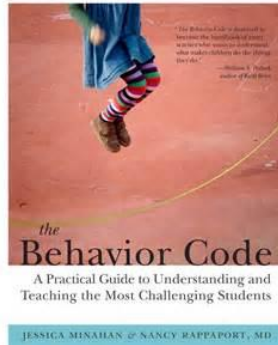


A Summary of Minahan's Work
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A F.A.I.R. Plan

Jessica created the acronym F.A.I.R. F is for understanding the *function* of the behavior, A is for *accommodations*, I is for *interaction strategies*, and R is for *responses*.

By adopting the F.A.I.R. plan, parents can discover that inappropriate behavior is malleable and temporary—and that they can help their children thrive. When children are oppositional, withdrawn, or anxious these children often experience failure and may be the most misunderstood in school.

A F.A.I.R. plan changes the behavior of students, many of whom were on the verge of being sent to a self-contained classroom or out of their district when applied. It has also changed the perspectives of parents and teachers, who've come to realize that these students need to be taught the skills to behave and that they require even more compassion and flexibility from their parents and teachers, even though they may appear to be pushing them away.



Consider Kindergarten child Robert. He struggles with transitions, and when he gets frustrated, he'll either hide behind a bookshelf in Ms. Silva's classroom or charge for the door and then lurk in the hallway. He may growl when reprimanded and he throws books off his desk, screaming things like, "You hate me and school sucks!" Robert pushes other students so he can be first in line, and he has trouble sharing; he'll grab all the materials when working on a project with other students. One time when the principal reprimanded him, Robert exploded and slapped the principal's glasses off.

What's the Function of the Behavior?

When working with students like Robert, it's important to avoid power struggles that may escalate the consequences and inadvertently reinforce, the negative behavior. Behavior happens for a reason and is a form of communication; determining the intent or *function* of the behavior—the F in Minahan's FAIR plan—enables us to better understand the behavior and decide how to intervene.

Minahan claims there are four possible functions of behavior: to escape, to obtain a tangible thing, to engage in sensory activities, and to get attention. These functions describe the benefit children get from the behavior—a benefit they may not even be aware of—and help us understand how to intervene to help kids change the behavior.

Escape-motivated behavior, according to Minahan, occurs when a child attempts to avoid a task, demand, situation, or person. This can be easy to recognize—for example, when Robert runs out of the classroom during circle time or when his mom wants him to leave the BRIOS and come to the supper table.

Sometimes it's less obvious—for instance, when kids argue to get out of doing an activity that makes them anxious. Common school procedures, such as time-outs, withholding recess or sending the student to the principal's office, can reinforce escape-motivated behavior because they remove the student from the undesirable activity—just what the student wanted.

Tangible behavior appears in two ways: when the function of the behavior is to obtain a tangible object like money or food or, as in Ken's case, when the function is to attain a specific agenda. The student wants what he wants when he wants it. Students who are self-centered and have inflexible thinking often fall into this category. Some children with a history of abuse or neglect may have a low frustration tolerance and operate with the assumption that the only way to get their needs met is to grab the thing they want or overpower someone.

Sensory behavior when a student is motivated by sensory input: Things feel good, look good, taste good, or sound good. Humming loudly while writing, tapping a pencil, or standing rather than sitting while others are working are all typical behaviors that fall into this category. These become problems when they interfere with learning, are disruptive, or make children look odd to their peers.

Finally, in *attention-motivated* behavior, the student tries to gain attention from an adult or peer. This can present as the student being aggressive, screaming, or continually interrupting the teacher. It can also work in the positive—that is, the child who dresses up to take on a role in a class so others will notice, or a child who works hard on his homework so the teacher will praise him, or one who helps set the table for dinner when a special guest is coming.

Negative Is Better Than Nothing

When I taught high school English, one of my students who had been arrested for breaking and entering chose to enter the class through the window, not a door. This elicited laughter from his peers; I was glad he had come to class. Still, entering in this fashion was dangerous. It also reinforced a skill that was illegal.

Minahan cautions us that teachers are sometimes surprised that negative attention, such as lecturing or redirecting a child, reinforces attention-seeking behavior. For kids with social deficits who may have difficulty recognizing more subtle communication—even negative attention may be better than no attention. Kids may prefer negative attention because it's dramatic; efficient, predictable; and more obvious than positive attention. Everyone expected Dr. Frangos to take exception to anyone who entered from the window and not the door. She wanted to get class started, and Eric did too. He sought to compete with her for attention and "air time."

If Eric entered the classroom appropriately and quietly, he may not be able to predict when the teacher will give him her attention. But if he swore while coming in from a window, he knew that his teacher is going to attend to his behavior immediately. Eric learned that the best way he could engage adult attention is to act inappropriately. You may have seen this at home when children fight with a sibling when a parent is on the phone to get the parent's attention.

Taking ABC Notes

When a child has a behavior incident, teachers and parents can document the incident either in a notebook, in an e-mail to the principal or in a parent journal. Minahan believes spending the time to take these notes is worthwhile because it contributes to a solution, may calm you down, and help you reflect on what triggered the event, or the communication the child is sending.

Notes also help an educator or parent see if one's responses are effective. My notes showed that once Eric got replacement behavior he still got what he wanted. If he (1) entered through the door he got to announce his arrival and describe his day (2) he received full class attention from his 25 peers for greeting them without bad language (3) he was praised for being the class "starter" and "announcer" by reading my classroom plan on the whiteboard (4) he was not suspended, detained or reported to an authority (5) he was praised for contributing constructively to the establishment of our classroom rules. By using a F.A.I.R. plan, Eric got to be a class leader and announcer. He achieved his agenda; ironically, he achieved mine! By enlisting his energy, he couldn't wait to get to English class. I began to think carefully about responding to behaviors in ways more likely to reduce inappropriate behavior rather than reinforce it. As a teacher, I was praised for keeping kids in the classroom, not ejecting them.

Once we know the function or intent of a child's behavior, it's easier to create a plan to change the behavior. The A in F.A.I.R. stands for the *accommodations* parents or teachers can make to help the student succeed. In suggesting accommodations, we want to reduce the triggering aspects of the environment as well as explicitly teach replacement behaviors and underdeveloped skills.

For children who act out, Minahan offers many accommodations including the skillful use of technologic tools.

Replacement Behaviors

During the time it takes for children to improve underdeveloped skills—such a learning to wait, take another's perspective, share objects, self-regulate, and think flexibly—it's important to teach them how to get their needs met more appropriately. By providing a replacement behavior that's not too difficult to handle, parents and teachers can help kids behave more appropriately while gaining the skills they need so they no longer want to avoid the task at hand.

It took time for our school to address Eric's underlying skill deficits. We wanted Eric to succeed. In the meantime, a replacement behavior needs to be as easy to implement as the inappropriate behavior, or it won't stick.

Teaching Self-Regulation

Just as we would do with all skill deficits, parents are their child's first teacher, we need to explicitly teach these skill. This begins with teaching children to identify their own feelings. Then label the student's emotion in the moment and then name specific behavior that can show the child what he or she is feeling (for example, "You're clenching your fists, your voice is loud, you're frustrated"). With practice, kids can learn to assign

themselves or choose a self-calming strategy in these moments and avoid explosive incidents.

Which Interaction Strategies Work Best?

The I in F.A.I.R. is for *interaction* strategies. Many students who have challenging behavior have a history of school anxiety, school failure, and difficult relationships with authority. Teachers and parents need concrete, easy-to-implement strategies to nurture and convey to kids that they are liked, respected, and safe. Building such a relationship enables students to take risks and move out of their comfort zone. It takes time to develop replacement strategies and they are best developed by inviting peers into your classroom.

While we are often skilled at positive reinforcement (for example, saying "Good job!" when a child acts appropriately), we may not frequently use non-contingent reinforcement. We call this "random acts of kindness": ways to recognize students for who they are rather than for what they've done. When students get stuck in a negative cycle with a parent or teacher, if adults take time to show they care—by bringing in their favorite snack, giving them a thumbs-up sign of recognition, or offering them a sticker "just because I like you"—these acts can be crucial in helping students stop challenging behavior. They learn we like them for who they are, not just when they behave well. By the way, my former student, Eric is now a manager in a big business and a good father and husband. His big voice and need to be in charge is put to good use every day in the workplace. It's incumbent on us to use student talents at school.

How a teacher or parent gives directions and talks with students has a huge impact on their behavior. One strategy is to give students some choice in a direction. For example, for an oppositional child, instead of saying, "Line up!" try, "Do you want to walk in the front or the back of the line?" You can also build delay into the direction, giving children control over when they comply. Rather than saying, "You need to clean your desk right now!" which precipitates resistance, try, "Please clean your desk or your room before lunch."

What Response Strategies Should We Use?

The R in F.A.I.R. is for *response* strategies. How we respond to an agitated child can escalate, deescalate, or be maintained. Ms. Minahan teaches us that we must avoid reinforcing the function of the behavior. If an attention-motivated child argues with you and you take her out of a party, holiday dinner or social gathering for a stern talk, you have accidentally reinforced the behavior. The student is likely to argue again the next day. Time out in a hallway or empty space such as a time out on a stairway at home puts a kid who needs a lifeline of support in a room or setting without needed teaching. As grown-ups, time-outs may save us embarrassment, but isolation rarely results in learning. Come hear behaviorist Jessica Minahan in January. Her F.A.I.R. plan turns previous thinking about how to work with oppositional behavior in the home or school on its head. We all need to teach the skills kids need to function well at home and at school. Happy New Year!