also reminded that the target behavior was talking out, and that John was not to mark his sheet for any other undesirable behaviors. Additionally, John was to have each teacher initial and place any comments on the sheet at the end of each class.

Prior to initiating the second intervention, or C phase, John was interviewed to get his input on identifying appropriate reinforcers for complying with the intervention plan.

**Figure 1.** Frequency data of irresponsible talking.



The problem behavior and consequences of his behavior were discussed with John, and he gave enthusiastic assent to try the intervention. A thorough explanation of teacher-directed self-recording was given. John responded excitedly to the proposed intervention, and agreed to raise his hand before making appropriate comments in school. John chose to earn one of the following reinforcers at the end of each day for reaching his behavioral goal: candy, gum, or bottled water. This reward was earned for having his sheet signed by all of his teachers, rather than for attaining a certain number of checks or Xs.

Although John carried his sheet and clipboard to all of his classes (see Figure 2),

the data presented in this study were obtained only in math. For consistency, the teacher continued using the hand clicker to record the target behavior. The numbers of checks and Xs on John's sheet were not intended to be used as data in this study, but were reminders for John which would eventually fade from use.

Although the target behavior decreased dramatically during this phase, John continued to have a significant number of inappropriate talk outs. As commonly happens, another intervention was needed to 'fine tune' his behavior.

**Figure 2. Self-Monitoring Sheet**

Class:	<b>AWESOME!</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Did I remember to raise my hand? <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Did I remember to keep my words RE-SPECTFUL and on subject?	<b>OOPS!</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I forgot to raise my hand. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> I forgot to keep my words RESPECTFUL and on subject.	Teacher Initials/ Comments:
<u>Science</u>			
<u>Social Studies</u>			
<u>Math</u>			
<u>Academic Support</u>			
<u>Language Arts</u>			

The data from the FBA had identified a co-function of escape from academic tasks. To address the function of escape, a class wide system of prompt cards was implemented for intervention CD. Providing prompt cards increased the opportunities to respond to the academic activity, and has been shown to increase student engagement and decrease in-

appropriate behavior (e.g. Sutherland, Alder, and Gunter, 2003).

Prior to each class, several questions and answers related to the academic lesson were written on sticky notes. These notes were placed randomly on desks in the classroom before students arrived. John always had at least two detailed, multi-answer question and answer prompt cards placed on his

desk. An example is: “Q: What are the four operations in mathematics? A: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division”. These questions were asked of the class one at a time, and the John (and the other students) regularly raised hands to answer the questions, and the prompt cards reduced the need for John to escape.

Intervention CD reduced the target behavior to very low rates, including (occasionally) zero (mean = 1.8). However, the objective of this study was to move John to a self-monitoring system. Therefore, intervention DE (mean = 5.4) was implemented. Keeping the prompt cards in math (D), a true self-monitoring program was initiated (E). John was still required to have each teachers sign his sheet daily. This gave him access to appropriately earned teacher attention, although not as much as with the teacher-directed self-recording. In addition to the daily candy, gum, or bottled water, a weekly reward was added to facilitate the transition to a self-monitoring system. On Fridays, John was to receive tea with his lunch from the 7<sup>th</sup> grade counselor and could eat lunch with his math teacher if his inappropriate talking out continued to occur at a low rate.

The final intervention, CDE (mean = 3.2) consisted of prompt cards and a hybrid teacher-directed and self-monitoring system. In math class, John received teacher attention by being thanked for raising his hand when he did so, and the teacher would motion to his sheet. This prompted John to give himself a check when he raised his hand and gave an appropriate answer. Similarly, when John spoke out without permission, the teacher would motion to his sheet, prompting him to mark an X. John was also instructed and encouraged to mark his own checks and Xs when he caught himself raising his hand or forgetting to do so, whether or not he had

been prompted. All of John’s teachers were asked to occasionally and randomly thank him for raising his hand (or ask him if he had remembered to do so) as they had done in interventions C and CD, and to gesture toward his clipboard for him to mark a check (or X, if appropriate). Never at any point was John either punished or not rewarded for the number of checks or Xs he marked on his sheet. Ultimately, this proved to be both an effective and maintainable positive behavior management system for John, and the CDE intervention has maintained a dramatically reduced frequency of John’s irresponsible talking out.

## **Discussion**

His remarkable improvement suggests that John needed a way to meet his need for teacher attention in an appropriate way, but he did not know how. In giving him an appropriate way to seek and receive teacher attention several times each class, and by discussing his behavior with each teacher on a daily basis, the function-based interventions have given John desirable means by which he could obtain teacher attention. Without having done an FBA, it would have been easy to have fallen into a pattern of reprimanding John for his behavior, thereby making the talking out worse.

Because John’s talking out did have a co-function of escape, the addition of prompt cards gave him an instructional aid that facilitated his making appropriate comments in class while helping to promote participation rather than escape. The prompt cards facilitated engagement in math class in a way not seen previously. Finally, intervention CDE, the combined teacher-directed recording and self-monitoring with prompt cards (mean = 3.2), proved to be an effective and sustainable system that John could use to manage his irresponsible talking. These combined strate-

gies had the additional benefits of providing a minimally intrusive plan that was amenable to use in the general education setting and providing an extra level of support that John needed in some academic areas.

While this study showed a striking decrease in the talking out behavior of a 13-year old boy with EBD, the results may be somewhat misleading. One could be tempted to assume that John has become a model student, which is far from the truth. In fact, several days of data are missing because John was sent to in-school suspension. Inappropriate talking out was identified as the highest priority for intervention, but it was not the only priority. However, these results provide clear encouragement that his other undesirable behaviors will be amenable to effective intervention planning.

Another limitation of this study is that there was some difficulty in implementing the teacher-directed self-recording system consistently in all classes. One reason data were collected only in math class was the difficulty many teachers and paraprofessionals had with identifying and focusing on the target behavior (i.e., teachers would have him mark his sheet for being out of seat or not keeping his hands to himself). Further, many teachers naturally give attention to negative behaviors in students (e.g., talking out) rather than giving positive attention for engaging in desirable behaviors (e.g., raising hand before speaking). In this study, many teachers were observed neglecting to have John check his sheet for responsible talking, missing many opportunities to reinforce desired behavior.

One important implication of this study is the importance of finding the function of a target behavior and basing interventions on that function(s). Beyond the measured outcome, an important outcome of the intervention was receiving many extremely positive anecdotal reports from teachers, counselors, and administrators concerning John's dra-

matic improvement despite problems we saw with consistent implementation. All of his teachers reported that John exerted more control over his behavior. Teachers who had made statements such as "he is the worst student I have ever seen" and "I think I hate him" were not only positive about John but expressed the belief that effective intervention planning for him was not only possible; it was likely. And nobody has referred to John as 'bad' in quite a while.

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