The past decade has witnessed growing concern regarding the implications of serious challenging behaviors exhibited by young children (e.g., Knitzer, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001). It has become widely understood that persistent challenging behaviors in early childhood are associated with subsequent problems in socialization, school adjustment, and academic performance, and that these problems can continue to affect adaptation in adolescence and adulthood (e.g., Campbell, 1995; Dodge, 1993; Reid, 1993). The basic message is that challenging behaviors should be addressed when children are young because problems that are not resolved by the mid-point of elementary school often become exceedingly resistant to change (e.g., Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2003).

As a result, increasing efforts have been undertaken to address young children's challenging behaviors (Conroy, Dunlap, Clarke, & Alter, 2005; Powell, Dunlap, & Fox, 2006). The vast majority of these intervention efforts, however, have been undertaken reactively, well after patterns of challenging behaviors emerged. In early childhood settings, interventions are often provided at the level of the individual child or, occasionally, for targeted groups of children at high risk for challenging behavior (Joseph & Strain, 2003; Powell et al., 2006). While these interventions can be effective, they tend to be relatively expensive and difficult to deploy for the increasing numbers of young children who are identified as being at-risk for challenging behaviors (cf. Qi & Kaiser, 2003). What is needed is a systemic, proactive approach that seeks to prevent challenging behaviors from developing, while comprehensively addressing the needs of all children on the continuum of risk for challenging behaviors (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003).

The approach known as School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SW-PBS; Sugai et al., 2000) provides a well-developed model of prevention that can be adapted to fit settings that serve young children. Because the fit is not perfect, we (and other authors) have chosen to refer to the approach as Program-wide Positive Behavior Support (PW-PBS) (Fox, Jack, & Broyles, 2005; Stormont, Lewis, & Beckner, 2005). In the remainder of this article, we describe the key elements of PW-PBS and discuss some adaptations from SW-PBS that have been made in order to address the characteristics of young children and the settings in
which they are served. We also discuss some directions that would benefit the further establishment of PW-PBS and, more generally, the entire enterprise of preventing challenging behaviors and promoting the desirable social-emotional development of young children.

**Core Features of PW-PBS**

Program-wide Positive Behavior Support (PW-PBS) is derived from School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SW-PBS) and, as such, the core features are essentially the same. The approach is based on a hierarchical model of prevention (Sugai et al., 2000; Walker et al., 1996), with primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of intervention. Primary, or universal, strategies apply to all children in the program, and it is expected that these strategies will be sufficient to guide the majority of children toward a socially-adaptive developmental trajectory, and away from the path of challenging behaviors (Fox et al., 2003). For those children with higher levels of risk, PW-PBS includes procedures of secondary prevention, which are generally provided in small group settings and focus on the development of social skills, emotional literacy, and problem solving techniques (Joseph & Strain, 2003). When children have needs that transcend the secondary level, intensive and individualized interventions are provided. These tertiary-level strategies require a functional behavioral assessment and assessment-based interventions, and typically involve the participation of a well-trained behavior specialist or consultant. In this article, we focus on the universal strategies of PW-PBS, though we emphasize that the secondary and tertiary components are also essential elements of the full program-based continuum of behavior support.

The principal elements of SW-PBS have been described in numerous articles (e.g., Sugai et al., 2000) and web sites (e.g., www.pbis.org), and these elements are paralleled in PW-PBS. However, there are important distinctions between SW-PBS for elementary and secondary schools and PW-PBS. These distinctions are owed to the significant differences in young children's intellectual, social and emotional development and needs, and to differences between public school (K-12) settings and the programs that provide early education and child care for young children. These latter settings include a variety of program formulations including Head Start centers, subsidized and corporate child care, and public school pre-K, and all of these vary in terms of the resources they have available, their personnel, and the level of autonomy owned by individual classrooms. These distinctions must be considered in the description and implementation of the core elements of PW-PBS.

In the following, we offer a brief description of the core elements with an emphasis on accommodations needed for young children in the context of PW-PBS. More extended treatment of these features is available in other sources (e.g., Stormont et al., 2005).

**Establishing a Team.** Leadership teams are the driving force behind both school-wide and program-wide positive behavior support efforts. With input from all staff, teams determine which features they will
target first, how progress will be monitored, what the behavioral expectations will be, when and how to teach the behavior expectations, and the type of data that will be used to inform decisions. In early childhood programs, teams often need to be larger than in SW-PBS because the formulations of classroom arrangements are often more diverse, there may be different administrators and decision-makers in charge of different aspects of the programs, there may be a variety of related program personnel that should be involved, and it may be even more vital to include ample family input at all levels of the process. Particularly important members may be administrators and individuals with expertise in behavior analysis and behavior support strategies. As in all functional team-based functions, it is important to establish clear delineation of roles, to maintain efficient agendas and record keeping, and to meet on a regular and frequent basis (at least once per month).

**Define Expectations for Children's Behavior.** One of the first tasks for the positive behavior support team is to establish behavioral expectations. With older children, there are often approximately five school-wide expectations that define the school's behavioral guidelines. For early childhood programs it is important to select a smaller number due to developmental differences. It is also important to make sure the expectations include words that children can understand. One early childhood program adopted the following three behavior expectations: "Be Safe, Be Kind, and Be Responsible." These expectations were selected because the first two were words that were already in the children's vocabularies, and the third ("responsible") was part of the expectations for the school district's support system, to which the children would soon be transitioning (Stormont et al., 2005. In another PW-PBS example, established in a large Head Start program in Kansas, the expectations were: "We use walking feet," "We take turns," and "We use soft touch" (Fox et al., 2005). When expectations are established, they are posted throughout the program using pictures and icons, often with a catchy theme designed to attract children's attention.

**Teach Children to Respond to Expectations.** Determination of behavioral expectations is followed by clear plans for teaching children to understand and comply with the expectations in the full range of settings within the program (e.g., classroom, hallway, bathroom, playground). Programs often develop schedules or matrices for teaching the expectations in natural routines across the day, and these schedules are often accompanied by strategies and activities that can be used to teach the expectations. Expectations can be taught with a range of strategies that include modeling, practice, role playing, and feedback in context, and a variety of materials can be used to help the teaching process (e.g., books, games, puppets, social stories). Fortunately, most early childhood programs place an emphasis on teaching social skills, and most early childhood educators recognize that opportunities to teach and support appropriate behavior exist throughout the day (e.g., Bricker, Pretti-Frontczak, & McComas, 1998).

**Acknowledge Children's Positive Behavior.** When behavior expectations are taught, it is extremely important to acknowledge when these behaviors are occurring in the context of the children's regular
routines. Early childhood professionals should illustrate the specific behaviors that exemplify the expectations in context so that the expectations become anchored to familiar words and behavior. Highlighting the occurrence of exemplars in context serves the purpose of teaching the expectations and supporting the use of the expectations through positive acknowledgement of the behavior. For many children, this acknowledgement serves as a positive reinforcer of their behavior and will increase the likelihood that they will engage in the behavior again (Maag, 2001). Acknowledgement of desired behaviors is such a vital feature of PW-PBS that often the leadership team needs to arrange special monitoring strategies to help prompt staff to "catch the children being good" with a high enough frequency.

Acknowledgement of children's response to behavior expectations must be provided at a level appropriate for the developmental age of the children. For example, token systems that are effective with older children may not work with young children given their cognitive levels. Acknowledgment typically needs to be more immediate, more descriptive and more concrete. Highly specific verbal feedback is usually effective. Other approaches for acknowledging positive social behavior are useful, including group celebrations and enthusiastic home notes that the children can help prepare.

**Use Data to Drive Decisions.** During the positive behavior support team meetings, decisions need to be made regarding the types of data to collect to monitor program-wide efforts. Many early childhood programs keep records on referrals for mental health consultation, evaluations for special education, and requests for technical assistance for classroom and/or behavior management. While these sources can be useful in gauging some effects of PW-PBS, the data are generally not sensitive enough to permit decision making regarding universal PW-PBS strategies. Elementary and secondary schools generally have an office referral data collection system already in place when they begin the positive behavior support process, and these data have been demonstrated to be very informative and can be used to focus intervention supports on specific classrooms, settings, and individual students (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004; Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). However, young children are usually not sent to an office when they engage in challenging behavior, and challenging behavior is a more relative term with younger children. Most early childhood programs do not have a program-wide format for collecting data, and behavioral information is often not reported to a central location. As a result, teams seeking to develop PW-PBS may spend a good deal of time determining what behaviors should be documented, what setting conditions should be noted, where the behavioral reports should be sent, and how the reports should be monitored and used in team decision making.

In response to this need, some programs around the country have developed behavior incident forms (e.g, Stormont et al., 2005) or behavior incident reports (e.g., Hemmeter, Fox, Jack, Broyles, & Doubet, 2005) for use in early childhood settings. These forms document occurrences of targeted challenging behaviors,
and note the type of problem behavior, the setting in which it occurred, the type of activity and any other potential triggers to the behavior, the people involved in the activity and the consequences (if any) that were provided following the behavioral incident. These forms have been field tested and have been found to be reasonably efficient data recording strategies for programs invested in PW-PBS.

**Providing Supports for Children with or At-Risk of Serious Challenging Behaviors.** While the universal strategies of PW-PBS can reduce the majority of challenging behaviors, they will not be sufficient for children with high levels of risk factors or children who already display intensive or chronic patterns of challenging behavior. For these children, targeted group interventions at the secondary level (e.g., Joseph & Strain, 2003) or individualized, assessment-based and intensive interventions at the tertiary level are required (Powell et al., 2006). Data from behavior incident forms can help teams determine which children and classrooms need support and what supports are appropriate. Discussion of interventions at these levels is beyond the scope of this article, however there are a number of sources where detailed guidelines are available (e.g. [www.challengingbehavior.org](http://www.challengingbehavior.org)).

**Summary**

Until recently, challenging behaviors of young children in early childhood settings have been addressed largely at the individual level, through mental health and behavioral consultation, or in small groups targeting the social-emotional development of at-risk children. The emergence of school-wide positive behavior support, along with a growing appreciation of the need to prevent children from adverse developmental trajectories (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), have generated new consideration of systemic, proactive approaches within programs of early education and child care. Program-wide positive behavior support (PW-PBS) is the systems approach that uses preventive intervention strategies derived from school-wide positive behavior support and applies them with suitable modifications in early childhood settings.

In this article, we have provided a brief and cursory overview of PW-PBS and have noted how some conspicuous features of the approach are adapted to fit the needs of young children and early childhood settings. Some of the obvious distinctions include the developmental ages of young children, the general absence of "school-wide" data collection and disciplinary procedures, and the considerable diversity of program formulations and funding streams that exist at the early childhood and pre-K level. Still, adaptations are possible and early efforts are beginning to demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of PW-PBS in a variety of settings and circumstances (e.g., Fox & Little, 2000; Fox et al., 2005; Stormont et al., 2005).

While PW-PBS offers exciting possibilities for the further development of early childhood programs, there is much that to be learned. We need to initiate more program offerings and collect detailed evaluation data
in the range of settings to which the approach pertains, and we need to create and validate additional
assessment instruments in order that programs can engage in self-assessment processes. In short, in order
to progress optimally so that the approach is of value to the thousands of early childhood settings in need
of improvement, PW-PBS needs to engage in many of the same iterative processes that SW-PBS has gone
through in the past decade. In addition, however, it will be vitally important for program developers to
explore the value of applying system-wide, proactive intervention strategies for the numerous early
childhood service offerings that are not defined by specific settings or centers. For instance, most
programs for infants and toddlers are family-centered and home-based, and funded by Part C of IDEA,
early Head Start or other entities (Powell, Fixsen, Dunlap, Fox, & Smith, in press). Exciting and
tremendously important opportunities exist for program developers, policy makers, and researchers
concerned with incorporating prevention and positive behavior support perspectives into the systems
affecting the full range of early childhood programs, from infancy through entrance and participation in
the K-12 school system.

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