

A BehaviorSchool.com Guide

The School BCBA's First 90 Days A Survival Guide

From Surviving to Thriving

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Introduction

Welcome to your new role as a school-based Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA). The first three months in a new school system are a critical period that can set the tone for your entire tenure. It's a time filled with immense opportunity, but it can also be overwhelming.

You may feel pressure to immediately "fix" problem behaviors and demonstrate your value. This is a trap. Your initial goal is not to be a fixer, but a listener, an observer, and a collaborator. The relationships you build in these first 90 days are more important than any single intervention you might implement.

The Prime Directive: Seek first to understand, then to be understood. Your expertise is valuable, but it's only effective when delivered with humility and embedded within the school's existing culture.

This guide provides a structured, phased approach to help you navigate this period successfully. By focusing on the right activities at the right time, you can move from just surviving to truly thriving in your role as a leader in behavior science for your school.

Phase 1: The First 30 Days

Mission: Observe, Learn, & Build Rapport

Your primary job in the first month is to be a sponge. Your goal is to learn the culture, identify key players, understand existing systems, and build trusting relationships. Do not try to change anything significant yet.

Key Tasks Checklist:

- ✓ **Meet Everyone:** Introduce yourself to administrators, teachers (gen & spec ed), paraprofessionals, related service providers (SLPs, OTs), and support staff. Learn their names and roles.
- ✓ **Learn the Landscape:** Walk the school. Understand the daily schedule, the flow of students, and the "hot spots" where behaviors occur.
- ✓ **Review, Review, Review:** Read existing IEPs, BIPs, and any available school-wide behavior data for context.
- ✓ **Identify Allies:** Find the teachers and staff who are open and interested in support. They will be your first partners.
- ✓ **Ask, Don't Tell:** Frame interactions around questions. "How does the referral process work here?" "What are your biggest challenges?"

Common Pitfalls to Avoid:

Avoid the "new sheriff in town" mistake. Don't come in with a list of changes. Don't criticize existing plans, even if they are weak. Your only job is to listen, learn, and offer help. Building trust is the only metric that matters in month one.

Pro-Tip: The "Help First" Principle

Your first interactions should be about offering help, not expertise. Instead of saying "Your BIP is wrong," try "That looks tough. Is there anything I can do to help, even if it's just grabbing you a coffee or watching your class for five minutes?" This builds trust faster than anything else.

Phase 1 Template

Template: Your Introductory Email to Staff

Use this template to introduce yourself to the school staff during your first week. Keep it brief, friendly, and focused on support.

Subject: Hello from your new BCBA!

Hi Team,

My name is [Your Name], and I'm the new Board Certified Behavior Analyst for our school. I'm so excited to be here and to get to know all of you.

My role is to support you and our students with any behavioral challenges that arise. For the next few weeks, I'll mostly be observing and learning the ropes. You'll probably see me in the hallways, classrooms, and cafeteria.

Please don't hesitate to say hello! My main goal right now is to understand your needs and figure out how I can be most helpful.

Looking forward to a great year together,

[Your Name]

Phase 2: The First 60 Days

Mission: Create Systems & Secure Small Wins

Now that you've built some rapport, you can begin to implement your own systems and demonstrate your value through small, successful interventions. Focus on being organized and helpful.

Key Tasks Checklist:

- ✓ **Establish a Referral Process:** Create a simple, clear form (a Google Form is great) for teachers to request your support.
- ✓ **Target a "Small Win":** Work with an allied teacher on a manageable classroom issue (e.g., transitions to recess). A quick, visible improvement builds momentum and credibility. Your goal is not to solve the most complex problem, but to solve a simple problem effectively.
- ✓ **Develop Easy Datasheets:** Create user-friendly data collection forms. If a teacher can't fill it out in 2 minutes, it's too complicated. Checklists are better than frequency counts for busy teachers.
- ✓ **Schedule Office Hours:** Block out time on your calendar when teachers can drop in to ask questions. This makes you accessible and shows you respect their time.

Pro-Tip: The Art of the "Easy" Datasheet

A datasheet that gets used is better than a perfect one that doesn't. Instead of asking a teacher to take frequency data on "disruption," create a simple checklist with operationally defined behaviors: "Calling Out," "Out of Seat," "Touching Peers." They can tick the boxes during a 10-minute observation. This is far more likely to get done than asking for continuous data collection.

Phase 2 Template

Template: Observation Request Email

When a teacher has made a referral, use this template to schedule your initial observation. It's collaborative and non-threatening.

Subject: Following up on [Student Name]

Hi [Teacher Name],

Thanks so much for reaching out about [Student Name]. I'd love to come in and observe to get a better sense of what's happening and how I can help.

Are there any particular times of day or activities where the behavior is most likely to occur? I want to make sure my observation is as useful as possible. My goal is just to be a fly on the wall.

Let me know what works for you.

Thanks,

[Your Name]

Phase 3: The First 90 Days

Mission: Implement, Train, & Plan Strategically

You've built trust and have systems in place. Now you can start tackling bigger challenges, providing formal training, and thinking about system-level improvements. You are shifting from a reactive consultant to a proactive leader.

Key Tasks Checklist:

- ✓ **Complete Your First FBA/BIP Cycle:** Finalize your first major assessment and develop a comprehensive, function-based BIP. Focus on training the classroom staff to implement it with fidelity. Expect to spend more time training and supporting the staff than you did on the assessment.
- ✓ **Deliver Your First Training:** Based on your observations, identify a common need and offer a brief, practical training for staff (e.g., "5 Quick De-escalation Tips," "How to Use Behavior Momentum").
- ✓ **Analyze School-Wide Data:** Look at the school's discipline data (e.g., SWIS). Are there patterns? Can you propose a system-level intervention (e.g., a check-in/check-out system, a school-wide reinforcement program)? Present your findings to an administrator.

Pro-Tip: The "5-Minute PD"

Teachers are busy. Instead of a one-hour after-school training, try offering a "5-Minute PD" at the beginning of a staff meeting. Present one single, actionable strategy with a one-page handout and a QR code linking to a short video demonstration. It's more likely to be remembered and used.

Phase 3 Template

Template: Post-Observation Feedback Summary

After an observation, provide feedback that is positive, collaborative, and actionable. Avoid jargon and focus on one or two small, high-impact suggestions.

Subject: Quick follow-up re: [Student Name]

Hi [Teacher Name],

Thanks again for letting me observe in your classroom today. I was so impressed with [mention something positive and specific, e.g., "how you used proximity to support a student during transitions"].

Regarding [the target behavior], I noticed a similar pattern to what you described. It seems to happen most often during independent work time. I have a couple of simple ideas we could try that might help, starting with offering a choice of two tasks.

Do you have 10 minutes sometime tomorrow to chat through it? I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Best,

[Your Name]

Beyond 90 Days: Now You're Cooking

Congratulations! You've survived the first 90 days. You've built relationships, created systems, and demonstrated your value. You are no longer just the "new person"; you are an integrated and respected part of the school community.

From Reactive to Proactive

Your focus can now shift from putting out individual fires to fire-proofing the school. This is where the real, system-level change happens.

- ✓ **Tier 2 Interventions:** Start developing and implementing group-based interventions for students with similar challenges. A great starting point is a "Check-In/Check-Out" (CICO) system for students who need extra adult attention and feedback.
- ✓ **School-Wide Systems (PBIS/MTSS):** Use your data to advocate for and help design school-wide systems of support. This could be as simple as refining the school's acknowledgement system or as complex as redesigning the entire discipline process.
- ✓ **Mentoring & Leadership:** Begin to mentor other staff (like RBTs or paraprofessionals) in the principles of behavior analysis. The more people you empower with these skills, the more effective the entire system becomes.

Your journey is just beginning. The trust and systems you built in your first 90 days are the foundation for creating lasting, meaningful change for years to come. Keep learning, keep collaborating, and keep focusing on the "why."