



Each and Every Child

Volume 5, Issue 4

An e-newsletter by the Iowa Department of Education

Channeling behavior

A focus on reinforcing expected behavior – not wrong behavior

If you are a teacher, you have heard of them before and, quite possibly, have taught them before. We're talking classes with notoriety. You know the sort: A class teeming with highly independent, strong personalities and,

most likely, disruptive behavior.

Annie Dillard had been hearing of a class going through kindergarten and then first grade. Unmanageable. Loud. Unproductive. And they were des-

igned for Dillard's second-grade class at Iowa City's Longfellow Elementary this past fall.

But she remained largely unfazed and undaunted.



Photos by Iowa Department of Education's Deborah Darge

Behavioral analyst Brydie Criswell drops by Rolla Kelly-Harvey's desk.

"I knew there were some issues when I saw them in first grade," Dillard said. "Honestly, I looked at it as a challenge."

There are, of course, challenges. But there are also challenges that are insurmountable.

By January, Dillard called for reinforcements: She got a paraeducator to help in the classroom. And she reached out to the district behavior analysts, Courtney Micheel and Brydie Criswell.

"When we came out to do our first observation, we would describe it as pretty chaotic, very disruptive, very loud," said Micheel, a former special education teacher. "The students were pretty much acting like there wasn't a

Continued on next page

teacher in the room.”

“The teacher was struggling with these four boys in particular,” said Criswell, also a former special education teacher. “They put the four boys at the same table. The para was working very hard at redirecting them, taking items away – there was a lot of action going on.”

One of the children, 8-year-old Rolla Kelly-Harvey, was exhibiting disruptive behavior 75 percent of the time during his language arts period.

“Before the intervention, if things were frustrating for him, there would be a total meltdown, physical aggression and property destruction,” Dillard said.

For Rolla, one of his triggers was writing. When he became exasperated with the task, he would act up.

“Rolla would be with the para and when he started being disruptive, she would take him off so he could

read his favorite book,” Criswell said. “He would come back to class and be more settled down for a brief period of time. However, from a behavior standpoint, it was the reinforcing the wrong behavior: ‘I can do the wrong thing to be able to do my favorite things.’”

Rolla’s parents, Brad Kelly and Bradley Harvey, said the situation wasn’t much better at home.

“For example, when it came time to brush his teeth, he would become frustrated,” Kelly said. “It became this whole big production. It took so much time. We would have to go through the finite details of everything, and then tell him what he should expect afterwards.”

Rolla’s siblings, 11-year-old CeCe and 7-year-old Timmy, were being short-shrifted from their parents’ attention, Kelly said.

“We would talk about how as a group we could support Rolla,” he said. “It felt like they were missing out because there was all this attention given to Rolla.”

Back at school, Micheel and Criswell were rolling up their sleeves.

“We needed to stop reinforcing the disruptive behaviors,” Criswell said. “We wanted the students to access reinforcement for appropriate behavior, to get attention for doing the expected behavior.”

“The other goal was to access instruction,” Micheel said. “We wanted to make sure it was a productive learning environment for everyone.”

The team tackled the situation in mul-



Annie Dillard

iple steps.

“Our first step was to look at baseline data without changing anything,” Criswell said. “We wanted to record appropriate and inappropriate behavior to see exactly where they were so we could measure growth. As we were establishing baselines, we were also conducting preference assessments



Courtney Micheel



Brydie Criswell

to determine what might reinforce appropriate behavior: What is your favorite thing to do? What is your favorite food? Some of the top choices were watching brief episodes of Dr. Who on YouTube, playing I-pad games, chewing gum, or drinking a glass of root beer.”

Systematically, the behavior analysts launched interventions on one student at a time.

“Before we would initiate the intervention, we would detail exactly what the behaviors should be for the 45 minutes of language arts instruction, such as eyes on the teacher, completing work, staying seated, raising your hand to speak and share,” Criswell said.

The initial focus of the first 45 minutes of the day is intentional.

“The classroom teacher identified the hardest part of the day as being first



Rolla listens attentively to instructions from teacher Annie Dillard.



Rolla works on a math problem.

thing in the morning, language arts,” Criswell said. “If the first 45 minutes were bad, the rest of the day most likely would deteriorate.”

Once the team shared expectations with Rolla, Micheel said, “We worked on setting a goal. He had to achieve a certain percentage of time during language arts where he exhibited the appropriate behaviors. If he met that goal, he would be able to access the I-pad games and root beer or Oreos.”

Clarifying the paraeducators’ role was critical to this process.

“The para’s role had to change,” Criswell said. “Instead of just keeping them on task, she would have to sit down with the child at the beginning of school and talk about the day’s goals. The goals would be set by the student and the teacher.”

In Rolla’s case, he set his goal for 100 percent – that is to say, exhibiting ap-

propriate behavior without wavering for all of language arts. This was not a goal the behavior analysts expected Rolla or any other student to meet, but allowed each student to determine his own goals for the day.

“As long as they hit 80 percent, they could access their reinforcers,” Criswell said.

Today, just a couple months into the intervention, Rolla is exhibiting appropriate behavior between the mid-90s and 100 percent.

And when it comes to one of his particular triggers?

“I was observing him recently when they were writing,” Criswell said. “You could tell he was really trying, and I was thinking, ‘this could go well, or very poorly.’ You could tell he was staying calm and thinking hard. Annie came over to see how he was doing, and the writing block was broken.

He wrote and wrote and wrote. There wasn't a sign of his aggression. He now feels reinforced."

Criswell stresses that working with behavior challenges requires a different way of viewing things in today's society.

"Some might say, 'why should I reward behavior when they should do it anyway?'" she said. "One of the analogies we use in that discussion is that I am rewarded for coming to work by getting a paycheck. While I love my work, I wouldn't come every day if I didn't get paid. Reinforcement happens all the time. It is not a bad thing. It is a part of life."

Dillard says the behavior needs to be reinforced at home, as well.

"Your job as a teacher is to take a child from his environment and teach him," she said. "There is a saying that it takes a village. The parent and teacher need to come together to ensure the student is making progress. The teacher-parent has got to be a partnership."

Kelly agrees wholeheartedly. And the Kelly-Harvey family has noticed substantial changes in their lives.

"We went from the end of January where I would come up to the school all of the time, and now we are going on week 5 and I haven't had a call from the school," he said. "I asked Rolla what had changed, and he said, 'I don't know, I'm just controlling my anger.'"

And brushing his teeth? No longer a problem.

School has changed substantially for the child whose favorite subjects are



From left, Timmy, father Brad Kelly, CeCe and Rolla.



Rolla rates school a perfect 10. That's up from three just three months ago.

math and drawing.

On a scale of 1 being the worst, and 10 being the best, what did you think of school before January?

Rolla holds up three fingers.

And today?

Ten.

Emily's vision of Oz

Most anyone growing up in the United States knows the story of a girl named Dorothy who finds herself blown into the land of Oz. But you should see it the way Emily Groves sees it.

Emily, a 7-year-old student at Pleasant View in Bettendorf, was born blind. But her vision of the Wizard of Oz is something to behold: A scarecrow with tubular clothing. A tiny cowardly lion with webbed feet. And a Dorothy who bears a striking resemblance to Emily.

Emily's vision came to life this year in a commercial highlighting a Comcast feature that enables the visually impaired to choose what they are going to watch on television. The commercial has been airing nationwide (including during the Oscars).

Emily, the daughter of Tyler and Katie Groves, went up against great odds to end up starring in the commercial, titled simply "Emily's Oz."

"It was a casting call in which the company was doing a nationwide search," mother Katie said. "We received a flyer that said it was looking for a child who is completely blind, articulate, imaginative and loves the arts."

With a great deal of reluctance, the Groves set up a series of interviews. In the end, Emily beat out 70 other finalists, and Comcast flew the family to California twice for filming.

"It was a very positive experience," Katie said. "It was a whirlwind, surreal, and wonderful."

Despite her Oz experience, Emily remains solidly on Iowa soil, where her mother says she works on her Braille, her mobility, her day-to-day school work. She also continues to grow in making her own choices.

"She is really becoming independent," Katie said. "Her paraeducator at school says she is more like a secretary to Emily than anything else."



Screen captures from "Emily's video"