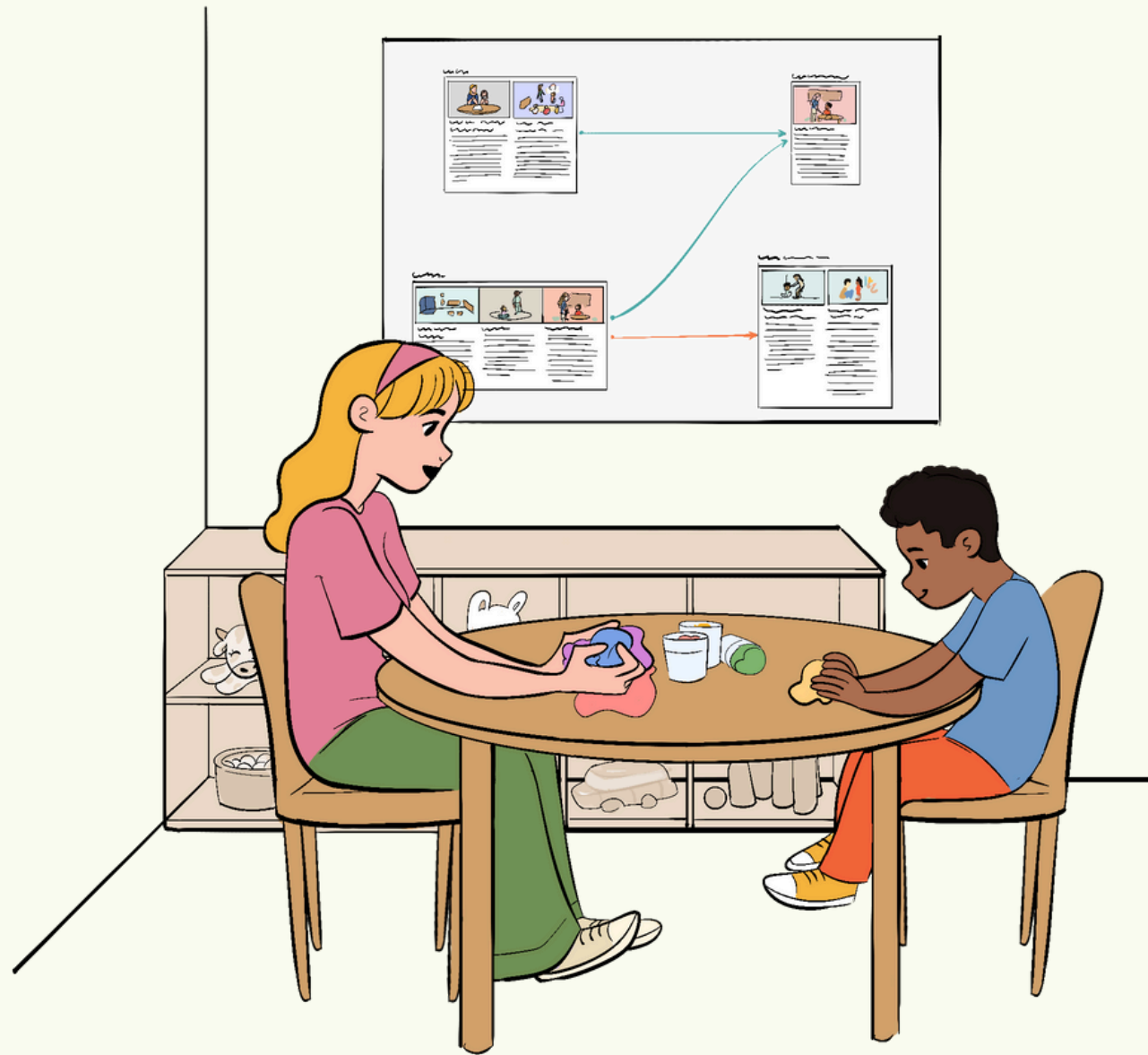


Lesson 2

Setting Effective Behavior Reduction Goals



Setting effective behavior reduction goals starts with clear, observable, and measurable language so everyone on the team knows exactly what success looks like. In this lesson, you'll learn how to write strong intervention goals and consider developmental norms, using research on behavior in neurotypical children to help ensure goals are fair.

ABA Visualized

Sample content from our
[BCBA Supervision Curriculum](#)

Test content outline items covered

- H.1. Develop intervention goals in observable and measurable terms.

Setting fair goals

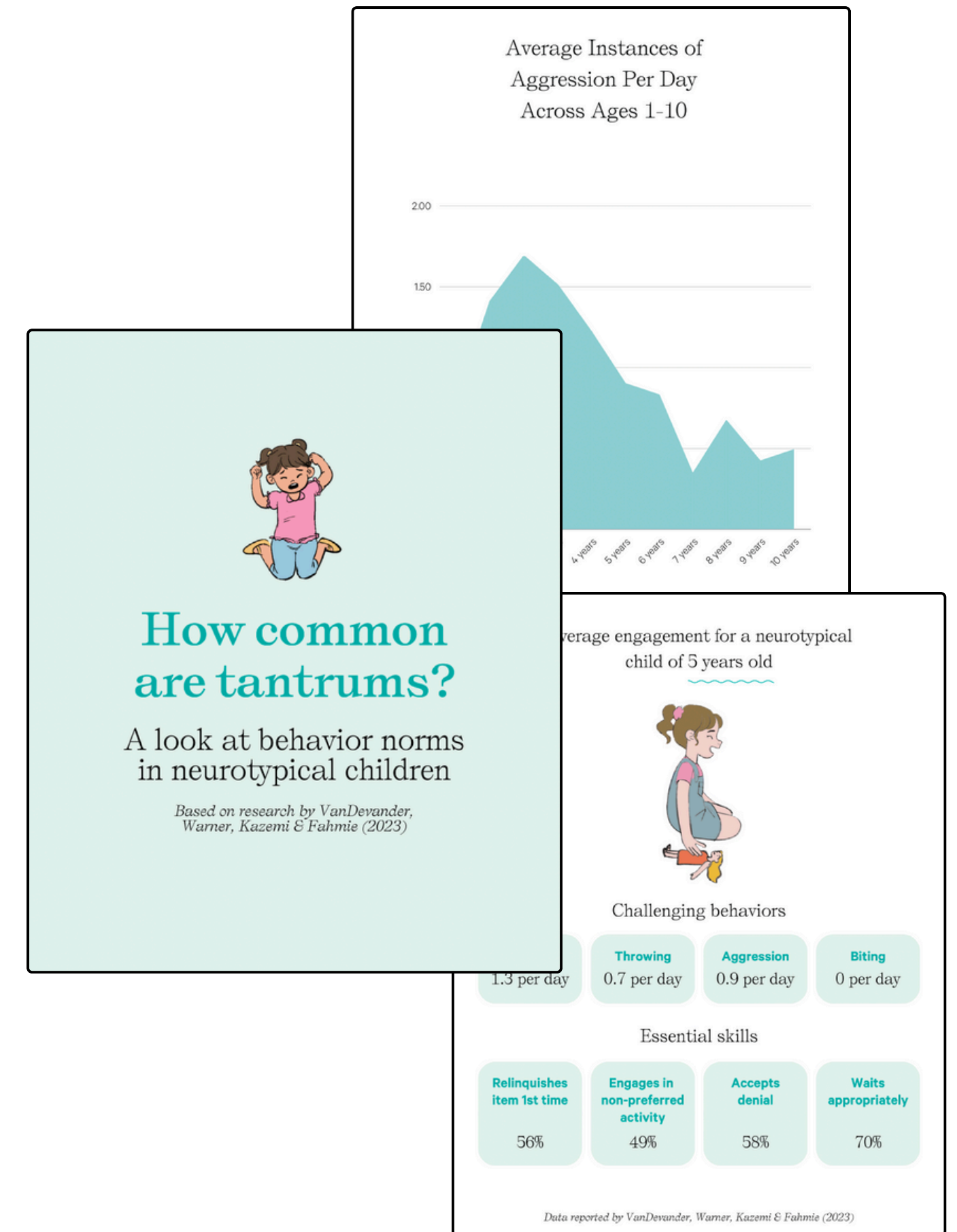
When setting behavior reduction goals, it's important to consider what is typical and developmentally appropriate for children the same age as your learner. The Behavior Norms in Neurotypical Children resource provides research-based information on the range and frequency of behaviors commonly seen in neurotypical peers.

By consulting these norms, you can

- Ensure your goals are realistic, fair, and not targeting behaviors that are typical for the learner's age group.
- Avoid over-pathologizing behaviors that fall within developmental expectations.
- Lead evidence-based parent coaching discussions on childhood norms.

Tip

Review this downloadable resource when developing reduction goals to guide your expectations and recommendations.



Socially significant

A goal is socially significant if it creates meaningful change in the learner's life.

- ~ Teaching a learner to request basic needs using an AAC device.
- ~ Teaching a learner to safely cross the street.
- ~ Building independence by teaching meal preparation skills.

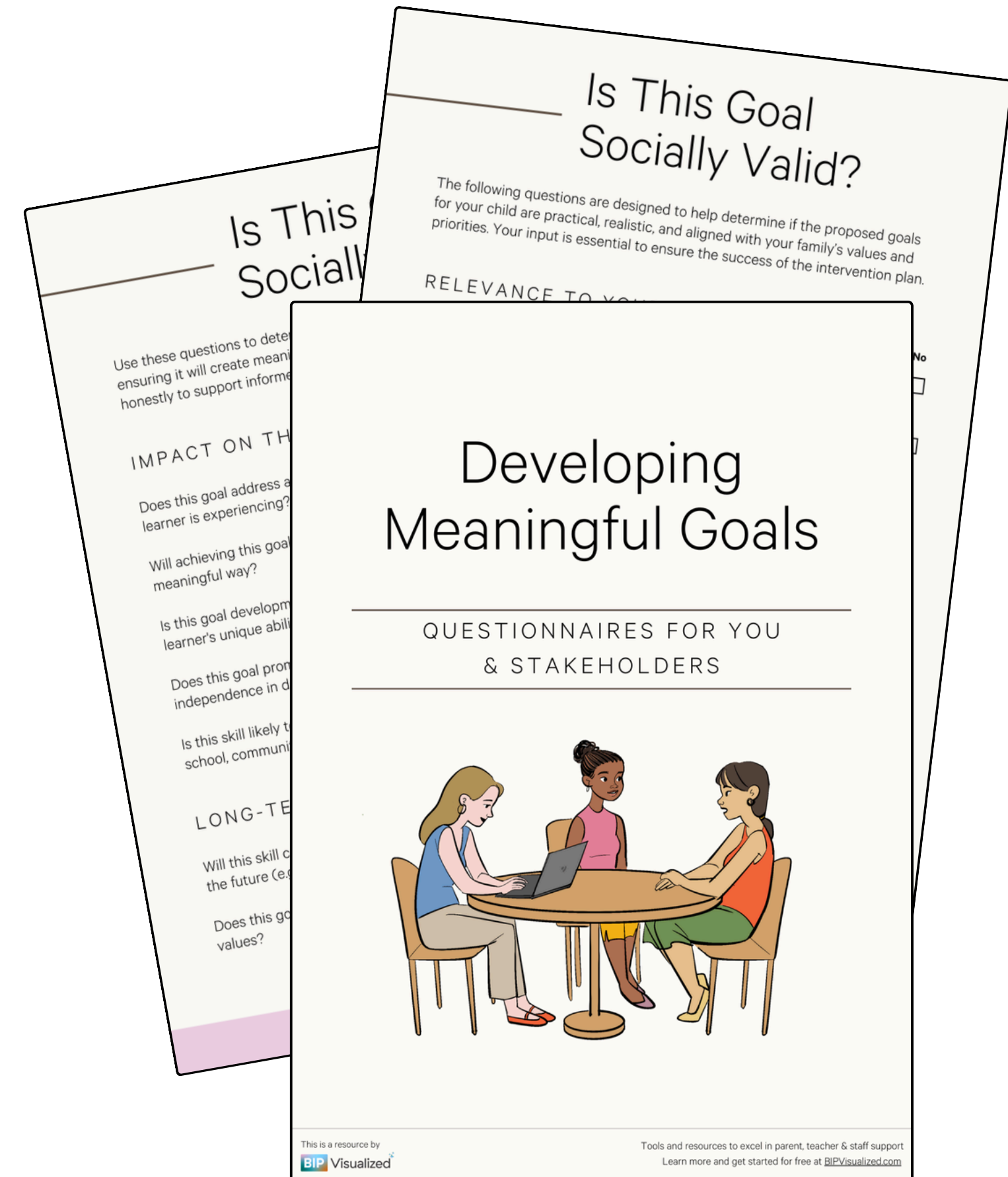
Socially valid

A goal is socially valid if those responsible for implementing it find it feasible and relevant.

- ~ A morning routine goal manageable within the family's schedule.
- ~ Strategies that build motivation and are feasible in a busy classroom.
- ~ Teaching parents how to calmly and consistently respond to a behavior of concern.

Questionnaires for you & stakeholders

I'm sharing two questionnaires from BIP Visualized to help you check the social validity and significance of your goals!



Setting meaningful goals

Once you've determined that a behavior is socially valid to target—and have considered what's developmentally typical—it's time to set clear goals that guide meaningful change.

For each challenging behavior you target, develop

- a behavior reduction goal
- a replacement behavior goal

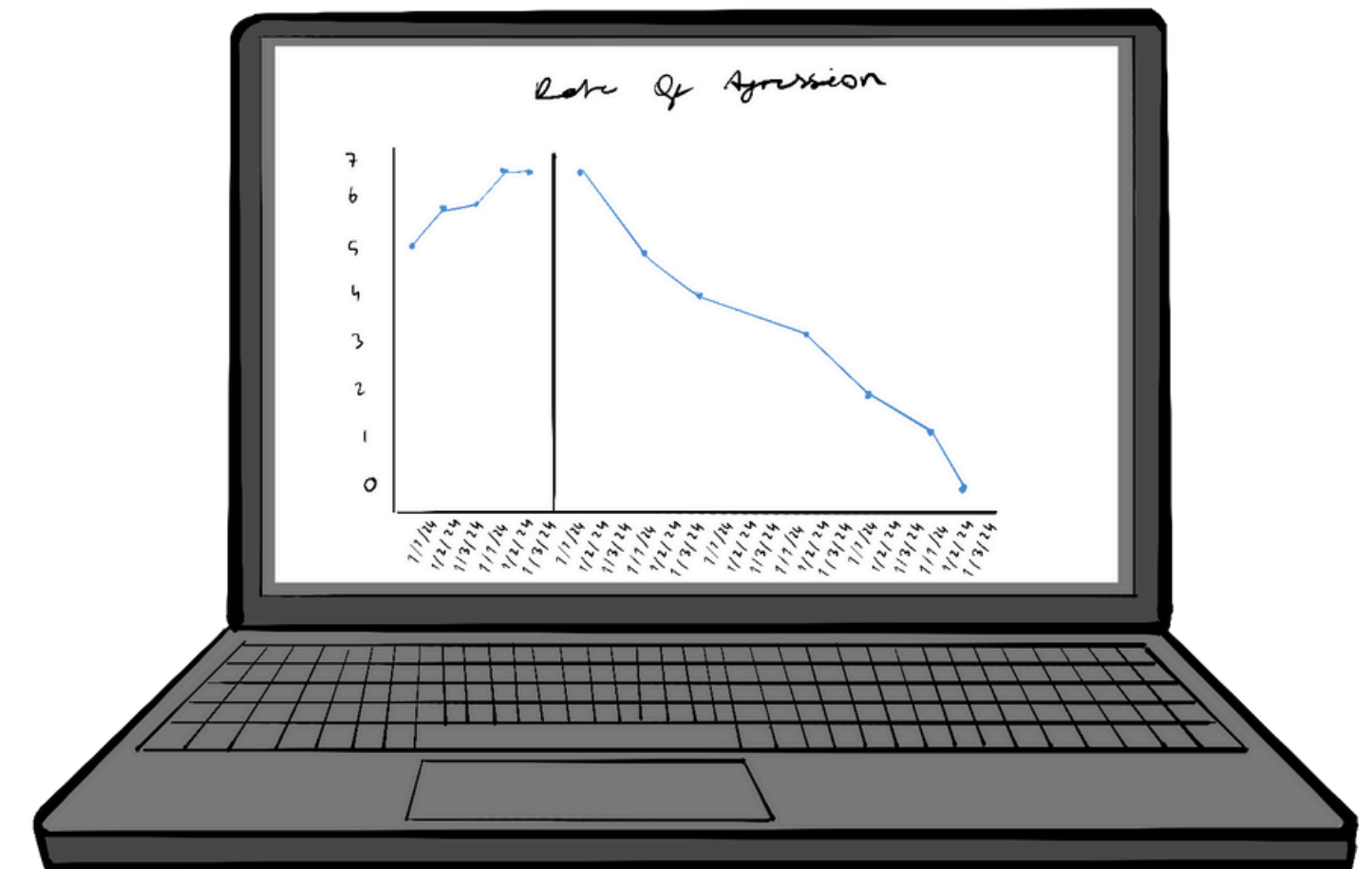
A behavior reduction goal sets an objective, measurable outcome for decreasing the rate or severity of the challenging behavior (for example, reducing aggression to the developmental age norm).

A replacement behavior goal defines the new skill the learner will use instead to get their needs met.



Think about it

Why is it important that we prioritize teaching a replacement behavior when we are aiming to reduce a challenging behavior?



Setting meaningful goals

Scenario

You're supporting a 6th grade student who often refuses independent work. When given an assignment, the student frequently pushes the work away, puts his head down, or doodles instead of engaging with the task. Baseline data shows this happens during about 65% of independent work periods.

When setting goals, consider what is typical and appropriate for elementary students during independent work. Rather than expecting 100% engagement, aim for a goal that reflects realistic expectations for students of the same age in similar settings.

Practice

Using the template below, write a behavior reduction goal for this student:

By (date), the student will decrease rates of (task refusal) to (#)% of independent work periods across (mastery criteria).

Meaningful goals should balance high expectations with what's developmentally appropriate.



Setting meaningful goals

Scenario

You're supporting an elementary student who currently throws objects about 20 times per hour.

It's important to remember that making progress doesn't always mean reducing a behavior to zero—especially when starting at a high baseline. Instead, set a goal that is ambitious yet realistic, and takes into account what's developmentally appropriate for the setting and age.

Practice

Using the template below, write a behavior reduction goal for this student:

By (date), the student will decrease rates of (throwing objects) to (#) per hour across (mastery criteria).



Setting meaningful goals

Scenario

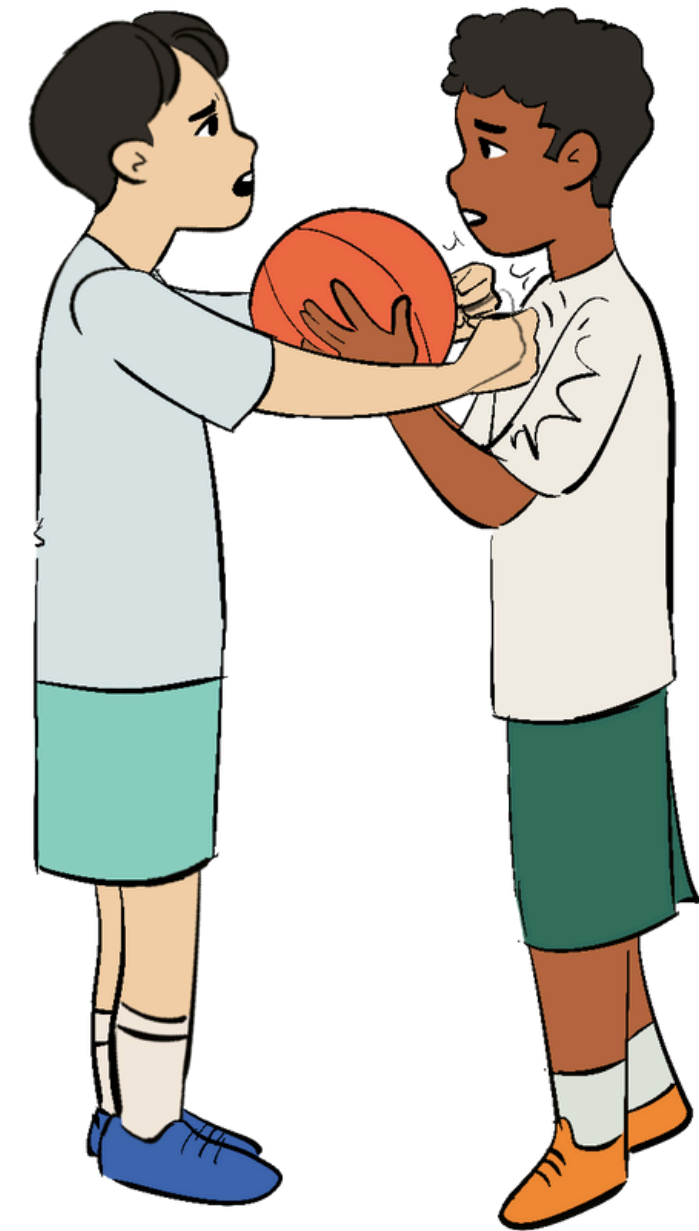
You're working with a 14-year-old whose baseline data shows hitting others about 2 times per hour.

Because this behavior is aggressive and poses a risk to others' safety, it's appropriate to set a goal of zero occurrences per hour. At this age, neurotypical peers typically engage in zero instances of aggression, so this goal is socially valid. Additionally, as students get older, the potential for harm and escalation increases if aggression toward peers occurs, making it even more important to aim for complete elimination.

Practice

Using the template below, write a behavior reduction goal for this learner:

By (date), the learner will decrease rates of (hitting others) to 0 per hour across (mastery criteria).



Writing replacement goals

Whenever you target a reduction in challenging behavior, it's just as important to teach and measure a positive replacement skill.

A strong replacement behavior goal should

- Clearly state the new skill or behavior you want the learner to use instead of the problem behavior.
- Specify the opportunity—the situation or context in which the skill should be used (e.g., when presented with academic work, when sharing toys with peers, when needing help with a task).
- Be observable and measurable, so anyone on the team can recognize when the learner is using the new skill.
- Include mastery criteria (how often, how independently, across which settings, etc.).

Template

When (opportunity), learner will (replacement skill) in (mastery criteria).

Example

When needing assistance (e.g. with a task, with reaching/opening something, with navigating a conflict, etc.), the learner will ask for “help” using their AAC device in at least 80% of opportunities across two consecutive weeks.



Writing replacement goals

What if there are multiple “correct” responses?

Sometimes, there isn't just one “right” way for a learner to respond in a situation. It's important to recognize and reinforce a range of appropriate skills that meet the learner's needs and promote flexibility.

In these cases, your goal can include several acceptable responses. Here are some examples:

- When presented with an academic task, the learner will either independently initiate the task within 2 minutes or raise their hand to ask for help.
- When encountering a peer conflict, the learner will either independently use the pre-taught problem-solving steps or seek out a teacher for assistance.
- After making a mistake on an art project or other activity, the learner will either use pre-taught self-regulation skills or be receptive to co-regulation support from a trusted staff member.



Think about it

What other examples can you think of?



Writing replacement goals

Let's think back to the scenario

You're supporting a 6th grade student who often refuses independent work. When given an assignment, the student frequently pushes the work away, puts his head down, or doodles instead of engaging with the task. Baseline data shows this happens during about 65% of independent work periods.



Think about it

What would you choose as the functionally equivalent replacement behavior for this student?

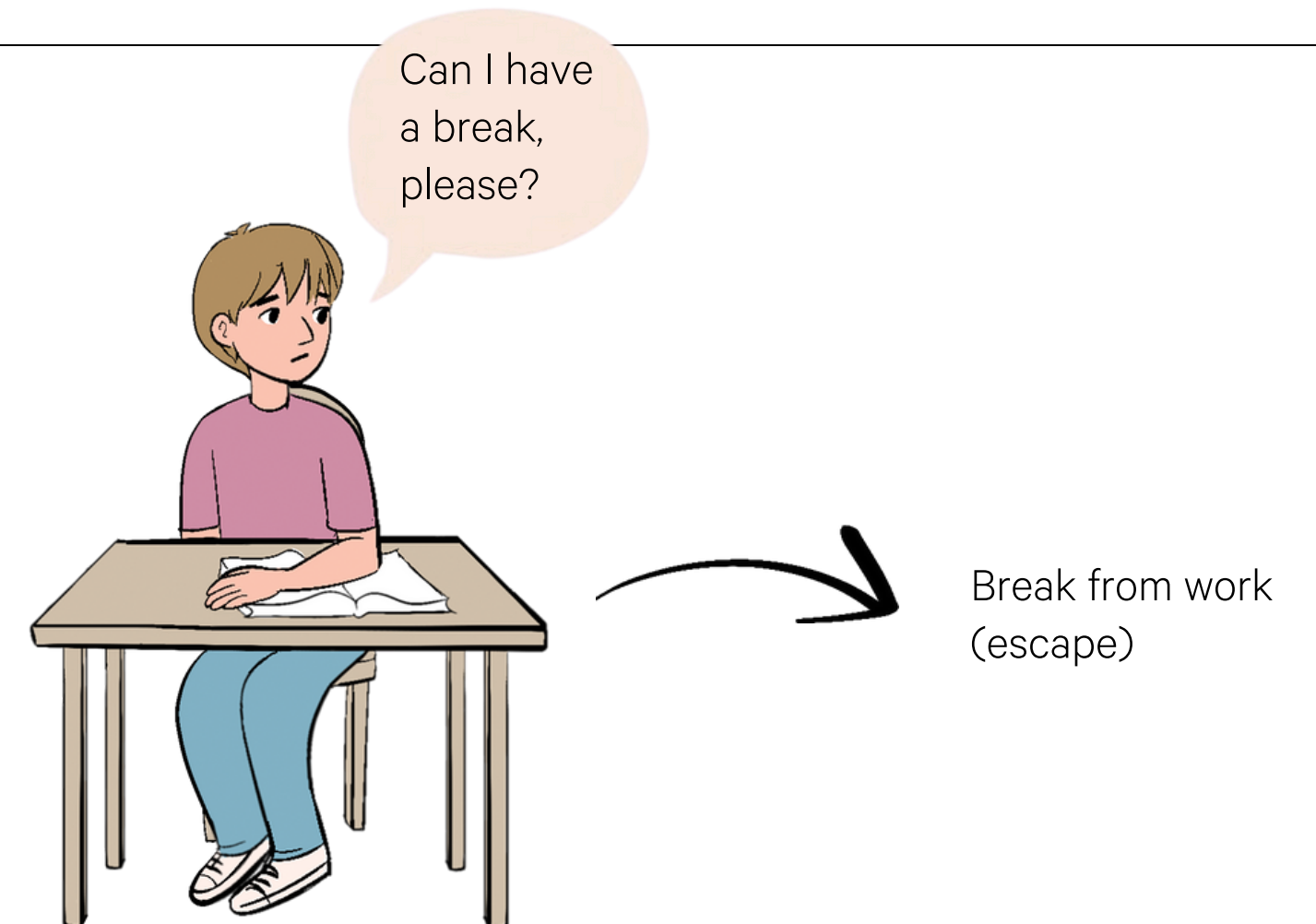
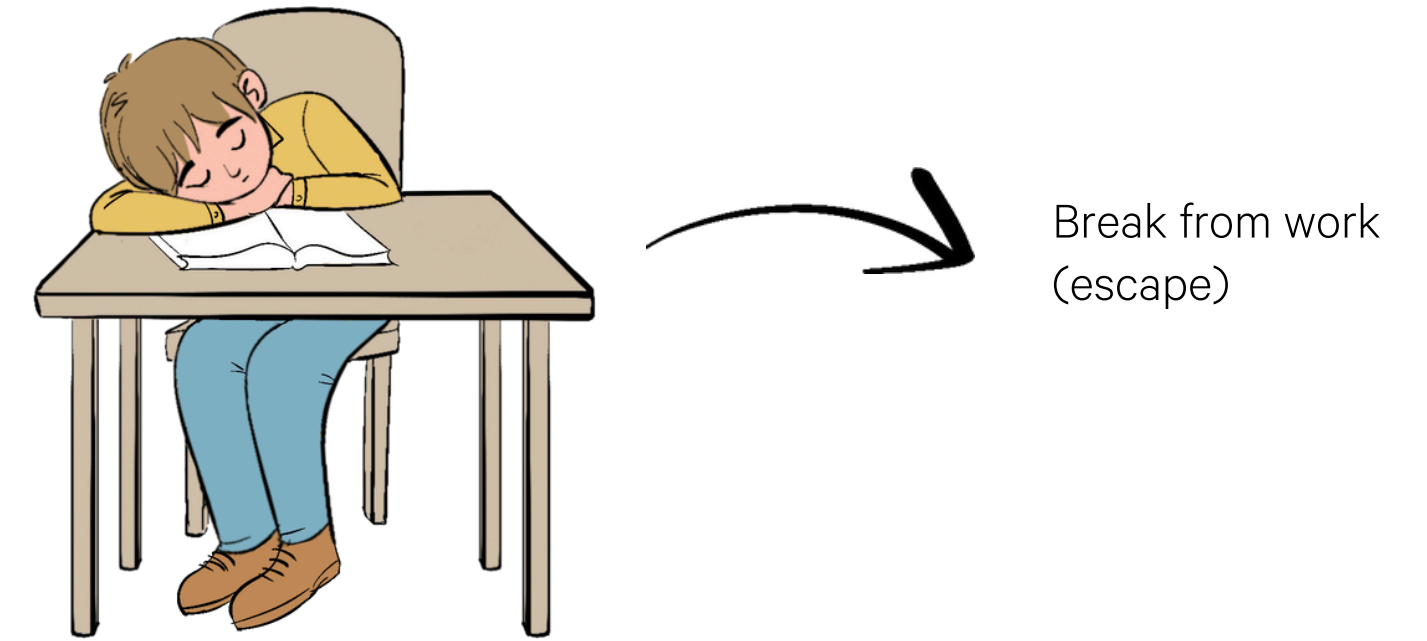


Writing replacement goals

Asking for a break would be a functionally equivalent replacement behavior for this student—it serves the same escape function as the off-task behaviors.

Practice

Write a goal for this skill that is observable and measurable.



Writing replacement goals

It's important to select a replacement skill that isn't just theoretically correct, but also practical and likely to be used by the learner.

Pop quiz

What is this concept called?



Think about it

Which behavior will help this student escape from work more quickly and easily—passively looking out the window, or actively asking for a break? (Hint: Pay attention to the response effort required for each!)



vs.

Can I have
a break,
please?



Writing replacement goals

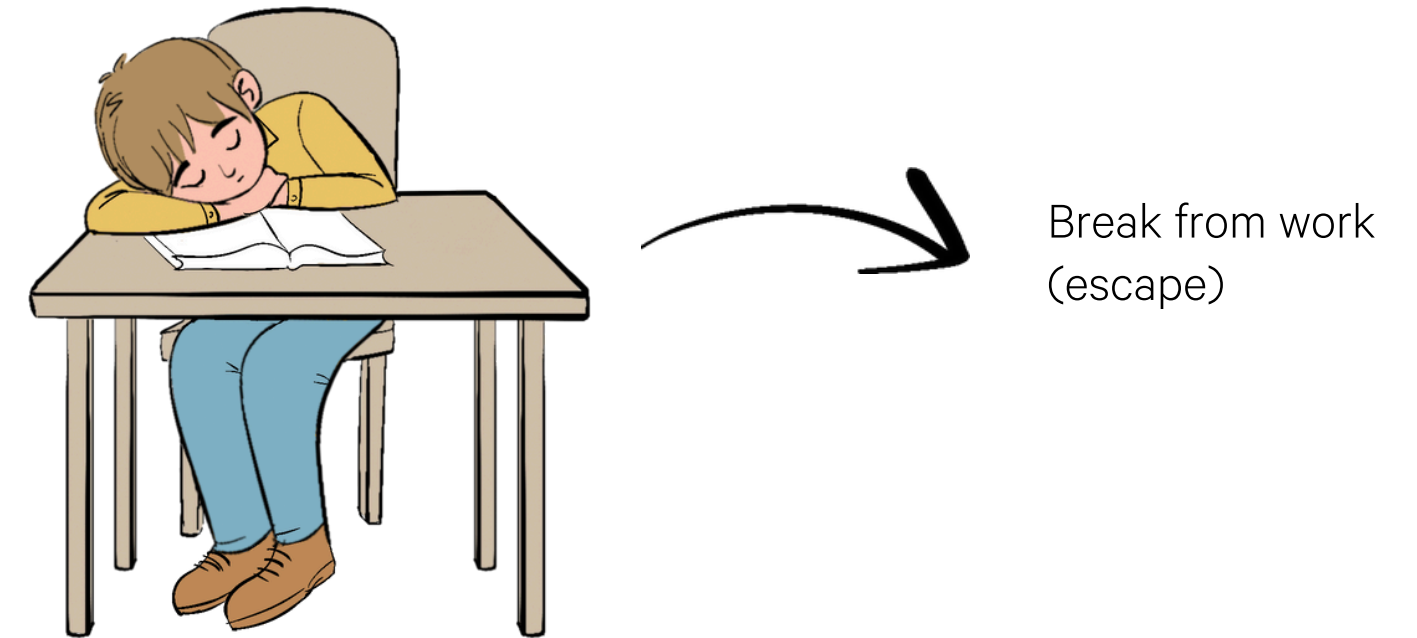
The answer to the pop quiz is Matching Law: learners are more likely to choose behaviors that are reinforced more often, more easily, or with less effort.

Considering this

We should make the replacement behavior more likely to be used by making it as easy and efficient as possible. For example, switching to a break card that the student can simply hold up or place on their desk makes it much easier for them to appropriately request a break when they need one.

Practice

Write a goal for this skill that is observable and measurable.



Homework

Task 1

Reflect on a recent case where you taught a replacement skill. Was the skill easier, faster, or more effective than the original challenging behavior? If not, what would you change to lower the response effort and increase the likelihood the learner will use it?

Task 2

Select one of your current clients with a behavior plan. Review their replacement goals.

- Are the replacement behaviors written in observable and measurable terms?
- Do the goals seem fair and developmentally appropriate for this learner, given their age and setting?
- Are there multiple “correct” responses that could be included as acceptable alternatives for the learner (e.g., asking for help or using a self-regulation strategy)?
- If you find areas for improvement, rewrite the goals to be clearer, more measurable, or more inclusive of other valid responses.

Task 3

Scenario: A parent or teacher wants a behavior reduced to zero, but that isn’t realistic for the learner’s age (use the provided behavior norms resource for reference).

Option 1:

Record yourself role-playing a response to the parent or teacher (with a friend, colleague, or on your own).

Option 2:

Prepare to role-play this conversation in our next supervision meeting.

Focus on explaining what’s typical for the learner’s age, why fair goals matter, and how setting realistic expectations supports progress.