

Positive Behavioral Supports: Information for Educators

By Andrea M. Cohn

What is Positive Behavioral Support?

Positive Behavioral Support (PBS) is an empirically validated, function-based approach to eliminate challenging behaviors and replace them with prosocial skills. Use of PBS decreases the need for more intrusive or aversive interventions (i.e., punishment or suspension) and can lead to both systemic as well as individualized change.

PBS can target an individual student or an entire school, as it does not focus exclusively on the student, but also includes changing environmental variables such as the physical setting, task demands, curriculum, instructional pace and individualized reinforcement. Thus it is successful with a wide range of students, in a wide range of contexts, with a wide range of behaviors.

Blending behavioral science, empirically validated procedures, durable systems change and an emphasis on socially important outcomes, PBS always involves data-based decision making using functional behavioral assessment and ongoing monitoring of intervention impact.

According to IDEA '97, PBS is the recommended form of intervention for dealing with challenging behavior in children with disabilities. In Fiscal Year 1999, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs in collaboration with Safe and Drug Free Schools supported a Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports with a grant of almost \$600,000. Information from this center is available at www.pbis.org. Additionally, the U.S. government continues to support a project at the University of Kansas (Beach Center on Families and Disability) to promote programs related to the personnel needs of infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities; this program supports the use of PBS to help children with disabilities who demonstrate challenging behavior.

Why Do We Need PBS?

- Problem behavior is the single most common reason why students are removed from regular classrooms. Even though students with extreme problem behavior represent only 20% of school enrollment, they can account for more than 50% of behavioral incidents.
- Harsh punishment and zero tolerance policies have not been effective at either improving behavioral climate in schools, or preventing students with problem behaviors from entering the juvenile justice system.
- Three years after being excluded from school, almost 70% of these youth have been arrested.

Failure to implement IDEA, due to a lack of incentives or negative attitudes toward children with challenging behaviors by administrators, policy makers and school personnel, is unacceptable. Students should *not* be excluded from school based solely upon inappropriate social behavior. Appropriate services can readily address and modify many of these behaviors, leading to more positive outcomes than simple punishment.

How is PBS Implemented in School Settings?

PBS is based on *behavioral theory*; problem behavior continues to occur because it is consistently followed by the child getting something positive or escaping something negative. By focusing on the *contexts* and *outcomes* of the behavior, it is possible to determine the *functions* of the behavior, make the problem behavior less effective and efficient, and make the *desired behavior* more functional. This often involves changing systems, altering environments and teaching new skills, as well as focusing on the problem behavior.

The most crucial part of devising PBS plans is the *Functional Behavioral Assessment* (FBA), which reveals information about the antecedents, consequences, and frequency of challenging behavior. FBAs also help to identify any co-occurring variables. Conducting FBAs doubles the success rate of an intervention.

PBS plans are *individualized* and *data-based* and include procedures for monitoring, evaluating and reassessing the process. PBS should be a *collaborative* effort among parents, school psychologists, teachers, counselors and administrators; all partners should be committed to the plan and its implementation. PBS is more effective when it includes the target individual as well as other significant individuals (i.e., peers, teachers, and parents).

High *fidelity* of implementation is required to maximize outcomes; therefore, interventions should be applied by educators in the school environment. School psychologists are ideally qualified to conduct FBAs, implement PBS plans and train other educators and parents in behavioral intervention techniques.

What Are the Benefits of PBS?

All students, both disabled and non-disabled, can benefit from PBS:

- Research conducted over the past 15 years has shown that PBS is effective in promoting positive behavior in students and schools. Use of PBS as a strategy to maintain appropriate social behavior will make schools safer. Safer schools are more effective learning environments.
- Schools that implement system-wide interventions also report increased time engaged in academic activities and improved academic performance.
- Schools that employ system-wide interventions for problem behavior prevention indicate reductions in office discipline referrals of 20-60%.

- Appropriately implemented PBS can lead to dramatic improvements that have long-term effects on the lifestyle, functional communication skills, and problem behavior in individuals with disabilities.
- A review of research on PBS effectiveness showed that there was over a 90% reduction in problem behavior in over half of the studies; the problem behavior stopped completely in over 26% of the studies.

How Can We Improve Implementation of PBS?

Although it is commendable that many states require functional behavior assessments before the development of significant behavioral interventions, they often occur reactively, or after the behavior has become a significant problem (i.e., after a student's behavior results in multiple suspensions or a drug/weapons infraction). After a crisis occurs, the focus is on punishment and exclusion. Additionally, school-based interventions commonly consist of unproven strategies and are implemented by staff who lack the training to deal with the problems effectively. When coordination is lacking among schools and other agencies, the primary responsibility for behavior is placed on families, who receive little support. Effective implementation of PBS includes:

- An **FBA**, conducted when the problem behavior is first observed or as a **proactive** activity
- Focus both on **prevention** of problem behaviors and **early access** to effective behavior support.
- **Culturally competent, family-friendly** behavior support
- Implementation with **sufficient intensity and precision** to produce behavioral gains that have a significant and durable impact on the academic, social and living options available to the student.

References

- Carr, E. G., Horner, R. H., Turnbull, A. P., Marquis, J. G., McLaughlin, D. M., McAtee, M. L., Smith, C. E., Ryan, K. A., Ruef, M. B., Doolabh, A., & Braddock, D. (1999). *Positive behavior support for people with developmental disabilities: A research synthesis*. Washington, D.C.: American Association on Mental Retardation.
- Heumann, J., & Warlick, K. (2001). *Prevention research & the IDEA discipline provisions: A guide for school administrators*. Available: www.ed.gov/offices/OSERS/OSEP/adminbeh.web.pdf.
- Horner, R. H., Crone, D. A., & Stiller, B. (2001, March). The role of school psychologists in establishing positive behavior support: Collaborating in systems change at the school-wide level. *Communique*, 29(6), 10-12.
- Skiba, R. J. (2000, August). *Zero tolerance, zero evidence: An analysis of school disciplinary practice*. (Policy Research Rep. No. SRS2).

Sugai, G., & Horner, R. (2001, June). *School climate and discipline: Going to scale*. The National Summit on the Shared Implementation of IDEA, Washington, D.C.
Available at: www.ideainfo.org

U.S. Department of Education. (2000). *Applying positive behavioral support in schools: Twenty-second Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disability Act*. Washington, D.C.: Author.

Walker, H. Colvin, G., & Ramsey, E. (1995). *Antisocial behavior in public school: Strategies and best practices*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
Andrea M. Cohn is a doctoral student in the school psychology program at the University of Maryland; this fact sheet was developed during her summer (2001) internship at NASP Headquarters.

**©2001, National Association of School Psychologists—4340 East West Highway,
#402, Bethesda, MD 20814**