Chapter 2

What is a Good Intervention?

What makes a good school-based intervention for students with behavioral, academic, or social difficulties? First, it is important to understand what an intervention is and what it is not. For the purposes of this book, interventions are not counseling or non-directive psychotherapies. There are places for these approaches in a school setting, however, their overall effectiveness for behavior problems, social skills deficits, and academic problems are less robust (Stage & Quiroz, 1997; Weiss, Catron, Harris, & Phung, 1999; Weisz, Weiss, Alicke, & Klotz, 1987). Our definition of an intervention is: *the systematic application of research-validated procedures to change behaviors through either teaching new skills or through the manipulation of antecedents and consequences.* It is important that any procedure implemented with students has been research-validated and published in a peer reviewed professional journal. This process insures that the intervention has been implemented with integrity and its’ effectiveness has been demonstrated using an acceptable research design and outcome measures. Most of the interventions reviewed in this book are either single subject or group research designs. Having the procedure “peer reviewed”, means that objective experts in the field have reviewed the intervention research study and found its’ methodology to be acceptable and the procedure effective in changing behaviors.

The second part of our intervention definition involves teaching a new skill or the manipulation of antecedents or consequences. Often, problematic behaviors result from a student’s deficit and his or her inability to perform a needed skill that is required in the school environment. These required skills can include academic, social, and even self-management skills. If the student can be taught the needed skill, then sometimes the problematic behavior will be replaced by a new and more
appropriate behavior. Teaching new skills that are adaptive and serve the student’s needs is an effective intervention.

At other times, antecedent and consequence manipulation are also needed to effectively change a behavior. An antecedent is anything that comes just before a behavior and sets the occasion for that behavior to occur. Antecedents can be persons, places, times, events, or other behaviors. If the antecedent is changed or altered, then sometimes the behavior can also be changed. For example, if thumb-sucking behavior is a problem for a young child, then tracking and changing the event that happens just before the thumb-sucking occurs can change the behavior. For example, the child may pick up his favorite baby blanket and rub it between his fingers just before the thumb sucking starts. The blanket sets the occasion for the thumb-sucking to begin. If the blanket is removed, then the sucking may stop. People, places, and other behaviors are common antecedents to behavior problems in the school setting. There might be one person such as a peer who teases and upsets another student that sets the occasion for a tantrum or outburst. Problematic places for misbehaviors might be unsupervised bathrooms, hallways, or stairwells. Other behaviors that are antecedents to common problem behaviors can be as simple as how an adult makes a request of the student. If the adult yells, gives the request many times without waiting for compliance (nagging), or makes the request from across the room rather than up close, then this ineffective request sets the occasion for noncompliance (Rhode, Jenson, & Reavis, 1992). By changing or altering the antecedent, the behavior can frequently be changed.

Frequently, when we think of interventions we think of consequence-based interventions. These can be consequence rewards like gold stars, candies, or social approval. Or, these consequences can be mildly aversive such as a verbal reprimand or taking a privilege away when the child misbehaves. Consequences fall into three broad categories that sometimes change behaviors. These include positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, and punishment. A positive reinforcement is anything that increases or maintains a behavior by gaining access to that stimulus. For example, if you work harder to get a grade of an A—then the stimulus of an A on an assignment is a positive reinforcement to you. Positive reinforcements can be a tangible object (money), an activity (going dancing), sensory (a massage), or social (attention from peers). If the behavior increases or is maintained to get access to the stimulus (tangible, activity, sensory, or social), then by definition it is a positive reinforcer. Ironically, if a student’s misbehavior is increased or maintained by a teacher’s yelling and negative comments, then the yelling and negative comments are reinforcing to the student by our definition.

A more difficult concept to understand is the concept of negative reinforcement. Like positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement involves increasing or maintaining a behavior. But unlike positive reinforcement in which access to