Jennifer Russel: Hey, everybody! Welcome to LifeSkills Radio. I'm your host, Jennifer Russell, and today's podcast is going to be all about challenging behavior.

Jennifer Russel: You know what I'm talking about. Whenever my partner and I do needs assessments with the specialist and teachers that we support, the topic of behavior is almost always the number one identified area of need. And I know that in my early career as a special education teacher, before I had a solid understanding of the Why behind behavior, I consistently left work feeling exhausted, frustrated, and just plain defeated. I just did not know what was going on with my students, and I didn't know how to help them.

Jennifer Russel: I had students who refused to work, who hit, who bit, who spit, who punched, kicked, pulled hair. I had kids who stripped down naked, who ran way. Never stripped down naked and ran away, thankfully. I had kids who tore apart the classroom, who screamed, and kids who cried all day. And honestly, sometimes I was so exhausted from responding to those same behaviors that my buttons got pushed. My buttons!

Jennifer Russel: How and why did that happen? Well, when you don't have an understanding of the why behind challenging behavior, a child's actions can start to feel personal, especially when you're so exhausted. I'm not going to lie, I had those moments where I thought, "He's just doing this to annoy me." Or, "He knows what to do. He just won't do it." Does that sound familiar to anyone?

Jennifer Russel: And I've unfortunately heard other teachers characterize students as being either a good kid or a bad kid, or say, "He's just acting bad today." When we don't understand behavior, we start to take it personally, which interferes with our ability to respond to that child who's in distress with effectiveness and serenity.

Jennifer Russel: Today, I'm going to spend more time talking about the causes of challenging behavior, or the Why, rather than specific interventions. But I will give you some information about interventions that can hopefully get you started on the path to teaching appropriate behavior instead of just managing it.

Jennifer Russel: Dr. Janine Fitzgerald runs The Fitzgerald Institute for Lifelong Learning, and although she doesn't work exclusively with children in a life skill setting, she is an expert in supporting kiddos with complex behavior needs. And I love the way Dr. Fitzgerald talks about challenging behavior. She says, "Difficult behaviors are the symptom of an unsolved problem, and the unsolved problem is either an unmet need, a lack of skills, or both. If a child has a need that has been met inconsistently, or never met, they might have developed behaviors to get that need met."

Jennifer Russel: She gives the example of a kindergarten student who every time he got called to the carpet for circle time, would hit his neighbor. Dr. Fitzgerald talked to the boy and said that she noticed he always came to the carpet the first time he was called, and that when he sat down, she also noticed that he always hit his neighbor.

Jennifer Russel: When she asked the boy about it, he said that when he hits, he gets to sit in a chair away from the other kids. She asked him why he liked sitting in the chair, and he said, well, then, he wouldn't get dirty. And she asked him what happens if he gets dirty, and the boy said that he gets a whooping.

Jennifer Russel: When she asked the teacher later what she thought the unmet need was, the teacher responded that she didn't know. Dr. Fitzgerald said the unmet need was safety, a need that every human has. And because the teacher didn't understand what the need was, she wasn't able to teach him an appropriate way to get that need met.

Jennifer Russel: An unsolved problem can also be the result of a lack of skills. If a child doesn't have the skills that the environment is demanding of him, we're going to see behavior. For example, when we ask an eight-year-old who is developmentally on the level of, perhaps, a two-year-old to sit at a table and do work for 20 minutes, we're probably going to see some challenging behavior because that child lacks the skills to sit and attend to a task for that length of time.

Jennifer Russel: If you want to see more of Dr. Janine Fitzgerald, you can find her on Region 13's YouTube channel. I highly recommend checking it out.

Jennifer Russel: Let's talk about behavior specifically in the life skills setting. Working with students with significant disabilities who might be nonverbal or have limited language presents a unique set of challenges when it comes to understanding behavior. There's just that extra layer of complexity. So, let's consider some of the things that can impact the behavior of our students with significant disabilities. Let's think about physical concerns.

Jennifer Russel: We have some kiddos in our classroom who spend most of the day, every day, feeling either uncomfortable or in pain. That's going to impact your mood big-time, right? We have students with mental health concerns. Studies have indicated that people with intellectual disability are at high risk of developing comorbid serious mental illness, so our students with intellectual disability might also have anxiety or depression. But a dual diagnosis is often overlooked, and this problem is heightened when the child's capacity to participate in a clinical assessment is limited because of their disability, perhaps.

Jennifer Russel: And looking at our students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, a study out of the University of Amsterdam concluded that about 40% of children with ASD had at least one comorbid diagnosed anxiety disorder.

Jennifer Russel: What did psychologists find to be the debilitating force behind the anxiety? Excessive worry and fear.

Jennifer Russel: Unfortunately, sometimes we don't recognize a student's behavior as being the result of worry and fear. Especially when that student is nonverbal, and struggles with social and emotional skills. For example, a behavior like running away or hitting might look like noncompliance, when maybe it's due to anxiety.

Jennifer Russel: Medication is something else that we have to consider when thinking about the behavior of our students. Some medications make kids really tired. When I'm tired, I get cranky. When I'm cranky, I might not want to do anything, and that might look like noncompliance. Some medications make children feel nauseous. When I feel nauseous, God help the person who tries to talk to me, touch me, or get me to do something. So, consider the impact that medication can have on your students' behavior.

Jennifer Russel: Finally, experiencing trauma understandably impacts behavior. In a 2012 Spectrum Institute study, individuals who had intellectual and developmental disabilities, or IDD, were interviewed and 70% reported that they had been sexually, physically, or financially abused. It's a staggering statistic. 90% of those individuals said that the abuse had been ongoing, and what's heartbreaking is that only 37% reported the abuse.

Jennifer Russel: If you work in a life skills setting, it's probably safe to say that you have a student in your classroom who has experienced trauma. And if you're an individual with IDD, you might have low language, so you might not be able to express your emotions in an appropriate manner. You might instead use your behavior to communicate your emotions.

Jennifer Russel: And that's the critical understanding that my partner and I always try to hammer home when we talk to new or struggling teachers. All behavior is communication, and every behavior has a function or serves a purpose, even if we don't understand it. Physical and mental health concerns, medication, and traumatic experiences can all impact a student's emotional and physical state. And in the absence of language or appropriate self-regulation skills, you, the teacher, will get behavior. And that behavior will be a manifestation of what that child is trying to communicate.

Jennifer Russel: So, all behavior is communication, and all behavior serves a purpose. Again, whether we understand it or not, if a child is engaging in a behavior, it has a function for that child. There are four common functions of behavior, and we can remember them by learning the phrase, an acronym, Everybody EATS. I'll say that again: Everyone EATS.

Jennifer Russel: The acronym EATS stands for Escape, Attention, Tangible, and Sensory.

Jennifer Russel: Let's walk through some examples that illustrate these four common functions.

Jennifer Russel: If you're trying to escape or avoid a situation, activity or person, but you can't communicate your inner thoughts or feelings, what behaviors might you exhibit? Think about it.

Jennifer Russel: I had a student who, whenever I asked him to check his schedule and transition to the table to do work, he would check his schedule, start walking to the table, and as soon as he saw the work on the table, he would throw his little body on the floor and start crying. There were no tears coming out, just a lot of noise. And it was pretty clear that he was trying to tell me, "Lady, I cannot do that work," or, "Lady, this work is so boring, I'd rather lie on the floor and pretend to cry for half an hour. You need to up your game." And he was right.

Jennifer Russel: The function of his behavior of lying on the floor was to escape or avoid the work. Escape is the E in the acronym EATS. Sometimes students also want to escape or avoid a person. How do you know if the function of the behavior is to escape? Well, if the behavior stops when the student doesn't have to interact with that person, then it's a possibility that the function of the behavior was to escape.

Jennifer Russel: The next function of behavior that I want to talk about is the A in our Everybody EATS acronym: Attention.

Jennifer Russel: If you have no communication, and have never been taught how to appropriately get someone's attention, what might you do? Would you touch them? Would you pull their hair? Would you throw something at them? Would you bite them, maybe? Would you put your face really close to the other person's face? Anybody ever experience that?

Jennifer Russel: If you see a child engaging in those behaviors, it could be to get your attention. How can you be sure? Well, you'd want to observe and collect data over time to know for sure if that's the function of the behavior, but as a guideline, if a child comes up to you and hits you, and you kneel down and say, "Sarah," and the hitting stops, the function of the behavior of hitting could have been to get your attention.

Jennifer Russel: You turned to the child, you looked at them, you said their name. You gave them attention. Or, if you're playing with a child and say, "All done!" and start to walk away and then they hit you, the function of the behavior could also be to get attention. You stopped giving them the attention that they wanted, and now they want it back!

Jennifer Russel: The third letter in our EATS acronym is T, which stands for Tangible.

Jennifer Russel: With this function, you will see behavior that either stops when a child gets access to the tangible object or activity they want, or starts when that tangible activity ends or the object is taken away. For example, if you see a student cry when time on the iPad is finished, the function of that behavior could be to get more access to that tangible activity, which is the iPad.

Jennifer Russel: Another example: you have a student who is rolling a car, and you want him to transition to the cafeteria. You ask him to check his schedule and he immediately starts crying. You don't know what to do because everybody has to get to the cafeteria to eat, or the rest of the day is going to be shot. So you give him the car to take with him to the cafeteria, and immediately, the crying stops. Chances are, the function of that behavior was also to get access to that tangible object, the car.

Jennifer Russel: Lastly, the S in our EATS acronym stands for Sensory. Sometimes children will engage in behavior to either obtain sensory information or to avoid sensory information. When a child is trying to get sensory input, you might see all kinds of behaviors. You might see self-stimulatory behavior, behavior that's repeated over and over again. Rocking, jumping, bouncing, banging; we see these behaviors a lot in our classrooms.

Jennifer Russel: When kids are trying to obtain sensory information, you'll probably see repetitive behaviors that might appear unusual and unrelated to anything else that's going on in the class. And you might see these behaviors when there isn't much going on in the classroom, or the child's been working for a long time on one task. That child might be seeking sensory input because they're bored, or no longer engaged in the activity they were working on and they're ready for something new.

Jennifer Russel: You might also see sensory-related behavior when there's a lot going on in loud or crowded places. The child might start yelling or vocalizing to self-regulate and match the environment around them. Or he might start covering his ears to avoid the overwhelming sensory input that he's getting. In extreme cases, a student might bang his head, or engage in other types of self-injurious behaviors to avoid the sensory input.

Jennifer Russel: If you've had very little experience with this, it is jarring, and it's confusing, but make no mistake, that behavior is serving a purpose for that child, and he's trying to communicate something to you.

Jennifer Russel: So, Everybody EATS: Escape, Attention, Tangible, and Sensory, the four common functions of behavior.

Jennifer Russel: By now, you might be thinking, "Um, Jennifer, we can't just let people yell for 20 minutes straight in the cafeteria, or spend the day giving cars and iPads to folks so they stop crying. We can't allow people to lie on the floor all day and do no work."

Jennifer Russel: And my answer to that is, "You're right! We can't." So, what do we do?

Jennifer Russel: Well, I'm first going to say the stock special education answer, which is: it depends.

Jennifer Russel: Depends on the student and what the data tells us. Number one, is take data. Before we can determine what the correct intervention is for a student, we have to take data. If you're unsure how to take data on behavior, I have another acronym to help you think about data, and it's very simple. It's ABC. A for Antecedent, B for Behavior, C for Consequence. Let's break this down.

Jennifer Russel: When you're taking the A or antecedent data, you're looking at what happens just before the behavior occurs. In the example of my friend who fell on the floor whenever I asked him to do work, right before he fell on the floor, he looked at the work on the table. Looking at the work on the table would be the Antecedent.

Jennifer Russel: B, for Behavior. The behavior that my friend displayed was falling on the floor and crying. I would want to take data on how often this was happening. When did it happen? Did it happen only in the morning? Did it happen all day? With what kind of work did it happen? Was it all work, or did it only happen when he was given fine motor work or math work? Those are important things to know.

Jennifer Russel: And C stands for Consequence. The consequence is what happens immediately after the behavior, and the consequence determines the function of the behavior. My friend fell on the floor and escaped or avoided having to do the work that was on the table. So, the function of the behavior was to escape the task. Now, again, you might be thinking, "Great. I know he wants to escape the work, but here's the thing: I need him to do the work. How do I get him to do the work?"

Jennifer Russel: And I'm going to remind you what Janine Fitzgerald said about difficult behavior being the result of an unmet need. "We can't deny the existence of a child's unmet need. If your student has a profound need to escape work activities, you're not going to be able to ignore that need and fast-forward to him doing the work. What you'll need to do first is to teach him an appropriate way to meet the need to escape."

Jennifer Russel: Maybe teach him how to use a break card, or how to transition to the cool-down area. These types of interventions which honor the function of the child's behavior are called function-based interventions. When we use function-based interventions, we look squarely at what the child's behavior is trying to communicate to us, and we teach the child to get that need met in an appropriate way.

Jennifer Russel: Now, over time with explicit teaching, that student will learn how to delay fulfilling the need to escape, which is just a fancy way of saying that that child will learn how to wait. Perhaps with the use of a timer, maybe a First Work, Then Play visual. The supports to teach the skill of waiting will be tailored to the needs of the individual student, but the bottom line is that because waiting is such an abstract concept for many of our students, they're going to need to be taught that critical skill. And perhaps through more ABC data collection, you might discover that it's fine motor activities that are really challenging to the child, and that's part of what's triggering that need to escape. So, you make sure those fine motor tasks are short and developmentally appropriate, and you continue to reinforce the student when they appropriately request a break to meet that need for escape.

Jennifer Russel: Again, we can't deny that a child has a need. Doesn't mean we give into our students' tantrums or give them the cars and the iPads willy-nilly, or allow ourselves to be hit. I often hear people talk about attention-seeking behaviors. But what I hear less about are the function-based interventions that are being implemented to help a child get attention in an appropriate way.

Jennifer Russel: "Oh, she's just crying to get attention. Just ignore her."

Jennifer Russel: Hm. Okay. So, she's communicating that she needs attention in the only way she knows how. What type of function-based intervention can we use to help her meet that need for attention in a more appropriate way? Does she need to learn how to use a help card to request help?

Jennifer Russel: And that brings me to communication. Whenever I go into a classroom and a teacher tells me that she's struggling with a student's behavior, in almost every instance, that student does not have a functional way to communicate. And giving our students a voice is one of the most important jobs that we have as life skills teachers; I truly believe that. All students must have a form of communication whether it's verbal communication, picture symbols, a voice output device. Whatever is determined by the SLP and team as being the most appropriate is what we have to implement all day, every day. We can't stop with, "I tried that, and it didn't work." We have to keep going.

Jennifer Russel: Finally, the last thing I want to talk about is the relationship between behavior and the use of evidence-based practices.

Jennifer Russel: I devoted a whole podcast to the evidence-based practices that we consider to be the essential EBP's that every teacher should have on their tool belt. These are the instructional strategies that are effective in the most settings with the most students, for the most positive outcomes.

Jennifer Russel: When we see teachers using reinforcement, prompting, modeling, task analysis and visual supports with consistency and fidelity, we see students that are learning more, who are calmer, less anxious, and happier. Because when students are taught routines in a way that makes sense to them, when they understand classroom expectations, and when they have access to engaging activities, many of the challenging and disruptive behaviors that teachers say are interfering with instruction, and their sanity, they fall away. And not coincidentally, the teachers are happier and feel more positive about their practice, too.

Jennifer Russel: And that's what we all want. Before signing off, I want to leave you with one of my favorite quotes, and it's from the Autism Speaks website, and it's kind of become a mantra of mine. It says, "It's critical to remember that any individual is doing the best he can do in each situation given his skills, education, physical and emotional state, and past experiences."

Jennifer Russel: Never forget that just like our students, we, too, are lifelong learners. Thank you for all that you do for our students, and thanks for listening.

Jennifer Russel: Don't forget to Like and Subscribe to this podcast on iTunes. Make sure to give us a rating and give us a review. We want to reach as many people as possible.