Behavior Traps: Turning Obsessions to Motivational Gold

WHAT ARE BEHAVIOR TRAPS? Do you have an activity, hobby, or interest that you find so fascinating and fun that you could spend hours on it without getting bored or tired of it? Are you are so obsessed with this interest that you keep going back to it every chance you get? If so, you may have been ensnared by a **behavior trap**. "Baited" with virtually irresistible reinforcers, behavior traps can produce substantial, long-lasting behavior changes. For example, if you love to dance, you might dance every day to different music at different times of the day in different places with different people. All of this practice leads to learning new dances and ever-more sophisticated dance moves. The more adept you become, the more you enjoy dancing, which makes you dance even more.

Many students with autism have special areas of interest (SIAs) that can be used as motivation for teaching a wide range of academic, social, and functional skills. For example, if a student really hates reading but loves Captain America, his teacher can use Captain America comic books as a tool for reading instruction. Here's how a teacher created a behavior trap that took advantage of a fifth grader's obsession with baseball cards:

> Carlos experiences school as tedious and unrewarding. But he does find solace in his baseball cards, often studying, sorting, and playing with them in class. His teacher, Ms. Greene, long ago lost count of the number of times she had to stop an instructional activity to separate Carlos and his beloved baseball cards. Then one day, when she approached Carlos' desk to confiscate his cards in the middle of a lesson on alphabetization, Ms. Greene discovered that Carlos had already alphabetized all the left-handed pitchers in the National League! Ms. Greene realized she'd found the secret to sparking Carlos' academic development.

> Carlos was both astonished and thrilled to learn that Ms. Greene not only let him keep his baseball cards at his desk, but also encouraged him to "play with them" during class. Before long, Ms. Greene had incorporated baseball cards into learning activities across the curriculum. In math, Carlos calculated batting averages; in geography, he located the hometown of every major leaguer born in his state; and in language arts, he wrote letters to his favorite players requesting an autographed photo. Carlos began to make significant gains academically and an improvement in his attitude about school was also apparent (Alber, S. R., Heward, W. L. (1996). "GOTCHA!" Twenty-Five Behavior Traps Guaranteed to Extend Your Students' Academic and Social Skills. Intervention in School and Clinic Vol. 31(5), pp. 285-289. Copyright © 1996 by Hammill Institute on Disabilities. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications, Inc.).

HOW CAN I USE BEHAVIOR TRAPS?

1. **Identify the SIA.** This is the easiest assessment a teacher will ever conduct. The objects, events, people, or activities that qualify as SIAs are known to anyone who has spent any time with the child. For example, Tyler a boy you will meet later in this chapter loves maps and endlessly talks about, looks at, and draws maps.
2. **Incorporate the SIA across the curriculum.** Tyler's fascination with maps could be integrated easily into math, reading, writing, science, and social studies lessons.

3. **Make "getting caught" easy.** Don't make the student earn his way into a behavior trap. In a behavior trap, the student has free access to the SIA. Provide materials that may be required to engage in the SIA and prompt the student to use them in ways that incorporate the targeted skills (e.g., "Tyler, would you show me how many different types of structures are identified on this map?").

4. **Start small and use the trap judiciously.** Use the SIA to help the student improve skills with which he has experienced some success and then gradually add new skills. Even though Tyler is crazy about maps, requiring him to write a 10-page research report on the topic (especially if his writing skills are poor) could destroy the effectiveness of maps as behavior trap bait. Better to begin by asking Tyler to label and classify his favorite map components, then write brief descriptions about them, then compare and contrast the functions of the components, and so on. In time, Tyler may write reports with all the detail of an experienced cartographer.

   Figure 7.1 shows examples of behavior trap activities across curriculum area for a student whose SIA is horses.

5. **Don't be in a hurry to eliminate the SIA.** Remember that you're not trying to eliminate the student's interest but rather use it to motivate the student to learn new skills, which may eventually lead to other interests.

6. **Involve the target student's peers.** Encourage peers to participate in SIA-related curriculum activities. Peer involvement gives the target student opportunities to practice social and language skills. A bonus may be that peers acquire interest in and useful knowledge about their classmate's SIA.

7. **Periodically change the curriculum areas and activities associated with the SIA.** Although a student may not tire of his SIA outside the trap, an SIA may lose its effectiveness as bait if a trap focuses solely on a single curriculum area or activity.

8. **Evaluate.** Look for improvements in the skills and knowledge the behavior trap was designed to "catch." Collect data on the amount of time the student actively engages with the SIA-related curriculum, the completion and accuracy of academic products, and the student's comments. The student's behavior will suggest ways that an ineffective trap can be revised. Over time, the student's interest in the curriculum area(s) baited with the SIA may grow to the point where the trap is no longer necessary.

FIGURE 7.1   Behavior trap planning sheet

Student _____Monique_____   Special Interest Area(s) – The Bait *Horses*

Curriculum Area	Setting the Trap	Once Inside the Trap
Reading: comprehension	*Place colorful books about horses on*	*Monique will select a book about horses, read it, and retell her three favorite parts.*
Math: application	*Show video of horse races*	*Monique will apply Distance = Rate x Time to calculate distance, rate, and time given two of the three variables for a horse race.*
Science: classification	*Display photos and/or models of different breeds and types of horses and close relatives (ponies, mules)*	*Monique will create a biological classification chart showing the kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species for horses.*
Social Studies: historical timelines	*Show video of last three Triple Crown winners*	*Using the Internet, Monique will research and draw a timeline (1900 to 1948) illustrating important events related to equestrian competition.*
Social interaction/ communication skills: asking questions	*Take a field trip to a stable or farm*	*Prepare and ask questions to the professionals who work with horses.*