

## **Positive behavioral support: Strategies for teachers**

Positive behavioral support (PBS) is a broad term that describes a comprehensive, research-based, proactive approach to behavioral support aimed at producing comprehensive change for students with challenging behavior. This article describes what PBS is, the value of exploring why a student exhibits challenging behavior, and certain key PBS strategies teachers can implement in their classrooms. Finally, the article offers relevant resources for those interested in implementing PBS.

Teachers report that student behavior is their number one difficulty. Both general and special education teachers also report that they aren't sufficiently trained to deal with the aggression, defiance--even violence--that they witness daily and see increasingly in children at younger ages. The time required to implement a strategy is among the leading criteria teachers use to choose behavioral interventions. Teachers favor trial-and-error interventions and immediately effective strategies (e.g., timeout) or isolated behavioral strategies suggested by fellow teachers rather than functional analyses and other databased intervention strategies because they find these too time-consuming. Teachers' lack of planning time, high student-to-staff ratio, and lack of administrative support to implement behavior changes in general have been cited as problems related to time. Faced with an increasing number of students whose behavior impedes their own learning or the learning of others, teachers are left wondering if and how they will find time to provide positive behavioral support to the growing number of students who need it. Yet teachers, especially more experienced teachers, do endorse proactive strategies and are comfortable with the premise of positive behavioral support-- a more time-intensive behavior model that requires teachers to determine what the problem is--where, when, how, and most importantly, why it happens (e.g., frustration, escape, desire for attention, boredom, control, etc.)--and then use strategies for teaching new behavioral skills, positive behavior appreciation, and environmental changes.

### **WHAT IS POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL SUPPORT?**

Did you ever hear the phrase, "Treat the symptom, ignore the disease"? Many people handle discipline that way. They try to eliminate challenging behavior (usually with punishment) without looking into why the behavior occurred. PBS is different--even revolutionary--because it is based on determining not only what, where, when and how challenging behavior occurs, but also why. PBS operates under the premise that behavior is not random but that any persistent challenging behavior "works" for the student. Why can't Mark remain seated during math? Why does Richard bang his head repeatedly? Why is Anastasia off-task so much? And what purposes (functions) do these behaviors serve for Mark, Richard and Anastasia?

Challenging behaviors such as these do meet some basic needs for a student. Students who act out do get more attention, higher levels of physical contact, or escape from work. But while meeting their immediate needs, disruptive behavior (such as aggression) interferes with others, especially in inclusive settings. It can also endanger the person exhibiting it and others, upset staff, and contribute to a negative attitude toward people with disabilities. Thus, it does not meet anyone's long-term needs--the teacher's need to have a functional classroom; other students' need to be safe; and the need of students with challenging behavior to learn socially appropriate ways to meet their needs and become more independent. PBS broadens intervention from one approach--reducing challenging behavior--to multiple approaches: changing systems, altering environments, teaching skills, and appreciating positive behavior. The goal in PBS is not to "eliminate" behavior. Rather, it is to understand the behavior's purpose so that the student can replace it with new, prosocial behaviors that achieve the same purpose. PBS helps students learn better ways to make their feelings and needs known. Everyone shares responsibility for the behavior.

PBS bears consideration for three reasons.

- First, we now know that *simply suppressing a behavior by punishing a student is counterproductive*. It may have the short-term effect of reducing behavior, but studies now show that punishing challenging behaviors without a schoolwide system of support is associated with increased aggression, vandalism, truancy, tardiness, and dropout. Further, *reactive approaches using punishment do not teach the student a skill to use in the future*.
- Second, *once teachers know why a student's behavior is occurring, they are in a much better position to teach a more appropriate way of responding, a way that will serve the long-term interests of both student and teacher*. This behavioral approach dramatically differs from traditional behavior modification. It shifts the focus from "fixing" the student to "fixing" skill deficiencies, settings, and systems (see Table 1 for a comparison of traditional behavior modification and PBS).
- Lastly, *PBS works and works well*. In a synthesis of 109 published studies of individuals with disabilities and severe challenging behavior conducted between 1985 and 1996, Carr and his colleagues (1997) documented the unqualified success of PBS on reducing the incidence of challenging behavior.

### **INITIATING PBS: ASSESSING A BEHAVIOR'S PURPOSE**

Ideally, before teachers initiate any PBS plan, they should put certain foundational blocks in place. These include establishing a collaborative team composed of persons who support a student, gathering/evaluating information about the purpose (function) of a student's behavior, and ensuring that both parents and teacher view a proposed plan as desirable and feasible. Gathering enough information to identify the challenging behavior (e.g., off-task) and then checking to make sure you are on target about the probable purpose of the behavior (e.g., to escape doing a task) constitutes the PBS cornerstone known as "functional assessment." More serious, long-standing behaviors that serve multiple purposes require in-depth, "Level 3" information gathering/evaluation with professional, trained support. Dangerous behaviors require an emergency plan. However, for many difficult behaviors (e.g., off-task, out-of-seat, noisy) that create constant demands for supervision or make the student stand out from others, provoking annoyance or embarrassment, the information gathering and evaluation process need not be long or arduous and can be accomplished in four steps:

1. *Define the challenging behavior*. The definition must be *observable and highly descriptive* of the behavior's appearance. "Mark is aggressive and runs from class," for example, is too vague and ambiguous. A better definition would be, "Mark will leave class or a designated activity area, often grabbing and damaging materials as he goes. If a staff person tries to keep him from leaving the area, he will strike out by grabbing, hitting, pulling hair, and/or kicking."
2. Identify the *circumstances under which the behavior is both likely and unlikely to occur*.
3. *Determine the potential purpose(s) of the challenging behavior*: Interviews and discussions, followed by direct observations of challenging behavior and the events happening before (triggering events or circumstances) and after the challenging behavior occurs (what the student achieves by the behavior), should help teachers determine a behavior's purpose. *Remember, challenging behaviors do not happen repeatedly unless individuals periodically get something they want or avoid something they do not want*. These purposes or "consequences" influence the challenging behavior. A "punisher" for a teacher may or may not be a "punisher" for a student. Teachers can never assume that a particular response (e.g., sending a student to the vice principal) will always be punishing with all students. *For a student motivated by escape, being sent to the vice principal's office may, in fact, be reinforcing*.
4. Evaluate the information and *develop a hypothesis or "best guess" statement describing the relationship between the behavior and the student's environment*. Statements such as, "Mark is aggressive and runs from the room (behavior is only vaguely described) because of his autism" (reason does not include purpose for behavior), should be replaced with specific statements based on observations that indicate how to change the environment to promote positive behavior. In general, functional assessment should be conducted at a level sufficient to describe the behavior

in question, situations or predictors when the behavior is most likely to occur and not occur, and the behavior's function or purpose. *For example, "Mark runs from the classroom or designated task areas to escape difficult tasks or learning situations. Escape from restraint is another reason for his behavior. When staff use restraint to keep him from leaving, trashing the room, or escorting him back to class, he will usually grab, hit, pull hair, and/or kick"* (behavior is specifically described; reason includes purpose for behavior).

Focusing on why challenging behavior occurs, in turn, helps them decide what to do. "When prevention becomes the goal, as it should, the focus of intervention planning changes from what we might do to the child to what we might change about our own classroom practices" (Strain & Hemmeter, 1997, p. 4).

## **PBS STRATEGIES**

Teachers favor strategies that work for other teachers. Therefore, the following list is a description of six teacher-recommended, proactive, proven PBS strategies. Although they are most effective after functional assessment, the first five strategies can be implemented without or before such an assessment.

### Strategy 1: Alter the Classroom Environment

Teachers can remove or modify environmental conditions within their classrooms that trigger challenging behaviors in a number of ways.

**ACCOMMODATE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT ENVIRONMENTAL NEEDS.** Information gathering may indicate that individual students' behavior is linked to environmental triggers. Students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), for example, should be seated away from noisy, high-traffic areas. For students who are easily distracted, consider the use of a study carrel or a quiet learning center(s), clearly defined work areas that students can "cycle through" in a predictable sequence. Clearly defined work spaces (e.g., learning centers, study carrels, or carpet squares when children sit on the floor) help define each student's space. Some students--for example, students with autism--may be highly sensitive to bells, other loud noises, or other sensory stimuli such as particular perfumes, body odors, or particular colors. Providing a noise-sensitive student, for example, with earphones to wear during periods when the noise level is high will neutralize the effects of noise and thus minimize the likelihood of the behavior.

### Strategy 2: Increase Predictability and Scheduling

Uncertainty increases anxiety levels in most people. Consider your frustration when you lose your daily planner or when a lesson that you organized during the weekend time is interrupted by an unplanned fire drill. All students experience frustration, but especially those with learning challenges. Predictability of classroom routines is their "security blanket." According to Strain and Hemmeter (1997), "A classroom schedule that is well-designed and is implemented consistently may be the single most important factor in preventing challenging behaviors". Teachers who can develop or modify their routines to increase predictability will lessen anxieties (and challenging behaviors) for their students.

**SCHEDULES.** Create a routine daily schedule and make sure that students are aware of it. Middle or high school teachers may find a student version of a "weekly planner" useful in increasing predictability and appropriate behavior; elementary teachers may post their schedule prominently in their classroom. Prompting students to refer to their schedule and previewing what is about to happen at numerous times throughout the day is also important. Teachers can use these previews to clearly specify criteria and outcomes for activities. When students know what to do and when to do it, challenging behaviors are less likely to occur. Teachers may need to establish separate individualized routines for students whose attention spans are limited or who are unable to sit for longer blocks of time. *Students with ADHD may*

*need predictable time periods when they can leave their seats for some activity (e.g., collecting homework, distributing materials, taking attendance to the office) built into their schedules.*

TRANSITIONS. Alerting students before transitions from one activity to another can increase the likelihood of appropriate behavior. These signals give students the opportunity to finish what they are doing before having to put it away. Teachers can choose from a variety of signals; different students may need different kinds (e.g., auditory, tactile, or visual). Many students, for example, respond well to taped music of various lengths to signal the end of various activities. As students repeatedly hear a particular song or series of songs, they know that an activity is ending within a given period of time. Minimizing waiting periods or providing other activities for early finishers also promotes appropriate behavior. When students are engaged with people or materials, they are less likely to exhibit challenging behaviors.

### Strategy 3: Increase Choice Making

Many people with disabilities (especially students with limited motor skills, verbal skills, or challenging behaviors) are not provided with opportunities to make significant choices in their daily lives. They are often told what tasks they must perform, with whom they may interact, and what rewards they may have. Because these students have difficulty expressing choice, choice making should be systematically taught and monitored in the same ways as other skills.

Providing students with challenging behavior with opportunities to make choices is another way of teaching them that they can influence others without having to resort to challenging behavior. Providing choice does not mean allowing students to control situations in which they pose a danger to themselves or others. Nor does it mean allowing them to do anything that they want to do. *It does mean permitting students to make choices as part of an approach aimed at increasing student's inclusion, productivity, and independence. By empowering students to make choices, teachers can help lessen student feelings of powerlessness. Teachers, parents, and students together can create a list of choices, but the student, whenever possible, makes the final selection.*

### Strategy 4: Make Curricular Adaptations

Curricular adaptations are modifications made to enhance a student's performance in completing activities and to reduce the likelihood of challenging behaviors. Why spend the extra time making such adaptations? Activities/tasks that (a) students intended to use at home or in the community, (b) reflected students' interests, and (c) were age appropriate were significantly associated with positive behavior, whereas activities/tasks that did not reflect these characteristics were associated with challenging behaviors. In addition, researchers found that adjustments in the difficulty level, length, or pace of an activity heightened levels of motivation and reduced levels of off-task and disruptive behaviors in students with disabilities.

What can a teacher do to adapt the curriculum when observation suggests that the existing curriculum is prompting challenging behavior? Consider the following four elements.

1. Think about the nature of the assigned task/activity and the way it is presented. Is the task or activity of high or low interest? Too easy or too difficult? Too long or too short? Too fast or slow paced?
2. Adjust the nature of the task/activity. Presenting material using different modalities (e.g., auditory, visual, tactile) or shortening instruction to highly structured blocks of 20 minutes or less have proved successful. Task variation, or interspersing previously learned tasks among new tasks, is another strategy. Especially when a new skill is relatively difficult for a student, studies have shown that constant task strategies (massed trials) often result in waning motivation and performance and increase off-task behaviors.

*Self-monitoring is a powerful, easily implemented intervention. It has been used successfully with students ranging from average achievers to students with moderate and severe disabilities as a technique to decrease disruptive behaviors and improve academic skills and on-task responding.*

Self-monitoring is accomplished by teaching students to identify and record occurrences of behavior and then rewarding them both for successful self-monitoring and for decreases in challenging behaviors. Self-monitoring involves

- (a) defining the target behavior
- (b) identifying preferred reinforcers,
- (c) designing a self-monitoring device/method
- (d) teaching the student to use the device
- (e) fading the use of the device.

The advantages of self-monitoring include increases in students' independent responding, more generalization and durability of behavior change, and reduced teacher supervision.

*Peer tutoring instruction of one student by another for academic or social support has the great advantage of allowing students to respond frequently and demonstrate whether they have acquired important information and skills.* For example, researchers have found that students have limited opportunities to respond to academic tasks during the school day. Peer tutors increase student opportunities to respond. In addition, researchers have found that peer tutors use more age-appropriate vocabulary and examples than the teacher does, can identify with the frustration of learning material, and tend to be more direct and supportive than adults. Peer tutoring can provide structured practice or review, monitoring of learning, and reinforcement of teacher-directed instruction. Peers can take notes using carbon paper if a "buddy" with ADHD has problems listening and taking notes. A copy will then be available for the buddy and the stress of listening and writing will be reduced.

Teachers have also found the PALS approach particularly useful for teaching social skills to younger children. This approach is based on arranging the environment; it **P**airs typical learners with those with disabilities during activities, **A**rranges for adults to be absent from the activity or reduce their rate of interaction, **L**imits the number and variety of materials available during activities (to those that occasion interaction), and **S**tructures the activity so that children work toward a cooperative goal and understand their role in achieving the goal. Using this approach, teachers can arrange a number of play areas with different materials/devices to set the occasion for different child behaviors. Such diverse play areas have been shown to increase the survival skills and experiences children acquire through play (Chandler, 1996).

### **Strategy 5: Appreciate Positive Behaviors**

Ideally, students will do the "right" thing in the "right" way with the "right" attitude. Actually, that's just how it is for a lot of people. They don't need to be encouraged with constant praise, trinkets, or future promises. *Their reward is the activity or behavior itself. However, many students don't have the social, learning, or behavioral skills that will help them thrive in the classroom or community.*

**TAKE ADVANTAGE OF POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT.** Simply put, positive reinforcement teaches a person to act in a certain way by rewarding that person for correct behavior. The theory is that if someone gets a reward for an action, then that person is more likely to do that action again. Positive reinforcement, which has been studied in great detail in the last 25 years, has proved to be an important part of the learning process. To encourage positive behavior, figure out the exact behavior that would benefit the student and the people around the student. Start with easier skills and break down more complex tasks into achievable steps. You may also consider teaching self-monitoring skills that will support more durable behavior changes and decrease the amount of adult supervision required.

**DETERMINE THE RIGHT REWARD.** Make sure you have the right rewards: Training will have little effect without a good reinforcer. Decide what the student--not you--views as rewards. One person's preference is not the same as another's. Typical rewards include food, drink, sensations (listening to music), materials (stickers, badges, certificates), activities (working on a preferred activity or with a special friend), and privileges (extra free time, new seating arrangement). A good way to start is to ask the student what would be a reward for him or her. Praise, too, must be used correctly. Use words of encouragement, appreciation, and affection, as well as physical expressions, such as hugs, pats, and smiles.

**REDUCE REWARDS OVER TIME.** At first, rewards should be given immediately and frequently when the person exhibits proper behavior. (During this time, ignore challenging behavior unless it is dangerous or destructive.) In fact, you may initially set up a learning situation in which rewards come at a rapid pace--even every minute, as researchers have done in studies--to teach desired behavior. Later, rewards should be given less frequently as the behavior becomes learned. Alberto and Troutman (1990) have pointed out that the more you reward someone for a task, the less interest the person will have for the task itself. Rewards, too, are a form of control. Nobody likes to be manipulated. Remember, your goal is to have the behavior or skill be a reward in itself.

**KEEP REWARDS INTERESTING AND THE STUDENT CONFIDENT.** Rewards will probably have to be changed at different times to keep them desirable. For certain students, you also can use tokens, points, or other scoring devices that the person will collect to trade in for a larger reward. Lastly, to encourage good behavior, always indicate your confidence in the student's abilities. This lets the student know you recognize his or her good intentions and that you believe he or she can learn and grow.

#### Strategy 6: Teach Replacement Skills

*Many challenging behaviors occur because the student does not know a more appropriate way to achieve an important outcome. By teaching appropriate, alternative responses that serve the same purpose as the challenging behavior, teachers can reduce the incidence of challenging behavior and increase the skill level of their students.* Unlike the first five strategies outlined here, which can simply be implemented as "best practices" without knowledge of a behavior's purpose, teaching an alternative response depends on knowing the purpose(s) of the challenging behavior; this is determined during the functional assessment. Many times the alternative responses taught are communicative in nature (e.g., appropriate ways to get attention/assistance, request a break or change of activity, etc.)

#### SUMMARY

PBS involves four main steps:

1. Identifying the purpose of challenging behavior.
2. Teaching appropriate alternative responses that serve the same purpose as the challenging behavior
3. Consistently rewarding positive behaviors and minimizing the rewards for challenging behavior
4. Minimizing the physiological, environmental, and curricular factors that trigger challenging behavior.

PBS calls for proactivity and a reevaluation of the reactive "quick-fix" method of intervening. It encourages teachers (ideally as part of a collaborative team) to take time "up front" to answer the question, "Why is my student behaving like this?" Not a lock-step approach, it looks at both individual student and teacher needs. A good PBS plan is one that works for both. It takes advantage of sound educational best practice and results in increased teaching and learning time, increased productivity, inclusion, and independence. PBS does not mean that teachers must become behavioral experts. Rather, PBS provides a means by which they may be able to become more clear, more predictable, more responsive, and more creative.