

Week Three: Case Study #1

Helene was an overweight high school senior. Physically, she was unable to keep pace with other students, and she was sensitive about her looks. She concocted one excuse after another to avoid physical education. When excuses did not work, she acted up, knowing that the gym teacher would tell her to sit by herself on the bleachers.

Helene's "misbehavior" fulfilled a need: It helped her avoid embarrassment. Nothing was wrong with her wanting to avoid humiliation. The problem was her method. Helene needed physical education, but she also needed to preserve her fragile body image. Helene's homeroom teacher had a heart-to-heart discussion with Helene and uncovered her secret. Her parents were also consulted, and they revealed that Helene's problem behaviors occurred mainly in the classes that preceded and followed physical education.

Understanding that Helene's actions were an attempt to avoid embarrassment sensitized her teachers to Helene's predicament. Her physical education and homeroom teachers met with the principal to discuss how to support Helene while still ensuring that she met state physical education requirements. They agreed that obesity was a school-wide problem, so they decided to pilot a physical education class similar to a commercial physical fitness program. The new course emphasized aerobic workouts coupled with nutritional education. Once the program was made available to seniors, Helene and eight other students signed up (Henley, 2010).

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1. A key premise of functional behavior is that misbehavior serves a practical purpose (i.e., function) for the student. In the above case study, please indicate what you think was the function of the misbehaviors of Helene.

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2. Please explain how you might have handled Helene's behaviors differently if you were her physical education teacher.