Case Study: Saylor

The student I chose for my case study is named “Saylor.” He is a five year old boy who has a diagnosis of Autism. I have worked with him in his in-home and in-school ABA program for the past two years. Saylor currently attends a private preschool classroom three days a week for three and a half hours per day.

Saylor primarily displays hostility problems including hostile, aggressive, and defiant behavior problems. According to Brophy, characteristics of hostile-aggressive students include the following challenging behavioral traits: direct and intense behaviors, they are easily angered, they engage in property damage, and they are aggressive including hitting and pushing others (171). Defiant characteristics that Saylor displays include engaging in power struggles with adults, insisting on doing things his way, and resisting doing something by verbally protesting (Brophy, 227). Additional hostility oriented behaviors that Saylor displays include the following maladaptive behaviors: tantrums, noncompliance, inappropriate negotiating, and negative language. Finally, Saylor also displays stereotypic (stimulatory) behaviors including perseverative behavior, and hand flapping.

Saylor may engage in any of the previously mentioned hostility behavior problems for the following reasons: in order to get a reaction from others; in order to escape a non-preferred, difficult, or anxiety provoking situation; in order to gain access to something desirable; when he is bored; and due to cognitive deficits. An additional challenging aspect of Saylor’s behavior is that he understands and takes advantage of the fact that he can control and manipulate other people in order to get what he wants. Consequently, at the start of this case study, Saylor would engage in these hostile-aggressive behavior problems multiple times per day.

In addition to hostility problems, Saylor also displays distractible behavior traits. Some of the primary behavior characteristics that he demonstrates in this domain include a short attention span, inability to sustain attention to tasks, being easily distractible, and difficulty adjusting to change (Brophy, 293).

Saylor appears to engage in these distractible behavior traits due to boredom, inability to filter out distractions, fleeting thoughts, and a difficulty with monitoring his on-task behavior (Brophy, 299). With regard to the occurrence of his distractible behavior, at the start of this case study, Saylor would display these behavior traits multiple times per hour at school.

A final domain of problem behaviors that Saylor displays is peer relationship problems as demonstrated by being rejected by his peers. According to Brophy, students who are rejected by their peers may seek peer interaction but are rejected, ignored, or excluded from their peers (347). In addition, although they try to interact with their peers, they don’t relate well to them; they lack social skills; and they are picked on or teased by their peers (Brophy, 347). Saylor displays all of these behavior traits.

Saylor displays peer rejection behavior traits due to his deficient social skills, impaired social cognition skills, and lack of confidence in social situations (Brophy, 347-353). Prior to the case study intervention, Saylor displayed peer relationship problems during the majority of his social interactions with peers.

When I started my case study with Saylor, there were a few attributes that I displayed then, and that I continue to display with him now, that have helped me foster an effective teaching stance with him. Some of these attributes are specific to Saylor and some are general attributes that I use with all of my students.

The general attributes that I demonstrate with Saylor include the following: teaching him through modeling and instruction, communicating positive expectations to him, reinforcing his desired behaviors, shaping his behavior through successive approximations, and clearly stating my expectations (Brophy, 20 & 26).

In addition, there are a handful of specific attributes that I display with Saylor. First, I feel like I have a good rapport with Saylor (Brophy, 22). I spend time talking to him about his interests, desires, goals, and fears. I enjoy interacting with him and I see huge potential in him (Brophy, 22). In addition, despite his engagement in frequent problem behavior, I am also confident in my ability to interact with him, patient when I engage with him, and I use firm limits when I am working with him (Brophy, 22-23). Finally, I am determined to help him be successful behaviorally, socially, and academically (Brophy, 23). Each of these attributes has carried over into my interaction with Saylor when he displays hostility problems, distractibility behavior problems, and peer relationship problems.

There are also a few common triggers that adversely impact my effective stance with Saylor. The biggest antecedent for me to lose my effective stance with him is when he engages in defiant and hostile-aggressive behavior during situations when he is in complete control over his behavior and is subsequently choosing to be defiant or hostile. During these situations, I have a difficult time controlling my thoughts and attitudes about him while not misattributing my disapproval of his behavior onto him (Brophy, 23). In addition, I have a similar difficulty with concealing my reaction to how other people (e.g., parents, caregivers, other adults, etc.) manage his hostile-aggressive problem behavior. What is more, I have felt myself start to judge or even intervene when other people are / aren’t dealing with the problem behavior in a certain way. I understand how this might look to Saylor and to the people who are interacting with him. Additionally, when dealing with his hostile and distractible behavior, at times I have difficulty projecting positive expectations and thoughts instead of pointing out the negative aspects of his behavior (Brophy, 23). Finally, I have a difficult time being flexible with limits that I set with Saylor when he displays problem behavior (Brophy, 23). For example, when I state an expectation or limit, I am insistent on maintaining that expectation. I understand how this stance could perpetuate problem behavior with Saylor.

Upon reflection of Saylor’s problem behavior and my subsequent interactions with him, I was able to identify interventions that I should employ with him in order to address his hostile, distractible, and peer relationship problem behaviors.

There were a few interventions that I implemented with Saylor in an attempt to address his hostile-aggressive behavior problems.

The first intervention that I tried with Saylor was a period of about two weeks of positive reinforcement-based rapport building time with him. The goal of this intervention was to help develop a trusting and mutually respectful interaction between Saylor and the adults in his life (Brophy, 353). My motivation with trying this intervention was to help repair interactions between Saylor and adults in his life that were negative, aversive, and void of respect. In order to achieve these goals, I wanted to ensure that Saylor found benefits to engaging in interactions with these adults. Therefore, I focused on increasing the amount of praise I provided him, I used clear performance contingencies, and I displayed interest in learning about his interests and motivations (Reavis, 60).

Upon implementing this intervention with Saylor, I noticed that his problem behaviors immediately improved. He was motivated to interact with the adults in his life, he shared his interests with them, and he was positive when engaging with them. After the two weeks of rapport building time was over and the previous level of demands and types of interactions commenced, however, Saylor reverted to his prior behavior patterns. His problem behavior increased and the aversive interactions resumed. I feel that the lack of effectiveness with this intervention was twofold. First, I think that the level of demands that were placed on Saylor during the rapport building time stopped completely which made it more challenging for Saylor to successfully readjust to the level of demands placed on him after the rapport period was over. In addition, I feel that once the rapport building time was over, the attempts to continue to maintain the positive relationship that had been developed with Saylor stopped. Therefore, Saylor thought of the attempt to build rapport as insincere.

Another intervention that I used with Saylor was implementation of behavior modification principles and techniques (Brophy, 182). Some of the generic tools that I used with Saylor include the following: stating clear expectations and limits, using contingent reinforcement, ignoring minor misbehavior, and reinforcing positive behavior (Brophy, 233-234). In addition to these generic tools, I aimed to increase his behavioral deficits while simultaneously decreasing his behavioral excesses (Brophy, 182). I carried this out by choosing a replacement skill to teach, instructing Saylor on how to implement the skill, and then demonstrating how to carry out the skill. Some of the replacement skills that I taught were emotional control, and conflict resolution skills (Brophy, 180-184). In order to teach these skills, I presented Saylor with hypothetical scenarios where I had him identify what was going on in the situation, how he could respond to the situation, and how that response might impact the situation (Brophy, 183). Along with these hypothetical scenarios, I presented an opportunity for Saylor to implement the new skills by role playing the situation (Brophy, 184).

Teaching Saylor appropriate ways to manage his hostile-aggressive and defiant behaviors was an effective intervention. Talking about and demonstrating appropriate emotional control and conflict resolution skills had a positive impact on increasing his utilization of these skills during upsetting situations. Teaching these techniques in the absence of other tools, however, led to the continuation of Saylor’s intermittent engagement in these problem behaviors. I think that teaching and reinforcing replacement skills in conjunction with other reinforcement-based interventions will have more of a long term impact on Saylor’s misbehavior.

As a result, another technique that I used with Saylor was implementing praise and reinforcement procedures. When I implemented praise for Saylor, I adhered to the following guidelines: I provided the praise immediately, I provided the praise frequently, I provided the praise with enthusiasm, I used eye contact when providing the praise, I described the behavior that I was praising, and I used variance in my praise (Reavis, 60-61). Along with praise, I implemented additional reinforcement procedures with Saylor. I utilized token systems, and reinforcer menus as visual modifications that I could use to increase Saylor’s understanding of and motivation to behave (Jenson, 120).

Moreover, another intervention that I used with Saylor was the implementation of a home-notes program (Reavis, 31-32). One of the goals of implementing this intervention with him was to increase the consistency of his behaviors across settings while also increasing his motivation to behave and accountability for his behaviors. With the home-notes system, a behavioral chart was filled out at school and subsequently sent home. The adults at home then discussed how Saylor did at school, while brainstorming how to improve his behavior if needed, and / or reinforce him when his behavior was appropriate.

There are a few impressions that I have when reflecting on my implementation of praise and positive reinforcement systems with Saylor. First, I feel that implementing a comprehensive approach to Saylor’s hostile, aggressive, and defiant behavior was ideal. I found that when used alone, none of these approaches effectively reduced his problem behavior. Rather, when I utilized behavior modification tools, praise, reinforcement systems, and explicit instruction in replacement skills, I noticed more consistent and long term improvements in his problem behavior.

With regards to his distractible behavior problems, there were a few changes that I employed in my interaction with Saylor.

The main intervention that I tried with Saylor in order to decrease his distractible behavior was to coordinate his home-notes program with a behavior contract that outlined behavioral expectations for him to adhere to during challenging situations (Reavis, 65). The behavior contract focused both on increasing his academic performance as well as his behavior. One of the main behavioral expectations that he had to follow with the behavior contract was for him to respond to directions the first time they were presented. In order to monitor Saylor’s response to this expectation, I tied in a self monitoring component where Saylor was taught to identify and reinforce himself when he met his behavioral expectation (Jenson, 49). Finally, this procedure tied back to his home-notes procedure by allowing him to gain access to a reinforcer (e.g., computer time) at home if he met his predetermined behavioral criteria.

Implementing this combined reinforcement system / home-notes / behavior contract / self monitoring system worked well to increase Saylor’s motivation and subsequent on-task behavior during tasks. With the addition of the behavior contract and self monitoring system, I feel like the comprehensive approach to responding to Saylor’s problem behavior was coming along. Like I postulated before, I don’t think that any of these interventions in isolation would have had the same impact on his behavior.

Finally, I also implemented a few interventions with Saylor in order to address his peer relationship problems.

Although he is not shy, Saylor’s behavior is often awkward, unpredictable, and extreme so his peers think he is odd and they subsequently reject him. Saylor’s peer rejection stems from a few core social skill and social cognition deficits including the following: his lack of effective language skills to join a social situation, his lack of identification and response to social cues, his lack of identification of his peers’ intentions, and his lack of confidence and motivation to engage with his peers. In order to decrease his rejection by his peers, these core deficits needed to be addressed.

As a result, my main intervention focus with regards to Saylor’s peer relationship problems was to increase his deficient social and cognitive skills (Brophy, 347). In order to address these deficits, I focused on a few interventions with Saylor. First, I discussed social behavior with Saylor by reviewing social scenarios, what the tenets of the social scenarios were, and how to respond to them accordingly (Brophy, 364). In order to teach these components, I would utilize visual supports such as comic strips and social stories about the social situation. Following exposure to key social skills, I presented opportunities for Saylor to role play and subsequently implement the social skills with his peers (Brophy, 371). In addition to teaching him common social skills, I focused on increasing his confidence during social situations by facilitating social opportunities with his peers while supporting and encouraging him to engage with his peers during these opportunities (Brophy, 351). During these facilitated social interactions, I would reinforce Saylor’s talents while discussing his strengths and areas of interests with his peers (Brophy, 353). Moreover, in order to help support him during these social situations, I would prime him before the social scenario by having him think about and discuss pertinent behaviors that he should display when engaging with his peers; such as what he could talk about with his peers or how to respond if they disengage from the social situation. One final tool that I used with Saylor was observing peers that he was having positive social interactions with so that I could encourage his parents to facilitate social opportunities for Saylor and those peers outside of school (Brophy, 372).

As I presented opportunities for Saylor to discuss and subsequently implement appropriate social skills and behavior with his peers, I saw an increase in his success with his peers. I noticed that with encouragement, praise, and support he developed the confidence to implement the social skills that we reviewed. Although there are still conflicts that arise, and social situations that we haven’t explicitly reviewed, I have seen an increase in Saylor’s overall confidence and success with his peers.

Finally, upon reflecting on my interactions with Saylor during this case study, there are a few fundamental conclusions that I have made about interacting with students who have problem behavior.

To start, I have developed an understanding of the importance of addressing a student’s problem behavior from multiple different perspectives in a comprehensive manner. For example, I think that the success with Saylor was due to the following interconnected elements: establishing a mutually respectful relationship with the student; building a strong rapport with the student; having a trusting relationship with the student; increasing the student’s confidence; teaching them replacement skills including coping skills, emotional regulation skills, social cognition skills, social skills, self monitoring skills, and problem solving skills; allowing opportunities for the student to practice the utilization of these replacement skills; allowing them opportunities to receive feedback on the implementation of these skills; using praise to reinforce appropriate behavior; setting up and implementing reinforcement systems; and creating opportunities for consistency across settings by involving the students parents when possible. As a result, my future interactions with students that I teach will include a comprehensive instructional approach that focuses on their effective socialization.

Lastly, upon concluding my case study intervention with Saylor, I have developed a greater understanding of how to maintain an effective professional stance with students with challenging behavior. Specifically, I have focused on better controlling my reactions to the common triggers that jeopardize my effective stance with students who misbehave. One such example is better controlling my thoughts and responses to students who misbehavior by responding in a neutral manner to their misbehavior. Similarly, I have focused on concealing my reaction to how other adults are managing students with hostile-aggressive behavior problems. With regards to Saylor, I specifically worked on observing other adults interactions with Saylor without immediately responding to their interactions. Instead, following my observations, I am approaching the adult in a positive manner in order to discuss, model, and have them practice alternative ways to intervene with Saylor. My goal with these changes is not to misattribute my disapproval of Saylor’s behavior and how other people are interacting with him onto him / them. Additionally, when dealing with his hostile and distractible behavior, I am working on projecting positive expectations and thoughts about the student instead of pointing out the negative aspects of their behavior (Brophy, 23). Finally, I am working on and have improved in my ability to be flexible with limits that I set with students like Saylor when they display problem behavior. Through this process, I am working on learning to “pick my battles” with them.

The changes that I have gone through in my professional stance with students who display problem behaviors has afforded me the opportunity to more efficiently teach my students while promoting their effective socialization.