

Positive Behavior Supports

A Guide for Parents

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Note *Positive Behavior Supports: A Guide for Parents* was developed by the Vermont Family Network (VFN) and the Vermont Department of Education and is supported through the Vermont State Improvement Grant (CFDA 84.323A), U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the Vermont Family Network and the Vermont Department of Education and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education. This work may be reproduced and distributed freely and can be found at <http://www.vermontfamilynetwork.org> and <http://education.vermont.gov/>, and at <http://www.pbsvermont.com>.

Introduction

Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) is a school-wide approach to creating a positive and safe climate in which students can learn and grow. Throughout the country schools are implementing positive behavior supports in order to improve discipline practices and to help students succeed in school. Vermont's PBS State Leadership Team has been working to bring PBS to Vermont schools. Currently over 50 schools, pre-K through high school, are adopting PBS.

As a parent of a school-aged child, you know how important a safe and effective school environment is to learning. PBS is used with all students and across all school environments, including the lunchroom and playground. When schools take a positive approach toward

addressing discipline, school climate improves. Students spend more time in their classrooms rather than in the principal's office, and teachers spend more time on instruction rather than on discipline.

In this booklet you will read about how and why PBS works and what you should know if your school is implementing this approach. We have included information about parent involvement in PBS and ways in which families and schools can work together on behalf of individual children and the school community as a whole.

What is PBS?

At a PBS school, teachers, administrators, counselors, and family members work together to teach and support behavior expectations at school. PBS exists to improve the behavior of all students in all school environments. Schools create and teach a set of behavior

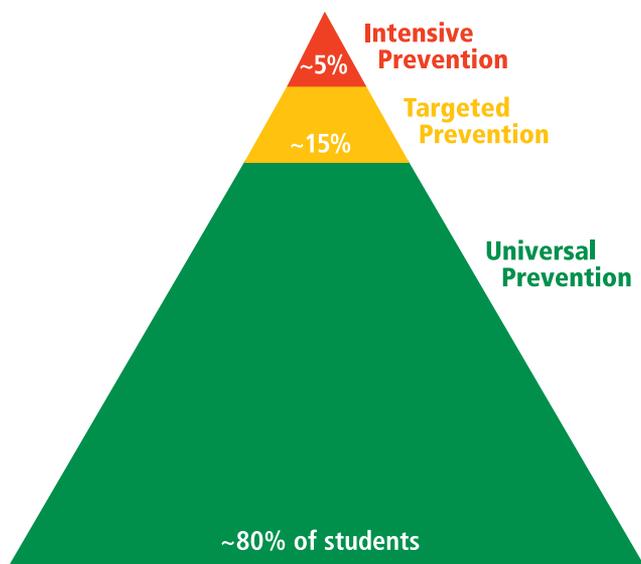


Fig. 1. Continuum of School-wide Instructional and Positive Behavior Support

expectations and positively acknowledge students for those behaviors. All school personnel are responsible for knowing the behavior expectations and providing consistent positive feedback to students.

PBS involves three tiers of intervention (*see Fig. 1 below*), starting with the “Universal” level, which is designed to support all students. About 15% of students will need the “Targeted” level of support through small-group interventions. Students with the greatest behavior challenges, about 5%, may require support at the “Intensive” level, which involves individualized and specialized interventions.

PBS is not a specific intervention or practice but a framework that enables schools to make decisions about student behavior. It requires schools to identify and use practices that have proven to be effective or evidence-based in each of the three tiers of support for students. The use of evidence-based practices eliminates “hit or miss” in addressing behavior problems.

How does PBS improve school climate?

According to the National Center on Positive Interventions and Behavioral Supports, schools nationwide that effectively adopt a PBS system are more likely to have environments that

- engage more students in learning
- prevent major behavior problems
- are safer and inclusive
- respond to student behavior effectively and positively
- improve interventions for students with more significant mental health and behavior problems
- enhance achievement for all students.

Research shows that PBS reduces suspensions, expulsions, and

dropout rates. Fewer students are referred to special education because they receive support early on within the general education environment. A school-wide approach to setting behavior expectations and recognizing appropriate student behavior helps all students make appropriate choices.

PBS schools in Vermont are showing positive results. The Vermont Department of Education reports a significant decline in office discipline referrals in schools fully implementing PBS. As of 2009, schools representing 27 supervisory unions were implementing some level of PBS as part of their school improvement efforts. This means that more than 18,000 general education students, 2,500 students with disabilities, and 4,400 educators are involved in PBS in Vermont.

Families play an important role in the PBS process by giving input and participating in the development and implementation of the school-wide or Universal level. For students needing additional support at the Targeted or Intensive levels of PBS, families provide information to the team about their son or daughter, help develop education and behavior plans, and work with the school to create consistency for the student. PBS schools that effectively engage families create a welcoming, family-friendly environment.

Who is responsible for PBS in the schools?

A PBS team made up of school staff, such as the principal, general educators, school psychologist, special educators, guidance counselors, cafeteria workers, and others are responsible for developing and carrying out the school-wide PBS system. Schools also appoint an in-school PBS coordinator and a district-level PBS coach to help staff implement the system. Parents may also be members of the school-

wide team. At regular meetings, the PBS team reviews school-wide student data and looks at how the system is working overall.

What is included in a school-wide PBS system?

PBS focuses on three elements to create an effective school-wide PBS system—data, evidenced-based practices, and systems.

❶ Data is a key element of PBS. Teachers and others collect, share, and use data about student behavior and progress throughout the PBS process. For example, classroom teachers will keep track of the number of out-of-class referrals and the number of positive acknowledgments students receive. This data is used in multiple ways, such as adjusting teaching methods, addressing behavior issues, and evaluating the PBS results.

❷ Schools use evidence-based practices in order to increase student learning and decrease classroom disruptions. Evidence-based practices are interventions that have proven to work well with students and that provide schools with tools that enable them to achieve positive results for student behavior. Two practices that have proven effective in improving behavior include giving students regular positive feedback for appropriate behavior and providing fair and corrective practices when students misbehave.

❸ PBS schools create systems that can stand the test of time. It takes from three to five years to fully implement a school-wide system using a three-tiered approach. This is accomplished through a PBS Action Plan that is created and consistently monitored by a PBS School Leadership Team, with the support of external coaches and ongoing professional development for school staff.

How does the three-tiered PBS system work?

Universal Level of Supports

Universal supports include strategies and practices that schools use with all students and that generally work for about 80% of the student population. This level of support requires schools to

- agree on and implement a common approach to discipline
- identify and teach a small number of expectations for student behavior
- reinforce students for appropriate behavior using various positive acknowledgments
- have procedures in place for discouraging inappropriate behavior
- monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the discipline system on a regular basis.

At the Universal level, for example, teachers will post rules for behavior in their classrooms, teach the students what is expected of them, and positively acknowledge them when these behaviors are demonstrated. In addition, all teachers have agreed upon procedures for discouraging problem behaviors.

Targeted Level of Supports

Targeted supports assist about 15% of students who aren't responding to interventions used at the Universal level. These students often struggle academically or socially. Interventions usually involve small groups of students and some individualized supports. At the Targeted level, school staff may

- screen students who are at risk for behavior problems
- monitor student progress
- provide the student with more structure, predictability, and feedback

- increase home to school communication
- gather and use data to make decisions.

Based on the data collected, the teacher will identify students who need extra help. These students may receive small group instruction in social skills, be assigned an adult mentor, or learn self-management skills.

Intensive Level of Supports

The need for Intensive supports occurs with approximately 5% of students who have the most significant behavior problems and for whom Universal and Targeted interventions have not worked. Most often students will have a mental health disorder, serious emotional problems, and/or significant behavior challenges that require a high degree of individualized attention and support. These students may or may not be receiving special education services. At this level, interventions often include a Functional Behavioral Assessment (FBA) of the student, a Behavior Support Plan (BSP), and possibly a comprehensive education evaluation to determine whether he or she is eligible for special education.

What are Functional Behavior Assessments and Behavior Support Plans?

When your child has significant behavior problems, it is important to understand fully the function these behaviors play and what can be done to address them. A Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) is a multi-step process that enables the school team and your family to address problem behaviors that you want to change. Steps in an FBA include

- identifying the problem behaviors that need to be changed
- gathering information from a variety of sources (including families) about why, when and where the behavior occurs, using methods such as observations, interviews, education records
- developing a hypothesis about why problem behaviors are happening. This is a best guess that takes into account the settings in which the behaviors are most likely and least likely to occur.
- identifying appropriate behaviors to teach the child that will replace inappropriate behaviors
- developing and implementing a Behavior Support Plan (BSP) that includes positive steps for changing problem behaviors
- monitoring and evaluating the BSP.

If your child receives special education or Section 504 services, positive behavior interventions may be written into the IEP or 504 Plan. Please note you retain the right to request a special education evaluation at any time if you suspect that your child has a disability that negatively affects learning.

What can I do to get involved in PBS?

Parent involvement is a key factor in the success of PBS for their child and in their child's school. Research tells us that parent involvement helps to improve student learning and schools in general. There are several ways for you to participate in PBS. Here are some suggestions that will help to enrich the PBS system in your child's school as well as statewide.

- Learn about PBS at your child's school and provide feedback about the process.

- Ask to participate on the state, district, or school PBS Leadership team.
- Help your school design parent involvement activities in PBS.
- Work with the school to engage community support and additional resources for PBS.
- Participate on Targeted or Intensive level teams as they relate to your child.

To find out whether your child's school is a PBS school or to get more involved in the PBS system, contact the principal or talk to your child's teacher. If your child's school is not a PBS school, schedule a meeting with the principal to discuss the development of a school-wide PBS system.

If your child attends a PBS school, here are some questions to ask to help you better understand how the system works.

- What is in place at the Universal level of PBS in the classroom and school-wide?
- What are the school-wide and classroom behavior expectations?
- How will the school communicate with me if my child needs extra help with behavior?
- If my child is having behavior problems, what evidence-based interventions will be used to help my child?
- What assessments will be used to develop a behavior plan for my child?
- How will the school inform me about the results of collecting information on my child?
- How will I be notified and involved if my child needs Targeted or Intensive supports?
- What resources are available in the school and community to help with improving my child's behavior?
- How can I work with the school to promote PBS at home?

What can I do to help my child with at-risk behavior?

Children who have difficulties following classroom rules or who receive multiple out-of-class referrals may need additional supports beyond the Universal level that all students receive. For example, a child may get into arguments with peers or not be able to stay in his seat. The school should notify you when your child's behavior requires Targeted level supports. Your child may be referred to the school's Educational Support Team (EST), the PBS Targeted Team, or the PBS Intensive Team. The team reviews data on your child's behavior and may make recommendations for further assessments or develop a behavior support plan. Although parents are not required members of these teams, the school should ask you to share information about your child that will help them better understand why the behaviors are occurring and how to prevent them.

At the Targeted level, your child may receive additional instruction, such as social skills training or the teacher may modify classroom work. This might include having your child check in and out daily with a teacher to receive prompts for following school-wide behavior expectations and to get additional positive feedback. During this time, data will be collected and your child's progress will be monitored. You should receive information about your child's progress and be able to see the data reports.

To help your child, it's important to communicate with the school on a regular basis, not only when a crisis or challenge arises. Your child will benefit when you reinforce school routines and predictable known schedules at home. Talk in advance to your child about changes and upcoming events to allow for additional processing time.

How can I be involved if my child needs Intensive level supports?

If your child has complex social/behavioral challenges, he or she may receive intensive, individualized support based at the Intensive level. You will be involved with your child's evaluation, education, and behavior plan. The knowledge you bring to the table about your child's development, medical history, strengths, interests, and needs is an important resource to the team in creating an effective Behavior Support Plan (BSP). A strong partnership between your family and the school helps to create consistency across home and school settings and to improve results for your child.

If your child is already receiving special education or Section 504 supports, the information you share with the team will be used to develop individualized academic and behavior support through an IEP or 504 plan. Your child may also have a separate behavior support plan. Other agencies may work with you in meeting your child's mental health and behavior needs. Local community mental health agencies often provide services that schools cannot to offer, such as mental health counseling, intensive family-based services, or wrap-around services. If your child is not on an IEP or 504 plan, you or the school may make a referral for a special education or Section 504 evaluation.

When your child needs services from multiple agencies, he or she may benefit from a Coordinated Service Plan. You or the school may request a Coordinated Service Plan Team meeting to discuss your child's needs and how to coordinate services between agencies, such as education, mental health, and family services. The plan, while not

an actual entitlement to services, describes how services and supports will be delivered and who will deliver them.

Resources

Association for Positive Behavioral Support

<http://www.apbs.org/>

The Association for Positive Behavior Support is an international organization dedicated to the advancement of positive behavior support.

Bazelon Center for Mental Health

<http://www.bazelon.org> or www.bazelon.org/pdf/WayToGo4.pdf

The Bazelon Center is dedicated to advancing the rights of children and adults with mental illness. To find articles about PBS, use the site's search function.

Functional Behavioral Assessment and Positive Interventions: What Parents Need to Know

PACER Center (2006)

www.pacer.org

National Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

<http://www.pbis.org/>

The Center assists state in implementing school-wide Positive Behavior Supports to improve problem behavior and enhance learning environments.

Positive Behavior Support Services: Overview of Vermont Initiative

Rae Ann Knopf, Vermont Department of Education

www.vermontpbs.org

School-wide Positive Behavior Support: Basics

George Sugai and Robert Horner, Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, University of Connecticut and University of Oregon (December 2006)

www.pbis.org

Vermont Department of Education PBS Leadership Team

(802) 828-0183 • <http://www.pbsvermont.org/>

http://education.vermont.gov/new/html/pgm_ess/pbs.html

The Department of Education provides training on PBS and technical assistance to Vermont schools implementing PBS.

Vermont Family Network (VFN)

(800) 800-4005 • www.vermontfamilynetwork.org

VFN is a family support and advocacy organization. Staff can answer questions about your child's behavior, PBS, and parent involvement in the PBS process.

Way to Go: School Success for Children with Mental Health Needs

Bazon Center for Mental Health Law

www.bazon.org

