

The ABC Every Teacher Runs

Watson's legacy, stripped of its excesses: behaviour follows antecedents and consequences. You are arranging both all day, deliberately or not.

A Antecedents: set the stage

Most behaviour is triggered by what happens just before it. Change the trigger and you rarely need the consequence.

In class: The argument starts at unstructured entry. Fix the entry routine, not the arguers.

B Behaviour: describe, don't diagnose

Name what you can see and count, not character. Countable behaviour can be changed and measured.

In class: Called out four times in ten minutes, not 'attention-seeking child'.

C Consequences: what follows, grows

Whatever reliably follows a behaviour strengthens or weakens it, including your attention.

In class: If calling out reliably earns a response and hands-up earns waiting, you are training calling out.

+ Reinforce the replacement

Removing a behaviour leaves a vacuum. Teach and reinforce what to do instead.

In class: Catch the same learner with their hand up within two minutes, and respond first time.

Reinforcement That Works

Four rules that separate effective reinforcement from sticker inflation.

Immediate beats delayed

Reinforcement works on the behaviour it follows closely. Friday's certificate shapes nothing on Monday.

Say: "Quiet word within a minute: that start was exactly what we agreed. Keep going."

Specific beats general

Name the behaviour, not the child's goodness. The behaviour is what you want repeated.

Say: "You waited and put your hand up twice in a row. That is the habit."

Attention is the strongest currency

For most learners, adult and peer attention outvalues any token. Spend it on the behaviour you want.

Say: "Audit yourself for one lesson: which behaviours earned your attention?"

Thin the schedule deliberately

Continuous reinforcement starts a habit; intermittent maintains it. Plan the fade like any scaffold.

Say: "Week one: every time. Week three: sometimes, unpredictably. The habit holds."

Before You React, Check the Antecedent

A 30-second routine for recurring behaviour: most fixes live before the behaviour, not after it.

1. When exactly?

Time, lesson phase, day. Recurring behaviour usually keeps a schedule.

In class: Always in the transition from carpet to tables. Never during the tables work itself.

2. What happens just before?

The instruction, the peer, the task type, the noise level: the trigger is usually visible.

In class: It follows multi-step verbal instructions with nothing written down.

3. What does the behaviour earn?

Escape from the task, adult attention, peer laughter: the pay-off maintains it.

In class: Being sent out removes the writing task. The behaviour is working perfectly.

4. Change the cheapest link

Usually the antecedent: adjust the trigger, pre-teach the moment, or remove the pay-off.

In class: Instructions now written AND spoken; the task starts with one doable line.

A Behaviourist Hygiene Check

The basics, honestly audited. Most behaviour systems fail on consistency, not design.

Antecedents

- Routines for entry, transitions and exits are taught, not assumed.
- Instructions are visible as well as spoken.
- Known trigger points have a planned adjustment.

Consequences

- Wanted behaviour earns attention faster than unwanted behaviour.
- Praise is immediate, specific and true.
- Agreed consequences happen every time, calmly, without renegotiation.
- Sanctions never remove the learning the behaviour was escaping.

The system

- Every adult in the room runs the same rules the same way.
- Replacement behaviours are taught, not just demanded.
- One recurring behaviour is currently being tracked with counts, not impressions.

Watson and Behaviourism: A 5-Minute Honest Briefing

What survives from behaviourism's founder, and what should stay buried.

■ The useful residue is real

Clear antecedents, consistent consequences and explicit teaching, behaviourism's classroom descendants, carry solid evidence: management practices predict engagement, and DI programmes show consistent positive effects.

■ Watson himself overclaimed wildly

The 'dozen healthy infants' boast was rhetoric, not finding. Behaviour is shaped by environment AND cognition, biology and context: no serious modern account is purely behaviourist.

■ Little Albert is an ethics lesson

Watson's most famous study conditioned fear in a baby with no consent and no deconditioning. It belongs in teaching as a cautionary tale about research ethics, not as a model of learning.

■ The honest caveat

Behaviourism explains behaviour frequency, not understanding: rewards can shape compliance while leaving learning untouched, and extrinsic rewards for already-enjoyed activities can backfire. Use the toolkit for routines and climate, not as a theory of thought.

Evidence base

Gage, N.A., Scott, T. and Hirn, R. (2018). The relationship between teachers' implementation of classroom management practices and student behavior in elementary school. *Behavioral Disorders*.

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Watson, J.B. (1913). Psychology as the behaviorist views it. *Psychological Review*.