1

Seven Key Behavioral Principles

The focus in this book is defusing strategies for teachers to use at the very *onset* of problem behavior. It may be that the teacher makes good use of proactive strategies to both prevent problem behavior and to establish expected behavior and may have best-practice procedures in place for following up with problem behavior. However, problem behavior will still occur because of factors that cannot be directly controlled in the classroom. For example, the students may engage in counterproductive behaviors outside of school time, which reinforce problem behavior. These behaviors may then spill over to the classroom. How the teacher responds to the occurrence of problem behavior is the theme of this book. However, before specific strategies are described for directly responding to these common problem behaviors (Chapters 2–7), seven key behavioral principles that underlie the strategies need to be clearly understood. These seven principles are described in this chapter: (1) goals of correction procedures; (2) the role of teacher attention in correction procedures; (3) the nature of behavioral intensity, escalation, and defusion; (4) the nature of behavioral chains; (5) the role of behavioral extinction and extinction bursts; (6) the power of personal reactions; and (7) establishing fluent responses.

KEY PRINCIPLE ONE: GOALS OF CORRECTION PROCEDURES

When students display problem behavior in the classroom, teachers have an initial goal of interrupting the problem behavior and directing the students to engage in appropriate behavior. For example, if the teacher is explaining something to the class, and two students are talking to each other, the teacher may ask them to stop talking and listen to the explanations. Ideally, the students will cease talking to each other and listen to the teacher. However, while this result is necessary, it may not be sufficient. Regarding the same example, suppose the students follow the teacher's prompt to cease talking and listen, but they resume talking a few minutes later or begin talking to each the following day when the teacher is again explaining something. The students cooperated initially but resumed the same problem behavior later. The problem behavior was not corrected. An effective correction procedure must have the goal of not only interrupting the problem behavior and redirecting the students to the expected behavior but also ensure appropriate behavior in future situations.

Teachers utilize these same two steps for correcting academic errors. When students make errors in a subject, the teacher informs them that an error has been made, assists them to correct the error, and expects the students to make correct responses to similar tasks in the future. If errors persist, the teacher typically adjusts the correction procedures to ensure future correct responses.

The first goal for correcting problem behavior is to interrupt the problem behavior and engage the students in the expected behavior. The second goal is to ensure the students exhibit the expected behavior in future occurrences of similar situations.

There is a third goal in addressing problem behavior, which is critical in this book, and that is to avoid escalation or accelerating the problem behavior. Suppose, for example, in the earlier illustration with the two students talking while the teacher was explaining something to the class, the teacher stopped talking very suddenly, glared at the two students, and told them that they were very rude for disrupting the class. One of the students muttered something to the other student who laughed. The teacher then walked to the two students, demanding to know what was said. Meanwhile, the whole class is watching this interaction. One of the students said nothing was said, and the other grinned. Both students were then sent to the office for disrespect and disrupting the class. Clearly, the situation *escalated,* beginning with two students talking and ending with each of them removed from class for additional behaviors of disrespect and disruption. In later chapters, detailed information will be described for not only addressing the initial problem behavior effectively but also

decreasing the likelihood of escalating the situation. The third goal in correcting problem behavior is to avoid escalation.

The three main goals in correcting problem behavior are summarized in Box 1.1.

BOX 1.1
Three Main Goals in Correcting Problem Behavior

1. Interrupt the problem behavior, and engage the student or students in the expected behavior.
2. Ensure the student or students exhibit the expected behavior in future occurrences of similar situations.
3. Avoid escalating the situation to more serious behavior.

KEY PRINCIPLE TWO: THE ROLE OF TEACHER ATTENTION IN CORRECTION PROCEDURES

Teacher attention plays a powerful role in affecting the whole gamut of student behavior from establishing expected behavior (Darch & Kame'enui, 2004; Sprick, Garrison, & Howard, 1998), reducing problem behavior (Algozzine & Kay, 2001), maintaining behavior (Carr & Shabani, 2005), and escalating problem behavior (Colvin, 2004; Sprick & Garrison, 2008). Of particular interest in this book is the role teacher attention plays in correcting problem behavior and in escalating or defusing these behaviors.

Several years ago Becker (1986) described an insightful, almost comical, study that clearly illustrated how a teacher was simultaneously correcting a problem behavior and reinforcing the same problem behavior simply as a function of teacher attention. Observers recorded the number of times a first-grade teacher told someone in the class to sit down and the number of students who were not sitting down in a 10-second interval for 20 minutes over a period of six days for each phase of the study. There were five phases in the study.

Phase 1—Baseline: In a 10-second interval, the average number times the teacher told someone to sit down was approximately once, and the average number of students standing up was approximately three.

Note: It is important to realize that the students followed the direction to sit down in all instances in this study.

Phase 2—First Intervention: The teacher was asked to catch more students not sitting down and give them the direction to sit down. The average number of students not sitting down increased to 4.3 (from 3), and the number of teacher directions to sit down averaged three per interval (from 1).

Phase 3—Reversal: The teacher was asked to resume the initial practice of responding to some of the students not sitting down. In this phase, the number of students not sitting down decreased to the baseline average of about three per interval and the number of directions from the teacher reduced to about one per interval.

Phase 4—Second Reversal: The teacher was then asked to increase the number of directions to sit down to all students who were standing up. The results showed a corresponding increase in the number of students standing up to averaging 4.5 per interval and the teacher directions to sit down increasing to about four per interval.

Final Phase—Second Intervention: The teacher was asked to ignore the students not sitting down and to praise the students who were sitting down and working. In this phase, the number of students not sitting down was recorded at two, the lowest of any phase.

The results from this study were compelling and obvious:

1. The more times the teacher told the students to sit down, the more students stood up.
2. The teacher's direction to "sit down" became the cue for other students, already seated, to stand up—the very behavior the teacher was trying to stop.
3. The students who were told to sit down cooperated and sat down on each occasion.
4. The least number of students standing up occurred when the teacher ignored the ones standing and praised those who were seated and working (Becker, 1986).

The overall conclusion from this study was that the behavior the teacher directly attended to was increased. Or, the most effective strategy for obtaining the expected behavior of sitting down was to directly acknowledge those students who were seated and working and ignore the students who were not seated. Moreover, the study highlighted the common *teacher-attention trap* of addressing a problem behavior, obtaining cooperation, and yet maintaining the problem behavior.

The author has frequently used an activity in presentations to educators to obtain a similar result explaining the role of teacher attention in maintaining problem behavior. Participants are asked to wave their hands if they agree to any of the following three statements:

1. All students, regardless of age, need some level of teacher attention. Participant response: *All wave their hands.*
2. Good behavior, expected behavior, is *guaranteed* to obtain teacher attention (emphasis on the word *guaranteed*). Participant responses: *No hands wave.*
3. Bad behavior, serious problem behavior, is *guaranteed* to obtain teacher attention. Participant response: *All participants wave their hands.*

The conclusion drawn from this activity is that the surest way to obtain teacher attention is to misbehave.

Some fundamental principles related to the role of teacher attention in correcting problem behavior are summarized in Box 1.2.

BOX 1.2
Role of Teacher Attention in Correcting Problem Behavior

1. All students need teacher attention to some extent.
2. Problem behavior is a sure way of obtaining teacher attention.
3. When teachers respond directly to students displaying problem behavior, they are providing attention to these students who may not otherwise be receiving teacher attention.
4. Even though students may comply with a direction, they may exhibit the same problem at a later time, indicating that the behavior has been reinforced by the teacher's correction procedure.
5. Other students who are cooperating may begin to display the problem behavior in order to receive teacher attention.
6. Teacher attention, if properly directed, can be used to reinforce expected behavior and reduce problem behavior.

KEY PRINCIPLE THREE: THE NATURE OF BEHAVIORAL INTENSITY, ESCALATION, AND DEFUSION

It was noted earlier that when teachers address problem behavior, one of the goals is to avoid escalation or accelerating the behavior to more serious

concerns. It is very important to have a solid working understanding to these related terms: behavioral intensity, escalation, and defusion.

Behavioral intensity is a measure of the seriousness of the behavior. For example, the problem behavior of talking out in class is less serious or less intense than the behavior of throwing a chair across the room. Behavioral intensity is usually measured by the impact of the behavior in relation to a number of variables, such as classroom disruption, safety for the individual and others, and personal and social needs of the students. Each of these factors has a number of levels or degrees of intensity. For example, a student throwing a paper airplane could be considered dangerous if it hit someone in the eye. However, a student throwing a chair is a more serious or more intense behavior because, compared to throwing a paper airplane, there is more likelihood of someone being hurt. Similarly, when a single student calls another student a nasty name on one occasion, there is a chance that the recipient of the abuse may be offended. However, if several students, singly or in a group, call an individual student a name on several occasions, there is much more chance the recipient will be offended and bothered by the sustained verbal attacks. The sustained attacks are considered to have higher intensity compared to the single-instance attack.

Behavior escalation is the process when a student, or group of students, exhibits a behavior that begins with low intensity and moves to higher intensities as a result of certain conditions. For example, two students may be arguing over whose turn it is to use the computer. Neither student gives way, so they begin to call each other names, pushing, and punching before the teacher is able to get to them. The successive student behaviors of arguing, name calling, pushing, and punching show increasing intensity, that is, the behaviors have escalated. Similarly, a student has his head down on his desk in class and the teacher asks him to begin work. He says he is finished, and the teacher checks and finds the student has barely started. The teacher tells him he has much more to do and needs to get on with it. The student says he is not interested and does not plan to work any more. The teacher tells him that if he needs help to ask for it, otherwise he can do the work now, or he will have to do it during the break. The student utters an expletive and shouts, "No way." The teacher tells him he needs to go to the time-out area. In this vignette, the successive behaviors of the student (off-task with head down on the desk, false claim that the work has been completed, refusal to start work, and uttering expletives) show increasing intensity, namely, the behavior has escalated.

Behavioral defusion is an antonym for behavioral escalation. Defusion is the process when a student's behavior shows successive decreases in intensity. For example, a student may be shouting out angry responses in class. The teacher intervenes, then the student begins to mumble to herself and a short time later sits with arms folded, staring at the floor. The teacher intervenes again, and the student reluctantly picks up her pen and begins to write. The sequence of behaviors displayed by the student is shouting in class, mumbling to herself, sitting staring at the floor and not working,

and slowly beginning to work. These successive behaviors show a reduction in intensity indicating that the situation has been defused.

This concept of defusion is central to the strategies used in addressing problem behavior and appears in the title of this book and in chapter headings. It is critical for teachers to understand that the student's behavior is *heading in the right direction* and that it may take several steps before the student is clearly on task appropriately. One teacher, in the example above, may conclude that the student has stopped shouting but is now sitting there refusing to work, and the teacher may mistakenly respond directly to the so-called noncompliance and thereby escalate the student's behavior. Another teacher, in the same situation, may conclude the student is now heading in the right direction, and the teacher continues to calmly and positively redirect the student. This teacher ends up with the student on task, whereas the other teacher ends up with an escalated situation.

The key principles related to behavioral intensity, escalation, and defusion are summarized in Box 1.3.

BOX 1.3
Key Points for Behavioral Intensity, Escalation, and Defusion

1. *Behavioral intensity* is a measure of the seriousness of a behavior based on its impact related to classroom disruption, safety, and personal and social factors.
2. *Behavioral escalation* is the process where a student engages in a series of behaviors in which each successive behavior is *more intense* than the previous behavior.
3. *Behavioral defusion* is the process where a student engages in a series of behaviors in which each successive behavior is *less intense* than the previous behavior.
4. The process of defusion should inform teachers that the student is making positive progress. Even though the student may not have achieved the desired behavioral level, he or she is headed in the desired direction, which must be acknowledged, otherwise the student's behavior may escalate.

KEY PRINCIPLE FOUR: NATURE OF BEHAVIORAL CHAINS

Behavioral chains consist of a series of discrete behaviors with each step in the chain prompting the next step. Many classroom activities can be described as behavioral chains or routines. For example, the students are asked to get ready to go to the library. This direction prompts students to finish up what they are doing, put their materials away, push in their chair,

and line up at the door. Or, a teacher may tell the class to turn in their reports by next Tuesday, which requires the students to read the correct passages, make summary notes, take their textbook and notebook home, write the report from their summary notes, and turn in the report by Tuesday of next week.

In this book, behavior chains are referred to in the context of social behaviors, particularly for escalating behavior chains. The following illustration of an office referral is used to identify the key principles involved in understanding the nature of behavior chains and areas where interventions may be successfully applied. An incident report submitted by a teacher follows.

Marietta was sitting at her desk with a bad attitude and was not doing her work. She was given a reminder to get started. She then started arguing about the work, and I tried to give her explanations and offered to help. She would not quit arguing, so I gave her the choice of doing the work now or after school. She became belligerent and began shouting. I gave her a warning to settle down, or she'd have to go to the office. She threw her books on the floor and stood up. I directed her to the office and she swung her arm and could have hit me in the face. I then called security.

The behavior chain for the student based on information in this incident report consists of a series of discrete behaviors of increasing intensity in this order:

1. Sitting, not beginning the designated work, and displaying a negative attitude
2. Arguing
3. Continuing to argue
4. Displaying belligerence and shouting
5. Throwing materials and standing
6. Swinging her arm toward the teacher

The administrator who dealt with this incident was basically bound to address the most serious behavior first, the student swinging her arm and nearly hitting the teacher. The student may have been required to receive some counseling, and consequences typically would have been delivered, such as suspension, detention, and parent conference. Hopefully, these interventions had the desired effect of averting future occurrences of the behavior of aggression by swinging her arm toward the teacher. However, by focusing *only* on the last behavior of the chain, even though it was the most serious one, other behaviors in the chain were not addressed. This

means that these behaviors were more than likely to recur in the classroom. To effectively address these behaviors earlier in the chain, all of which are undesirable and counterproductive for teaching and learning, a more detailed analysis of the behavioral chain is needed.

Analysis of Behavioral Chains—Interaction Pathways

At first glance, the responses made by the teacher appear reasonable and normally would not result in a major incident, as in this case. The information provided in this incident report was restricted to the student's successive behaviors. There was no information at all on what may have prompted or set off each of these student behaviors. The assumption was that each student behavior in itself set the occasion for the next behavior, ultimately resulting in a serious act of swinging her arm toward the teacher's head. Behavior chains typically do not function this way. Additional stimuli or prompts are usually present, which set the occasion for the student's next behavior in the chain.

In many of these classroom situations, we are really looking at a *series of interactions* involving *both* teacher behavior and student behavior (or teacher–student interactions). For each student behavior, there is a corresponding or reciprocal teacher behavior. Each successive student behavior is *preceded* by a specific teacher behavior. Also, it could be argued, each teacher behavior is preceded by a specific student behavior. In this sense, we may conclude that the teacher behavior may have set the stage for the next student behavior and that the student behavior set the stage for the next teacher behavior. These successive interactions will be referred to throughout this book as an *interaction pathway.*

Interaction Pathway Illustration

Suppose the incident report cited above was rewritten with the following information:

Marietta was sitting at her desk, looking subdued, and was not doing her work. The teacher approached her, telling her that it was time to get started on her work. Marietta said she had finished it. The teacher noted that she had barely started and that if she needed help she could ask for it, otherwise she needed to get started. Marietta stoutly said she had done what was asked. The teacher pointed out Marietta needed to do 10 problems, and she had completed only 2, to which Marietta shouted, "No way. I am not doing this twice. That's not fair." The teacher told her to settle down and gave her the choice of doing her work now or doing it during the break. Marietta pushed her books on the floor and stood up. The teacher told her she needs to go to the office and nudged her arm toward the office. Marietta vigorously swung her arm backward and nearly hit the teacher's head.

While this report describes the same student behaviors as the initial incident report, the biggest difference is that the teacher responses are also included. The situation can now be described in terms of an *interaction-pathway diagram,* which depicts the successive teacher–student responses (Figure 1.1).

The pathway described in Figure 1.1 permits a close examination of the student's behavior in relation to the teacher's successive responses. Here is the key: One effective way of changing the student's successive behaviors in this example is to change the teacher's responses. Suppose, for example, the teacher's first response was along empathetic lines in recognizing that the student is bothered over something with a statement like, "Are you doing OK?" or, "Would you like a little time? And, I'll be back shortly." Similarly, when the student continued to argue, rather than confront the student, suppose the teacher disengaged, saying, "Why don't you try to continue, and I'll be back in a second." The teacher would then go to other students and return shortly. It is also clear in one of the last interactions of the pathway interactions that the teacher's nudge, physical contact, directing the student to go to the office was a powerful stimulus for the student to react physically. While there are several variations in responses the teacher could have made, the crucial point is that each teacher response sets the occasion for the student's next response. Basically, the teacher's response, in a large measure, *determines* what the student may do next. This means that the situation can be escalated or defused depending on the kind of response the teacher makes.

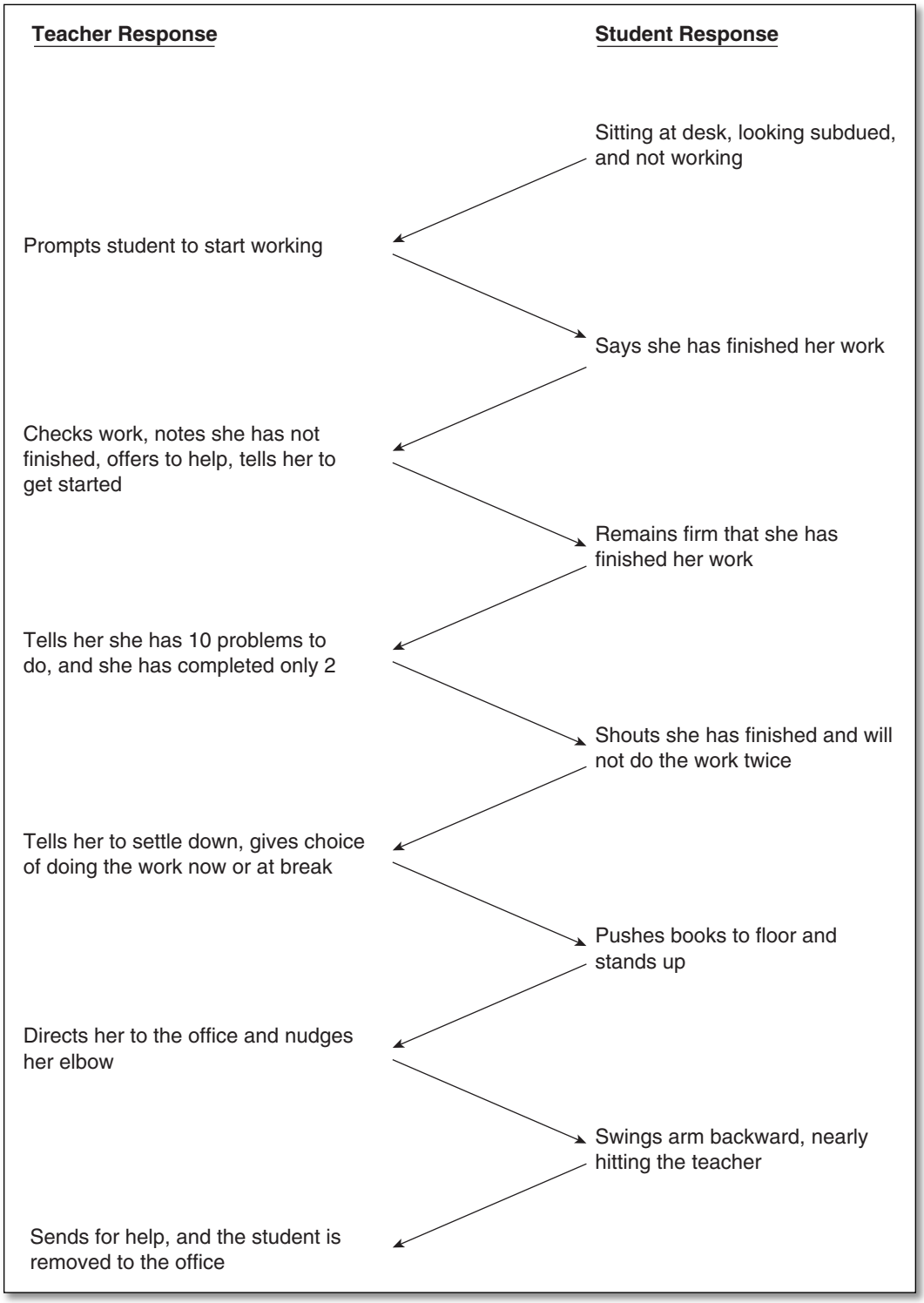
Another critical element of interaction pathways is that the teacher's responses serve to *reinforce* each student response. In the example above, by stopping work the student is successful in bringing the teacher to her and engaging in a discussion. The teacher coming to the student and prompting her to work reinforces the student stopping work. This response from the teacher also functions as a stimulus for the student's next response of arguing. In effect, each teacher response serves a *dual* purpose in the interaction pathway:

1. To reinforce the student's prior response in the chain; and
2. To set the occasion for the student's next response in the chain (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007).

This dual function of teacher responses has three important implications:

1. It provides an explanation of how interaction pathways get established and maintained in the classroom. Once the pathway is established, the successive teacher and student behaviors become predictable.

Figure 1.1 Interaction-Pathway Diagram



2. It also provides direction for strategies to break up a problem pathway and redirect to an acceptable pathway. By changing the teacher's response, the student's behavior may not be reinforced (leading to extinction), and there is a different cue for the student's next behavior. This means a new, acceptable pathway of behavior may be developed.
3. If the teacher's initial response to the student's first behavior in the chain is changed, then the problem pathway may not even get started.

This book is designed to apply this *interaction-pathway analysis* to common problem behaviors students may exhibit in the classroom. The key is understanding that the teacher's responses reinforce the student behaviors and also set the occasion for the student's subsequent behaviors, which means that the student's behavior can be managed as a function of how the teacher responds to the problem behavior.

Behavioral-Chain Patterns

Teachers often report student problem behavior as a predictable behavior chain. For example a teacher reports, "As soon as Jamie starts whining and complaining, I know there is going to be a blowup before long." Another teacher, speaking of a student with severe disabilities, said, "Once he starts tapping his fingers on the desk, it won't be long before he starts to slap his face and pull his hair." Similarly, a teacher remarked, "When Cerise stops working, stands up and walks around the room, she will soon become abusive to other students and me." In each of these examples, the teacher identified a behavior pattern in which certain student behaviors are followed by predictable, more-serious behaviors.

While it is quite helpful to be able to identify the successive behaviors of a student in a behavioral-chain pattern, it is *very important* to identify the reciprocal responses, especially from the teacher, to these behaviors. For example, when Jamie starts whining, what is the teacher's response to the whining? It is likely that the teacher's response is also predictable for the student, which will ensure completion of the chain (the student blows up). When the teacher responses to the student behaviors early in the chain are identified, the teacher is then in a stronger position to make changes in these responses that may break up the problem-behavior chain and replace it with acceptable patterns and routines. More details will be provided on this approach in Chapters 2 through 6.

Questions that often arise regarding behavioral-change patterns are, "How do these patterns get established in the first place?" and, "How are they maintained?" Clearly, these questions need to be answered if the problem behavior is to be effectively addressed and changed.

Establishing Behavioral-Chain Patterns

Behavior chains become established as patterns simply through the power of the reinforcing events that occur at the end of the chain. For example, suppose Marietta in the example above has a strong aversion to math. So when math is introduced, she begins to whine and complain. The teacher may address the whining, which leads to arguing and refusal from the student. The teacher then gives an ultimatum that the work needs to be done, help will be provided if need be, or Marietta will have to do it after school. Marietta then throws a tantrum, shouting and running around the room (she blows up). The teacher and teacher assistant then escort her to the time-out area to calm down. Marietta has now been successful in removing or avoiding the need to do math (at least in the short term). Task avoidance is a very common reason why students exhibit problem behavior, and when the students are removed from the situation because of escalating behavior, their behavior is reinforced. The whole chain is reinforced.

Maintaining Behavioral-Chain Patterns

The behavioral-chain pattern is maintained because the reinforcers for the last behavior in the chain continue to be applied or available to the student. In Marietta's case, when she blows up she is removed (this is her desired outcome). Moreover, the teacher and teacher assistant's behavior are also reinforced because they are effective in quieting the student, restoring order in the room, and enabling instructional activities to resume. Consequently, it is predictable that when Marietta begins to whine she will end up in the time-out area, removed from math. It is also predictable for Marietta that when she whines, the teaching staff will become engaged, ultimately removing her from the instructional activity.

One final property of behavioral chains is the relative strengths for each of the behaviors within the chain. Research on behavior chains has demonstrated that the behaviors at the end of the chain are the strongest because of their closest proximity to the reinforcing events; similarly, the behaviors early in the chain are weakest because of their relative distance from these reinforcers (Bellamy, Horner, & Inman, 1979; Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007; Watson & Butler, 2005). The implication is that interventions designed to address behaviors early in the chain are more likely to be successful compared to interventions for behaviors at the end of the chain. However, common practice often requires educators to target behaviors at the end of the chain because of their relative seriousness or intensity. The guiding rule is to intervene as early in the chain as possible.

The key points regarding the nature of behavioral chains are listed in Box 1.4.

BOX 1.4
Key Properties of Behavioral Chains

1. Behavioral chains consist of a series of discrete behaviors.
2. Behavioral chains often reflect escalation where each successive behavior is more serious than the preceding behaviors in the chain.
3. Addressing the last behavior in the chain may not change the behaviors early in the chain.
4. Each behavior in a chain is preceded by a stimulus that is usually the response from the teacher in classroom situations.
5. Behavioral chains can be perceived as *interaction pathways*, which involve successive responses from the student and teacher. The student's response sets the occasion for the teacher's response, and the teacher's response sets the occasion for the student's next response.
6. Behavioral chains are established and maintained by the presence of strong reinforcing events at the end of the chain. These events reinforce the entire chain.
7. The behavior at the end of a chain is strongest compared to behaviors early in the chain, which means that interventions are more likely to be effective when behaviors early in the chain are targeted.

KEY PRINCIPLE FIVE: THE ROLE OF BEHAVIORAL EXTINCTION AND EXTINCTION BURSTS

Behavioral Extinction

Teachers and behavior specialists need to have a good working understanding of the concept of extinction. *Extinction* refers to the process of systematically removing events that reinforce a behavior. For example, a student may act out in the classroom so as to be sent home. Once at home, the student has uninterrupted time for TV, cell phone use, and contact with other students who may be suspended, skipped school, or using their cell phones at school. Access to these preferred activities serve to reinforce the student's acting-out behavior in the classroom. However, if it was set up that on the next occasion when the student acted out in class he was sent to an alternative classroom, then the student would not have access to the reinforcing activities available at home. The student's acting-out behavior in class would be put to *extinction* by removing access to the reinforcers available at his home.

Similarly, the student who talks out a lot in the classroom is successful in obtaining a response from someone (either the teacher or other

students). The teacher determines that the student's talking-out behavior is reinforced and maintained when others (teacher and students) respond to her. The teacher spends time explaining to the class that there is a classroom expectation that if you have something to say you need to raise your hand first. Also, the class may respond to students who raise their hand and are called on to respond. If someone does talk without raising his or her hand, then the class should not respond. The teacher also makes a concerted effort to encourage hand raising and not to respond to anyone who does not raise a hand, especially the targeted student. With this plan, the student's talking-out behavior was put to *extinction* by removing the reinforcers (responses from the teacher and other students).

The overall approach in using the extinction process is to identify events or responses that are reinforcing the problem behavior and then make adjustments so that these reinforcers are not available following the problem behavior. It is also presumed that the teacher would include in the plan strategies so that the student can access these reinforcers by following expected behavior (given the reinforcers are acceptable). For example, the student above received teacher and class attention for talking out. Once a plan was in place to remove attention for talking out, the student was able to receive attention by raising her hand. By following the expected behavior, the student was able to access attention.

Extinction Bursts

One aspect of the extinction process that can be quite daunting and perhaps discouraging for teachers is the behavioral phenomenon of an extinction burst. When students become accustomed to accessing reinforcing events through problem behavior, they usually will exhibit more serious behavior when these reinforcers are removed. Their behavior may escalate. This escalation of behavior is known as an *extinction burst.* A teacher who has not worked with students with well-established behavior may misinterpret this escalation of behavior as an indication that the plan is not working. The teacher may say, "The plan is not working because the student is showing worse behavior now." In the illustration above, the student who went to the alternative classroom instead of being sent home may very well act out at in this classroom much more severely than in the initial classroom. Similarly, the student who talked out in class when she found no one was responding to her may talk out more often or may begin to shout. The student is basically communicating, "Hey, try ignoring this," and exhibits more intense behavior. The most serious outcome is that, if the student is successful in obtaining the desired reinforcers following an extinction burst, then the system has shaped a more serious problem. The student is more likely to exhibit this higher-intensity behavior in future. However, if teachers and program planners understand that

an extinction burst is likely, supports can be put in place to manage the escalated behavior on a short-term basis. If the escalated behavior is not reinforced, it will extinguish quite quickly (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007; Teachman & Smith-Janik, 2005).

More details will be provided on the extinction process and managing extinction bursts in Chapters 2 through 6, when common classroom problems are addressed. A summary of the key points on extinction is presented in Box 1.5.

BOX 1.5
Key Points of the Extinction Process and Extinction Bursts

1. *Extinction* refers to the process of removing the reinforcers that maintain a target behavior.
2. If the reinforcers are appropriate, students need to be taught how to access them through behaviors that are acceptable.
3. Once the extinction process is implemented, students are likely to exhibit more-serious behaviors, called *extinction bursts.*
4. Great care and planning needs to occur so that the students do not access the reinforcers following an extinction burst, otherwise the escalated behavior will become part of the student's repertoire.
5. Extinction bursts, if managed effectively, are usually of short duration.

KEY PRINCIPLE SIX: THE POWER OF PERSONAL REACTIONS

Many teachers have experienced the situation where they have read a book or attended a workshop, and the information presented makes good sense and should be a routine practice. However, in the heat of the moment, the teacher may react and respond quite differently. For example, when a student becomes argumentative and disrespectful, it makes sense to withdraw, go to other students, and then return to the involved student and address the problem in a composed, matter-of-fact, and focused manner. However, in an actual moment, when the student becomes argumentative and calls the teacher an offensive name, the teacher may take exception to the name calling, approach the student immediately, and state in a somewhat upset manner, "That is no way to talk in here. You need to take yourself to the office." The student then utters a stream of language and makes a threat. In this instance, the teacher reacted personally to the offensive remark and confronted the student. The student then reacted

with worse behavior. Clearly, the student's behavior was unacceptable and needs to be addressed, but reacting personally to the behavior exacerbated the problem. The issue becomes how to effectively address these kinds of behaviors and avoid escalating the student's behavior. The key point is for teachers not to react personally, as a necessary first step.

There are many reasons why teachers may react to certain student problem behaviors, lose composure to some extent, and respond in a way that accelerates the student behavior. These reasons could be culturally based. For example, the students may use language that is offensive to the teacher's values. Another common reason relates to authority. Teachers may feel their authority in the classroom is threatened or usurped by the challenging behavior from their students. Consequently, they may respond in a way to try to establish their authority, which can easily degenerate into an escalating power struggle. Finally, some students make it their business to press their teachers' buttons. These students know what behaviors are very likely to annoy or engage their teachers. Consequently, when the teacher becomes engaged, successive interactions occur, leading to more-serious problem behavior.

In general, when teachers take student behavior personally and react, their behavior is likely to escalate the student's behavior. The features of reactive behavior from teachers that are likely to escalate the student's behavior include immediacy of response, voice volume, tone of voice, body language, proximity to students, finger pointing, and perhaps threats. These factors will be more fully addressed in Chapter 4, Defusing Disrespectful Behavior, and Chapter 5, Defusing Agitation. The key points regarding personal reactions to problem behavior are listed in Box 1.6.

BOX 1.6
Key Points for Responding Personally to Problem Behavior

1. Sometimes, teachers take student behaviors personally and react in a way that escalates the student behavior.
2. There are occasions when teachers abandon logical or best-practice responses they might otherwise use when they are calm because they take certain behaviors personally.
3. Reasons for teachers taking student problem behavior personally are typically cultural or value based, related to authority questions, or to students knowing how to press their teachers' buttons.
4. Reacting personally to student behavior is usually manifest in teacher responses related to immediacy of response, voice volume, tone of voice, body language, proximity to students, finger pointing, and perhaps threats.
5. There is clearly a need to address these problem student behaviors in ways that are effective and at the same time not escalate the student behavior by not taking the behaviors personally.

KEY PRINCIPLE SEVEN: ESTABLISHING FLUENT RESPONSES

Perhaps the biggest challenge to teachers in managing their initial responses to problem behavior is fluency. *Fluency,* in this book, refers to the degree to which a teacher responds in a planned way, automatically and smoothly, to certain situations. For example, consider the case where most of the class is on task with the class activity except for two students who are engaged in a side conversation. The desired first response from the teacher is to respond to the students who are on task and ignore the students who are off task. The first teacher notices the two students off task, immediately and naturally responds to the students who are on task with a brief compliment. This teacher's response is said to be fluent. A second teacher understands that it is better to respond to students on task, however, when confronted with this situation involving two students talking, the teacher hesitates, looks at the two students, looks at the rest of the class and in a delayed and awkward manner acknowledges the rest of the class who are on task. In this case, the teacher's response, although correct eventually, is not fluent. A third teacher, who also accepts that it is better to acknowledge the students who are on task as an initial response, in this situation, automatically addresses the two students who are off task. These three teachers showed the full range of application regarding fluency. The first teacher's response was marked with high fluency; the second teacher with low fluency; and the third teacher made the wrong response, responding with zero fluency.

It is possible for teachers to understand and agree with alternative approaches to managing behavior. They appreciate the logic behind the strategies and acknowledge the research on the effectiveness. However, when a targeted situation arises, they automatically respond in their old ways.

The root challenge, in these cases, is that teachers are required to change their behavior, specifically, to change their first response to situations where problem behavior occurs. This change is difficult and challenging for many teachers because, through repeated practice, they have become fluent with less-effective strategies. Consequently, even though willing to change, they automatically respond with their former strategies when problem situations arise. The challenge is to develop procedures to assist teachers to let go of existing habitual practices and become fluent with new and more-effective practices.

The most crucial response for teachers facing problem behavior, in many cases, is their *very first one.* This initial response from the teacher may elicit a planned or conditioned direct response from the student. Some students exhibit problem behavior expecting the teacher to respond in a predictable manner. Consequently, when the teacher responds in this way, the student automatically responds further involving more problem behavior or escalated behavior. By changing the teacher's initial response, the effect will often alter the student's subsequent responses, paving the

way for defusing the situation and redirecting the student to appropriate behavior.

In each of the following chapters where specific problem behaviors will be addressed, procedures will be described for addressing this very crucial topic of achieving teacher fluency in response to problem behaviors. In addition, the section on strategies for defusing problem behavior in each chapter begins with a reiteration of this central approach of controlling the teacher's *initial* response. The key principles related to fluency are summarized on Box 1.7.

BOX 1.7
Key Points for Establishing Fluent Responses to Problem Behavior

1. *Fluency* refers to the degree to which a teacher responds in a planned way, automatically and smoothly, to certain situations.
2. Teachers may fully agree, either through research or demonstrations, that there are more-productive strategies for addressing problem behavior but have difficulty changing their responses.
3. Teachers, through repeated practice, are often quite fluent in using practices that are not very effective.
4. The core challenge comes in helping teachers to let go of their former practices and adopt different practices that have demonstrated effectiveness.
5. The most challenging response for teachers in obtaining fluency is their very first response.
6. Specific procedures are described in Chapters 2 through 6 for developing fluency with strategies for addressing common classroom problem behaviors, defusing the situations, and redirecting the students to appropriate behavior.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The bulk of strategies for addressing problem behavior in the classroom are designed to manage antecedent factors or proactive approaches and to manage consequences and follow-up procedures. Another important window for addressing problem behavior is the moment *immediately* following the occurrence of the initial problem behavior or the onset of the problem behavior. Specifically, the teacher's first response to the initial problem behavior can determine whether the behavior is defused and the classroom activities resumed or whether the problem behavior persists or escalates, and the classroom instruction interrupted.

A key to managing initial responses to student behavior is to properly understand *interaction pathways.* This concept is defined in terms of successive responses between the teacher and the student. One pathway may result in the student exhibiting more and more serious behavior as the interactions proceed. Another pathway may result in defusing the problem behavior, resulting in the student displaying acceptable behavior. This book is designed to utilize sound behavioral principles so that common classroom problem behaviors result in interaction pathways leading to acceptable behavior.