

What Is It?

Preferred items as a distractor engages a student in an activity or gives the student an object to distract him from the activity or event that typically results in the challenging behavior. The student is usually offered an item that he likes and one that does not interfere with the activity when he is given the request.

When to Use It

- Preferred item as a distractor is most effective for behavior that are maintained by escape for a task or demand.
- Preferred item as a distractor is used when engaging in a preferred activity does not interfere with the student completing the preferred activity. For example, a teacher can play music in the classroom while having her students complete math problems.

Steps to Implementation / How to Do It

After identifying a task the student is trying to escape:



1. Determine if the student can engage in the task while engaging in a preferred item. An individual can wait in a doctor's office (where challenging behavior occurs) while listening to his favorite music.



2. Select objects or activities that do not interfere with the target activity or event but are still preferred by the target student (i.e. playing with a fidget toy or stress ball during group instruction).



3. Engage the student with the preferred item or activity prior to asking the student to engage in the target activity.

Example

Henry typically engages in challenging behavior when transitioning from the bus to the classroom in the morning. He refuses to line up with his classmates outside and tries to hide behind the corner of the building to avoid coming inside. The tier 3 team conducts a functional assessment and determines that Henry engages in challenging behavior to avoid the transition to classroom activities and tasks. The coach and teacher decide to implement a preferred activity/item as a distractor to increase Henry's appropriate behavior during this transition. Henry's teacher, Mrs. Flores, identifies several activities that Henry enjoys. Ms. Flores has observed that Henry likes doing classroom jobs. She decides to assign Henry a special job as a distractor during the transition from the bus to the classroom in the morning. She selects several asks that engage Henry in another activity while transitioning to the classroom. She asks Henry to be the line leader, carry the classroom attendance clipboard, count students as they line up for the transition, and go to the classroom early to assist Mrs. Flores with jobs in the classroom before the students arrive. Henry engages in these activities while passively transitioning to the classroom. After several days of this, she notices that Henry no longer demonstrates challenging behavior during the transition.

How to Increase Effectiveness

- Ensure the target activity or event and the distractor are compatible.
- Identify several preferred items or activities that can be used as distractors. Use new items and vary them to increase the value and novelty of each item. If a student becomes disinterested in an item or activity, select different items to use as distractors.
- When the student is successful in engaging in the activity or event across multiple opportunities, gradually decrease or fade the use of the distractors. Avoid fading too quickly.
- Remember the preferred item must be presented prior to the student engaging in a challenging behavior so to not reinforce the challenging behavior.

Resources

Davis, C. A., Reichle, J. E., & Southard, K. L. (2000). High-Probability requests and a preferred item as a distractor: Increasing successful transitions in children with behavior problems. *Education and Treatment of Children, 23*, 423-440