



# Finding Common Ground: Working Together to Resolve Behavioral

Adapted July, 20018 by Victoria McMullen and Meme Hieneman for Home & Community PBS from the following 2010 article in Parenting Special Needs Magazine:

<http://parentingspecialneeds.org/article/299>

Maria is a 34-year-old woman who has recently moved into a supported living arrangement with two roommates and 24-hour staff support. She has developmental delays that make it difficult for Maria to understand social cues, independently complete daily activities, and express her needs clearly. Maria works in a sheltered workshop five full-days per week with an 8:1 staff ratio. Maria's parents and 28-year-old sister visit with her weekly, often taking her shopping or out to dinner.

## Different Settings, Different Issues and Approaches

Maria's family has done everything they can to promote her language and self-determination skills. In her family home, Maria was always encouraged to communicate by being given choices in daily routines and her family offered assistance or reduced demands whenever Maria requested these things. At the sheltered workshop, Maria has done packaging tasks with minimal direction for several years. Lately, she has started to refuse to work after lunch, saying she wants to go home. Staff are ignoring Maria's requests and resistance to tasks, however, they are concerned about how they should respond.

In her new living arrangement, Maria rarely completes activities such as brushing her hair or helping with household chores and expects to get attention and items she wants almost immediately. Maria's house manager

acknowledges the importance of providing choices and honoring communication, but all residents are expected to complete the majority of their self-care independently and participate in the upkeep of the household. The staffing schedule is organized to provide minimal support during morning routines and more support in the evening for cooking, chores and community outings. In the evening, Maria is participating in more activities and routines, but often cries, or sits down on the floor and refuses to move when she is frustrated.

Maria's employer is confused by her behavior as she has always been a good worker and her current job is one she has been doing for a while. While she seems happy to see her co-workers each morning, her afternoon work refusal is now becoming problematic. Ignoring the problem obviously isn't working and Maria is at risk of being suspended from work. The staff at Maria's residence are similarly concerned. They are concerned that Maria's unwillingness to complete required activities is affecting others who live in the home. Maria's family do not understand why support staff are not more supportive of Maria and are worried about both placements.

## Importance of Collaboration

The different perspectives and approaches adopted by people working with Maria at home, work and in the community has led to conflict between them and produced frustration for

Maria. Each of their viewpoints are valid, but there is very little consistency in their approaches. Contradictions such as these are not uncommon. That is why collaboration, or working together, is important when trying to develop a positive behavior support plan.

Collaboration involves the development of shared goals and responsibility through open communication. The result is behavior support plans that incorporate multiple perspectives and can be adapted across environments. Some tips for maximizing collaboration when creating a behavior plan include:

- ***Maintain focus on the person and what will make her more successful and content (rather than getting bogged down in the conflict between the adults).***
- ***Create mechanisms for open communication, listening carefully to gain insight into different (and equally valuable) perspectives.***
- ***Develop shared goals by identifying “points of consensus” to which all supporters agree.***
- ***Find out what is driving a person’s behavior by paying attention to situations surrounding it and reactions that follow it.***
- ***Develop a behavior plan that is based on this understanding, allows the person to achieve all the valued skills, incorporates all the most successful strategies, and that is flexible and easy to use in different settings.***
- ***Monitor the outcomes of the plan – make sure it is working and adjust it when necessary.***

## **An Integrated Approach for Maria**

Once Maria’s mother and support staff acknowledged each others’ viewpoints and agreed to work together, they determined that both communication and independence were important for Maria, and that the strategies they were using at her new home and at work could be blended to help Maria be more successful. For example, Maria’s mother and

house manager made a list of activities and routines they felt were reasonable to expect Maria to complete every day. Since Maria was not accustomed to cooperating with routines, they decided to start small (especially at home), adding expectations over time. Maria was allowed to take brief breaks from these tasks when she asked appropriately, however, she was still required to complete them before doing something she enjoyed. They incorporated choices and additional visual cues into the morning routine and providing additional staffing for one month until Maria was more settled in her new environment. Because staff at the sheltered workshop knew that the transition from the family home had been less than smooth and that Maria missed her family, she was given an opportunity to call a family member at lunch time every day and support staff was also provided with a social story to help talk to Maria about her new living situation.

Creating these consistent expectations and encouraging both communication and cooperation have helped Maria adjust to her new home and settle into a regular routine. Finding common ground and working together to effectively support a person with developmental delays is essential to success. Maria’s family and support staff provide an example of how collaboration can enrich people’s lives.

Hieneman, M., Persons, K. E., & Sergay, J. (2006). *Parenting with positive behavior support: A practical guide to resolving your person’s difficult behavior*. Paul H. Brookes.