

PREVENTING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR AMONG PEOPLE WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES

Social-Environmental Approaches
for Human Service Agencies



DENNIS H. REID
JAMIE L. CLARY

**PREVENTING CHALLENGING
BEHAVIOR AMONG PEOPLE WITH
SEVERE DISABILITIES**

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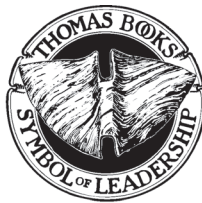
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By

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and

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PREFACE

An important responsibility of human service agencies that support people with severe neurodevelopmental disabilities is helping individuals overcome challenging behavior. Recognition of the importance has spurred a vast amount of behavior analytic research on treating challenging behavior among individuals with severe disabilities who exhibit this type of behavior. Although less well popularized and disseminated, embedded in that research are also strategies for *preventing* the occurrence of challenging behavior.

Preventive strategies represent a more proactive approach to addressing challenging behavior relative to treating the behavior once it is manifested. Preventing challenging behavior can preclude detrimental effects the behavior has on individual quality of life as well as on other people in an individual's environment. Additionally, preventive approaches can lessen the financial burden of agencies to secure clinical professionals for developing and overseeing formal treatment programs for each individual who otherwise may engage in challenging behavior.

This book describes social-environmental approaches specifically for preventing challenging behavior among individuals with severe disabilities in human service agencies, including special education settings. The approaches to be presented are characterized as *social-environmental* because they pertain to how front-line staff interact with individuals and structure environments in which individuals spend their time. Initially, general social-environmental approaches are described in practical detail that are relevant for preventing challenging behavior among all individuals with severe disabilities. These approaches include agency staff developing good relationships with individuals, promoting individual enjoyment, and ensuring meaningful activity engagement of individuals.

More specialized preventive approaches are then presented that are relevant on an individual client or student basis. Particular emphasis is placed on staff responding to events that tend to precede challenging behavior in a manner that prevents the challenging behavior from following those events, disallowing reinforcement for challenging behavior, teaching specific skills for

individuals to meet their needs without challenging behavior, and teaching in ways that prevent challenging behavior during the instructional process. How the approaches relate to the reasons individuals engage in challenging behavior are likewise presented in respective chapters as well as underlying research that represents the basis of each approach.

Subsequently, procedural information is provided on how agency supervisory and executive personnel can ensure effective training and supervision of front-line staff to promote the staffs' successful application of social-environmental approaches to prevent challenging behavior. Attention is also directed to how clinical professionals charged with treating challenging behavior if it does occur can focus on ongoing social-environmental influences and alter those influences to prevent the behavior from reoccurring. The underlying intent across all chapters is to provide information to help human service staff perform their duties in ways that prevent challenging behavior among individuals with severe disabilities and avoid ways that often occasion or promote challenging behavior.

Denny Reid
Jamie Clary

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**PREVENTING CHALLENGING
BEHAVIOR AMONG PEOPLE WITH
SEVERE DISABILITIES**

Section I

**INTRODUCTION TO *PREVENTING*
*CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR***

Chapter 1

OVERVIEW OF PREVENTING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR AMONG PEOPLE WITH SEVERE DISABILITIES

Quality of life among people with severe disabilities is heavily determined by the nature of supports and services they receive. For most people with severe disabilities, supports and services are provided within various types of human service agencies. Accordingly, human service agencies must provide supports and services in an effective manner if individuals with severe disabilities are to experience a desirable quality of life.

Providing effective supports and services in human service agencies for people with severe disabilities is a multi-faceted process. Often, one of the most difficult aspects of that process is helping agency clients overcome challenging behavior. Although only a subset of people with severe disabilities engage in challenging behavior, most agencies serving this population encounter individuals who exhibit challenging behavior to varying degrees.

Challenging behavior among people with severe disabilities takes many forms. The most serious forms usually involve behavior that poses an immediate risk of physical harm to themselves (e.g., self-injury) or others (e.g., aggression). Other forms include behavior that is socially inappropriate to a level impeding socialization or learning opportunities (e.g., “tantrums”, “acting out”), disruptive to the physical environment (e.g., property destruction), and detrimental to overall health (e.g., restricted food consumption with limited nutritional value). In a smaller number of cases, challenging behavior results in serious legal issues for individuals due to the behavior involving illegal activities (e.g., stealing, public exposure).

Challenging behavior as exemplified above can directly impede quality of life among people with severe disabilities, and especially when an individual's behavior causes self-harm. Challenging behavior can also have negative effects on life quality more indirectly. In particular, engaging in challenging behavior can restrict individuals' access to desired activities and experiences. A representative example is when family members, friends, or support staff avoid involving individuals in community activities they enjoy (e.g., going to restaurants, sporting events, vacations) because of the likelihood of challenging behavior that could cause disruption, embarrassment, or otherwise unpleasant situations for everyone involved.

In light of the seriousness and pervasiveness of challenging behavior in agencies serving people with severe disabilities, a very considerable amount of research has focused on means of treating such behavior. Most noticeably, the field of applied behavior analysis has been researching ways to treat challenging behavior among this population for over six decades. Literally thousands of investigations on treating challenging behavior have now been reported in the behavior analytic literature, at professional conferences, and in webinars and webcasts.

Among the numerous behavior analytic investigations, a basic protocol has emerged that is generally considered best practice for treating challenging behavior among people with severe disabilities in human service agencies. The protocol involves the following process. First, a systematic assessment is conducted to identify the likely reason for an individual's challenging behavior. The assessment is usually designed to identify the probable function that the behavior serves for the individual (e.g., to obtain desired attention from someone or avoid completing a disliked task). Next, a treatment procedure is developed that addresses the identified, or at least hypothesized, function. To illustrate, if the behavior appears to function for an individual to obtain attention from support staff, the treatment procedure may involve teaching the individual skills to obtain attention in an appropriate manner and/or ways staff can avoid providing attention for the challenging behavior (as well as provide attention specifically for alternative, more appropriate behavior).

The above approach to treating challenging behavior, as well as related behavior analytic treatment procedures, has a very significant amount of research-based evidence to support their effectiveness. However, there are some serious practical considerations with application

of the procedures in many human service agencies. For example, not all agencies have a qualified behavioral professional available to conduct the necessary assessments and develop effective treatment procedures. Other agencies have only limited access to a qualified professional such that the amount of services the professional can provide is insufficient to effectively resolve issues with challenging behavior among all agency clients who engage in this type of behavior.

Additionally, it can be expensive for agencies to secure qualified behavioral professionals (e.g., certified behavior analysts, licensed psychologists). The demand for such personnel currently exceeds the available number of professionals who have the necessary training and expertise to develop recommended procedures for treating challenging behavior among people with severe disabilities. The demand versus availability differential is especially the case in agencies that specialize in providing applied behavior analysis (ABA) services for individuals with severe autism. Due to the disparity between demand and availability, the financial cost for an agency to secure qualified behavioral professionals continues to increase. The increasing cost includes both the salary for employing professionals within an agency as well as securing part-time consultative services.

Another significant consideration with common behavioral procedures from a practical perspective is that the procedures are generally designed to be implemented once an individual is *already* engaging in challenging behavior. Relatedly, a qualified professional (if available) may require significant time to assess the likely reasons for the behavior and develop recommended treatment procedures for agency staff to subsequently apply. Even more time can then be required for the professional to train staff in the skills to implement the procedures appropriately, as well as to maintain proficient implementation of the procedures during the staff's routine work situations. Meanwhile, detriments of the challenging behavior on individual quality of life as well as potentially for other people (e.g., due to harmful aggression) continue to occur.

An alternative, more proactive approach for addressing challenging behavior among people with severe disabilities in human service agencies is for agency staff to *prevent* such behavior from occurring. Embedded within the behavior analytic research referred to earlier are various procedures staff can use to prevent challenging behavior. Many of those procedures can be combined into practical approaches

This book describes social-environmental approaches specifically designed to prevent challenging behavior among individuals with severe disabilities in human service agencies, including special education settings. The approaches to be presented include agency staff developing good relationships with individuals, promoting individual enjoyment, and ensuring meaningful engagement in activities. More specialized preventive approaches are then presented, relevant to an individual client or student. Emphasis is placed on staff responding to events that precede challenging behavior in ways that prevent such behavior from following those events, disallowing reinforcement for challenging behavior, teaching specific skills to help individuals meet their needs without challenging behavior, and teaching in ways that prevent challenging behavior during the instructional process. How the approaches relate to the reasons individuals engage in challenging behavior is likewise presented in the respective chapters, along with the underlying research that underpins each approach. Subsequently, procedural information is provided on how agency supervisory and executive personnel can ensure effective training and supervision of front-line staff to promote the staff's successful application of social-environmental approaches to prevent challenging behavior. Attention is also directed to how clinical professionals charged with treating challenging behavior, if it does occur, can focus on ongoing social-environmental influences and alter those influences to prevent the behavior from reoccurring. The underlying intent across all chapters is to provide information to help human service staff perform their duties in ways that prevent challenging behavior among individuals with severe disabilities and avoid ways that often occasion or promote challenging behavior.



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