

Assuring Your Child Receives Support for Positive Behavior in the Classroom

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Background: School Mental Health

Students who struggle with more significant emotional and behavioral issues often benefit from a range of supportive strategies and interventions in the classroom. These strategies should help your child feel more comfortable in the classroom and reduce the likelihood that emotional and behavioral problems will act as barriers to learning.

While schools have been providing services to promote positive student behavior and mental health for a long time, in recent years there has been a move to expand these services to reflect a full continuum for improving environments; broadly promoting student wellness, positive behavior, and mental health; and implementing prevention, early intervention, and treatment programs and services for students in general and special education.¹ A key value for these school mental health programs and services is that they reflect a shared agenda involving school-family-community system partnerships in all aspects of program development, guidance, and ongoing improvement.

Positive Behavior Support

Efforts to promote student positive behavior and mental health should ideally proceed from a platform of broad strategies related to enhancement of the school environment toward a nurturing, consistent, and positive climate that includes clear and frequently reinforced positive expectations for student behavior. In this realm there are a number of strategies that are very helpful; including programs involving *Positive Behavior Support* (PBS). The federal

Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) supports a technical assistance center for PBS (www.pbis.org) that includes guidance for the promotion of positive behavior in the classroom. Positive behavior support strategies are described as moving away from aversive and punishment-based interventions toward preventive and positive strategies, with key guiding principles that include the following:²

- Involve systemic and individualized strategies;
- Work for all students;
- Provide common expectations regarding positive behavior;
- Focus on procedures and systems that are evidence-based, or have a science base of support, and that can be efficiently delivered;
- Focus on learning and behavior together; and
- Focus on climate in schools and classrooms and teamwork and collaboration with all staff learning and reinforcing skills.

Teachers and Strategies for the Classroom

Teachers obviously play a critical role in assuring positive classroom environments, with many skills involved, including the following:³

- The way students are grouped or assigned seating (e.g., not having disruptive students sitting close to one another or in the back of the room);
- How tasks are scheduled (e.g., completing less preferred tasks before students can engage in more preferred ones);
- The use of stimulating materials and activities; and

- Matching communication and direction to students in light of their presenting behavior.

The last point is a particularly important theme for effective classroom management and the promotion of positive classroom behavior. That is, the ideal is for teachers to be proactively scanning the environment, noticing how students are doing, praising them for positive behavior, using humor and maintaining a lively and fun environment, and proactively and with empathy addressing behavioral issues in students very early on. In this regard, most students will show that they are beginning to have trouble, for example, by shifting in their seat or showing discomfort. An empathic and supportive response provided to the student one-on-one by walking over to them can often disrupt the development of negative behavioral chains.

Research has demonstrated that teacher and student behavior are interrelated and dependent. For example, teacher behavior affects student behavior, which affects teacher behavior. In general, classrooms function better when teachers engage in a “high approval” style, involving positive and constructive feedback, than a “high disapproval” style, which is more negative and consequence driven.⁴

Other critical skills for educators to promote positive classroom behavior include the following:^{5,6}

- Implementing classroom rules that are behaviorally specific and easy to follow (versus subjective and hard to understand and enforce) and fostering student ownership of the rules;

¹ Weist, M.D., Evans, S.W., & Lever, N. (2003). *Handbook of school mental health: Advancing practice and research*. New York, NY: Springer.

² Sugai, G., Horner, R.H., Sailor, W., Dunlap, G., Eber, L., Lewis, T., Kinciad, D., Scott, T., Barrett, S., Algozzine, R., Putnam, R., Massanari, C., & Nelson, M. (2005). School-wide positive behavior support: Implementers' blueprint and self-assessment. Eugene, OR: University of Oregon.

³ Gettinger, M., Stoiber, K.C. (2006). Functional assessment, collaboration, and evidence-based treatment: Analysis of a team approach for addressing challenging behaviors in young children. *Journal of School Psychology, 44*, 231-252.

⁴ Polirstok, S., Gottlieb, J. (2006). The impact of positive behavior intervention training for teachers on referral rates for misbehavior, special education evaluations and student reading achievement in elementary grades. *International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy, 2*, 354-361.

⁵ Lloyd, J.W., Forness, S.R., & Kavale, K.A. (1998). Some methods are more effective than others. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 33*, 195-200.

⁶ Gottlieb, J. & Polirstok, S.R. (2005). A school-wide professional development program to reduce behavioral infractions and referrals to special education in three inner-city elementary schools. *Children and Schools, 27*(1), 53-57.

ASK THE DOCTOR

- Having teachers self-monitor their use of language and striving to use positive and encouraging words or phrases versus negative or critical ones;
- Increasing positive statements and praise to individual students, groups of students, and the whole class; and
- Implementing simple systems for rewarding students for positive behavior (e.g., end class a little early and allow talking time).

A critical skill for teachers is to make requests of students in a way that promotes their compliance with these requests. If this is handled well, positive behavior is promoted, but if handled poorly, behavior by students can quickly get out of control. For example, if a student does not comply with a request and a teacher yells, the student may be rewarded by this yelling (by attention on him or laughter by his classmates), and may act out more in response. Instead, teachers should strive for a calm and business-like manner in making requests of students, involving the following steps:⁷

- Present the request in clear behavioral terms for one action at a time;
- State the time limit for starting to respond to the request;
- Provide contingent praise and positive attention to students who comply with a request on time;
- Withhold praise and attention if there is no compliance with a request within the specified time;
- Provide gentle prompting and guidance, without praise or comment, for compliance following the time limit; and
- Calmly implement disciplinary consequences if there is still no compliance.

Resources and Relevant Initiatives

All of the above represents general strategies that should be implemented to promote positive behavior by all students in classrooms. Students who present more significant emotional and behavioral challenges should also receive tailored support and intervention

to assist them in addressing these challenges and to promote their positive performance in school. Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, most recently reauthorized in 2004), these services may be provided through the school system through placement in special education and receipt of services under an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), or through the receipt of special services as provided through 504 plans.

If your child does not have an IEP or 504 plan, and is experiencing emotional and/or behavioral concerns that you believe are impacting his or her ability to succeed in the classroom, communicate with your child's teachers and grade-level special education case managers regarding their behavior in the classroom and possible strategies and interventions. To learn more about possible resources for your child related to emotional or behavioral disabilities that impair learning, see the Regional Resource and Federal Centers Network of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at www.rrfcnetwork.org (click on *Technical Assistance and Dissemination Network*).

Also, as reflected in the introduction to this article, schools are increasingly partnering with families and community mental health systems to expand the range of mental health promotion and intervention services available to students and their families. There are numerous on-line resources, including those from:

- The Center for School Mental Health (CSMH) at the University of Maryland at csmh.umaryland.edu and www.schoolmentalhealth.org;
- The Center for Mental Health in Schools at the University of California, Los Angeles at www.schoolmentalhealth.org;
- The Center for the Advancement of Mental Health Practices in Schools at the University of Missouri at www.education.missouri.edu/orgs/camhps; and
- The Center for School-Based Mental Health Programs at Miami University of Ohio at www.units.muohio.edu/csbmhp.

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Further, the University of Maryland CSMH, in collaboration with the IDEA Partnership, funded by OSEP and housed at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (www.nasdse.org), is building a *National Community of Practice on Collaborative School Behavioral Health*. This community is promoting dialogue and collaboration on multiple dimensions of learning support and school mental health, and includes 12 states pursuing systematic school mental health initiatives and 12 practice groups pursuing the advancement of training, practice, research, and policy in key theme areas in the field. The Community meets annually (with the next meeting in Minneapolis, Nov. 2-4, 2009), with ongoing learning and collaborative work occurring through an interactive Web site at www.shared-work.org.

What You Can Do

A critical theme associated with the quality and effectiveness of school mental health programs and services is active family involvement in all aspects—from being a collaborator with mental health providers and your child in his or her mental health care to helping to guide school mental health programs and services at school, community, state, and national levels. The family voice should be heard. If you sense obstacles to such involvement or that your voice is not being heard, express your concerns to the school principal and to leaders of your community's child and adolescent mental health system. As you are able to, get involved in program and policy-focused meetings pertaining to school and child and adolescent mental health.

Author's Note: Appreciation is extended to Christianna Andrews and Matthew Page of the CSMH for their help in conducting background research for this article. 

⁷ Cipani, E. (1993). Non-compliance: Four strategies that work. Washington, D.C.: The Council for Exceptional Children.