
During the last six months the Ontario Association for Behaviour Analysis (ONTABA) has been hearing, with growing concern, reports of violence within school settings and recognizes the urgent need for improved services and supports for students with severe behavioural challenges. Students exhibiting challenging behaviours are at risk of seclusion, physical restraint, and exclusion from school as a result of inadequate supports. In addition, there are significant impacts on staff and student safety and well-being, including reports of: educational workers being hit, kicked or punched by students (Draaisma, 2017; Westoll, 2017); educational workers wearing kevlar clothing to protect themselves from injury caused by students (Westoll, 2017); students witnessing acts of violence towards their teachers or being evacuated from their classrooms (Rushowy, 2017); and police officers being called by schools to manage a student’s outburst (Goodfield, 2017). In a recent survey, 90% of Ontario Catholic School Teachers reported they experienced some form of violence or harassment (Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association, 2017).

On January 17, 2017, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO) released a call to action on Violence in Schools regarding the lack of support for students with special education needs and the Lost Time Injuries by education workers caused by workplace violence. According to People for Education’s Annual Report on Schools (2017), “24% of elementary and 15% of secondary schools report that not all identified students are receiving recommended support” (p. 21). Many parents and educational workers share frustration about long waitlists for students with developmental disabilities and mental health concerns to access appropriate assessment and treatment, especially in rural areas of Ontario.
In light of these concerns, it is imperative that students with skill deficits and challenging behaviours such as aggression, self-injury, and severe property destruction have timely access to effective and evidence-based supports from qualified professionals within their communities. It is ONTABA’s position that all children, including those with special education needs, have a right to effective education and to behaviour analytic assessment and intervention services in their early childhood and educational settings. Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) provides an effective way to assess, treat, and manage aggressive and self-injurious behaviours in a safe manner across many populations (Brosnan & Healy, 2011). The Behavior Analyst Certification Board (BACB, 2014) defines ABA as, “a well-developed scientific discipline among the helping professions that focuses on the analysis, design, implementation, and evaluation of social and other environmental modifications to produce meaningful changes in human behavior.” ABA is an evidence-based practice applicable within a variety of sectors including social services, health, organizational behaviour management and education.

Thousands of studies published in peer-reviewed scientific journals have demonstrated the efficacy of a range of ABA procedures – singly and in various combinations – for building skills and reducing problem behaviours in many clinical and non-clinical populations in a wide range of settings. (ONTABA, 2017, p.7).

From over 50 years of ABA research come the following best practices in the assessment and treatment of challenging behaviour that school boards and child care settings should consider adopting as part of their special education strategy:

1. **Prior to the onset of an intervention for challenging behaviour, a functional behaviour assessment (FBA), which may include an experimental functional analysis, must be completed by qualified personnel.** Various structured interview and assessment tools (see Prevent-Teach-Reinforce [Dunlap et al., 2009]; O’Neil et al., 2015) can assist school teams in identifying target behaviour(s), formulating a hypothesis about why and under what circumstances the challenging behaviour is likely to occur, and inform the best options to support the individual.

   In cases where challenging behaviour poses a risk to the health and safety of students and education workers (e.g., aggression, self-injury, severe property destruction, sexually inappropriate behaviour), the FBA should be completed with support from a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst® (BCBA, BCBA-D). These professionals are qualified to administer and then analyze the results from other assessments (e.g., experimental functional analysis) that are more sensitive to capturing the relationships between the student’s behaviour and the
environmental variables surrounding their occurrences. Results are then used to design an effective function-based behaviour support plan.

2. A behaviour support plan (BSP) developed for a student displaying challenging behaviour should be based on results of behavioural assessments, be function-based, and include the following components:

   A) **Proactive strategies** such as
      - rearranging the environment (e.g., strategic desk placement, storage of learning materials, visual aids, timers, etc)
      - curricular modifications and/or accommodations to ensure the student is meeting with success (e.g., breaking tasks into manageable pieces)
      - temporarily removing or minimizing events that have a history of evoking challenging behaviour (e.g., non-preferred tasks, reducing sensory input, offering choice, etc.)
      - increasing the student’s access to reinforcing items/activities/experiences *before* a challenging behaviour is likely to occur

   B) **Teaching Skills** that may function as replacement behaviours for challenging behaviours (e.g., communication, self-management) and/or alternate skills (e.g., tolerance training, self-regulation, social skills etc.) As the student reliably demonstrates more of the replacement and/or alternative skills, there will be less need or opportunity for challenging behaviour to occur.

   C) **Reinforcement** for demonstrating the replacement behaviours and alternative skills (or their approximations). Careful consideration must be made to the rate, pacing and quality of reinforcement as determined by data collected in the FBA.

   D) **Reactive strategies to displays of the challenging behaviour** - a plan for how others will respond when the student demonstrates the challenging behaviour (e.g., redirection, ignoring the behaviour, response interruption, reducing demands, etc.) so that challenging behaviour is not reinforced while keeping staff and students safe. In some cases, a Safety Plan outlining a hierarchy of responses is developed.

   E) **Data tracking procedures with set success and revision criteria.** Recording student behaviour is necessary to assess whether strategies are effective in reducing challenging behaviour and increasing alternative behaviours and to inform any necessary changes to the BSP.
3. The Behaviour Support Plan should be overseen and monitored by a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst (BCBA/BCBA-D) in order to: (a) ensure effective implementation of the intervention components by staff; (b) support staff in their data tracking; (c) make program changes and additional recommendations as needed; and (d) support the transfer and generalization of skills learned to other classroom settings.

4. Education and childcare workers supporting students with behavioural challenges should receive professional development in ABA principles and procedures specific to a student’s Behaviour Support Plan. Professional development should include ABA principles as well as hands-on training. The BCBA/BCBA-D should offer this hands-on training to education workers in implementing the BSP. Behavioural Skills Training (BST) is one means of delivering individualized training on the Behaviour Support Plan. BST consists includes: (1) providing information about the intervention/procedure and its rationale which may include a written description of the intervention and procedural steps; (2) a demonstration of the procedure; (3) opportunities for staff rehearsal; and (4) on-site coaching/feedback. It has has been shown to be effective for teaching front-line staff to implement various ABA procedures and achieve desired student outcomes across many research studies (e.g., Parsons, Rollyson & Reid, 2012).

ONTABA is committed to working with the Ministry of Education, area school boards, child care centres, and unions to develop a strategy to include the above practices and improve supports for children with special education needs. Ensuring students who display challenging behaviour have timely access to Board Certified Behaviour Analysts (BCBAs/BCBA-D) to complete behaviour assessments and collaborate on the design of behaviour intervention will help to reduce violence in the classroom, increase safety and wellbeing, increase learning time, and may help to better support staff in achieving the Ministry’s vision for an inclusive educational setting for all students.

For more information, please email ONTABA at contact@ontaba.org

ONTABA is a not for profit professional organization representing behaviour analysts in Ontario. We serve as a resource for practitioners and users of behaviour analytic services, a respected community partner, and a dedicated advocate for individuals in need of life changing behaviour analytic services. Our mission is to demonstrate leadership, knowledge, and innovation in education, training, and research for the ethical and effective application of behaviour analysis.
References


