Building Connections Between Individual Behavior Support Plans and Schoolwide Systems of Positive Behavior Support

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Teachers and administrators indicate that addressing disruptive, disrespectful and aggressive student behavior is one of the greatest demands on their time. While traditional responses to these behaviors in schools have typically included “get tough” policies based on containment, punishment and exclusion, such strategies have been shown to be ineffective for improving behavior. Paradoxically, the coercive and punitive environments that result from this approach may serve as setting events that evoke aggression, attendance problems, disruptions and other undesirable outcomes for students who are most at risk for failure.

A more promising solution is the use of proactive strategies of school wide systems of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) to address the contextual factors within schools that lead to problem behavior. A school-wide systems approach to PBIS is one way to effectively reduce chronic challenging behavior, promote cultures of social competence, and meet the needs of children with significant behavioral challenges. The goal of school-wide systems of PBIS is to create and maintain a host environment that emphasizes the development of a positive school climate, practical policies, well-defined physical spaces, and monitoring systems to improve academic and social outcomes for all students, but especially those who are considered at risk for behavior problems.

Schools that have implemented school-wide systems of PBIS increase their capacity to support students who present challenges by shifting away from traditional responses of solving behavior problems through suspension and exclusion to an approach that emphasizes the development of specially designed and individualized interventions based on functional behavioral assessment to generate an understanding of how the social and instructional context effect an individual student’s behavior. In doing so, these schools have redefined the roles and responsibilities of educators and all school personnel in accountability for promoting positive behavioral interventions, strategies and support for students with chronically challenging behavior. Individual systems of PBIS focus on integrated, team-based planning and problem solving to design individual support plans to prevent, reduce and replace problem behaviors and to develop, maintain and strengthen socially desirable behaviors. What we have learned from research and application is that larger overall school-wide systems are required to increase the likelihood that individual support plans are implemented with a high degree of integrity.
Take the example of Matthew, a 9-year-old, third grade student. Matthew attends a school that has experienced an increase in appropriate behaviors and reduction in office referrals following the establishment of universal and secondary systems of PBIS. The school recently developed a building level team that acts as a subgroup of the PBIS team. This Individual Support Team is charged with coordinating support for teachers working with students with challenging behaviors and to develop, implement and monitor programs of behavioral support for individual students.

While his teachers reported that Matthew’s behavior in the classroom was satisfactory, Matthew continued to be sent to the office for arguing, threatening and harassing his peers in the cafeteria, gym and on the playground. Supervisors in these less structured areas reported that the inappropriate behavior occurred several times each day and regularly throughout the day. The counselor and principal expressed considerable concern regarding the intensity of Matthew’s behavior in these settings, which included shaking his head, pounding his fist, mumbling, crying, tantrumming, and issuing threats. Matthew was diagnosed as “Other Health Impaired” under IDEA by a multidisciplinary team and recently began taking Ritalin. His behavior plan provided for weekly meetings with the school counselor to discuss anger management. It was recognized by all the staff that the universal systems of support, standard forms of discipline and current support plan were ineffective at changing Matthew’s behavior. A referral was made to the team to develop a comprehensive individualized support plan for Matthew.

**Functional Behavioral Assessment**

The support team determined that a functional assessment was necessary, and an assessment plan was developed. Descriptive analyses (e.g., teacher interview, student interview, teacher rating) and direct observation (e.g., scatter plot and direct descriptive observation) were conducted to identify the problem behavior, the antecedent and consequent events, and to develop a hypotheses regarding the function of the problem behavior. Results supported a preliminary hypothesis that Matthew engaged in inappropriate behavior to escape peers. To test the hypothesis, Matthew’s class was combined with two other classes from the same grade to participate in a series of game-like cooperative group activities designed to be fun, appealing and low in structure. Conditions were altered so that Matthew was allowed to choose which peers he was with for some activities, but was allowed no choice for others. In essence, the no choice conditions did not allow escape from peers, and predictably, Matthew had an increase in inappropriate behavior when he was not able to escape.

With a confirmed hypothesis, the team then reconvened to design an individualized support plan based on the outcome of the functional assessment. Included in the meeting, in addition to the Individual Support Team, were the classroom teacher, the special education teacher, the counselor, other teachers who had Matthew in their classes (e.g., art, music) and Matthew’s mother. As they discussed the components of the plan, the team followed two guidelines: (a) the plan should build upon systems already in place and (b) be
Plan Development

Several elements were combined to form Matthew’s complete plan. Each component of the individualized plan provided a reasonable extension of the existing universal interventions to a more intense and individualized support plan. To eliminate the antecedent to the inappropriate behaviors, several environmental changes were implemented. Teachers and supervisors in the cafeteria and on the playground were asked to avoid grouping Matthew with “disliked” peers. For example, as part of the cafeteria routine students were directed to sit at specific tables in the cafeteria based on order of entry into the setting or progress of the lunch line. Under the conditions of the individualized support plan the supervisor would redirect Matthew to a different table if it appeared he would be assigned to a table with a disliked peer. Likewise, supervisors increased the rate of praise for appropriate behavior in those environments, particularly when they observed Matthew interacting with students with whom he had experienced problems.

To give Matthew a replacement skill that provided an appropriate means of escape from peers, one-to-one instruction on how to make “I” statements to ask for assignment to a different group or area when unhappy with group membership (e.g., “I would prefer to sit at a different table, please”) was provided. Teachers and supervisors were provided with a precorrect to say when he entered the setting (e.g., “Remember to use an “I” statement if you have some need today”). Because teachers and supervisors had used precorrects when teaching school-wide behavioral expectations to all students, tailoring the procedure to meet Matthew’s needs required little adjustment or effort.

In addition, Matthew participated in lessons on how to respond to teasing and how to respond to perceived challenges from peers since those events were often the antecedents to his problem behavior. Matthew’s mother asked for copies of the social skill lessons so she could prompt Matthew to use the skills at home and reinforce the behaviors when she saw him use them. To support the individualized lessons and promote generalization of the replacement skills being taught to him individually, group social skill lessons on self-management and self-advocacy were taught to the entire class, although tailored to meet Matthew’s specific skill deficits. The lessons were designed to build on and reflect the social skill lessons taught to the entire school regarding behavior expectations in all settings.

The team reconvened after two weeks to review the data that were collected to evaluate the effectiveness of the plan. The data showed a clear decreasing pattern of problem behavior. His classroom teacher reported that he was not coming in from the playground in an agitated state as he did prior to the support plan. Based on the data and teacher report, the team decided to maintain the plan until the end of the school year, which was only two weeks away.
In the fall of the following school year, the Individual Support Team met and reviewed Matthew’s plan. His new classroom teacher reported to the team that he is doing well, and has had no office referrals. The team, however, decided that Matthew could still benefit from additional support and therefore included him in a targeted group intervention, an after school club that focuses on teaching social skills. The “Social Skills Club” meets once a week. To promote generalization, posters of each lesson taught in the club are given to the classroom teacher to display in class and use as a visual prompt. Matthew then presents the weekly social skill lesson to his class. All staff have been instructed on how to prompt and reinforce the skills that are taught.

By providing systems of support across all school settings, Matthew has improved in his ability to interact appropriately with peers, and is experiencing greater success at school. In addition to teaching replacement behaviors and planning for generalization, his individualized support plan addressed how the school environment should be modified to increase the use of the replacement behaviors that were taught and decrease the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of his problem behavior. Critical to success of Matthew’s plan and any plan of support at the individual level is a thorough understanding of the way the problem behavior relates functionally to the school context. The success of an individualized support plan is directly related to the effectiveness of the larger school wide system of PBIS in providing prevention and intervention at the universal, targeted and individual levels.

**Conclusion**

As described above, critical to Matthew’s success was the development of a continuum of positive behavior supports. By linking individual student plans to the larger school set of expectations, processes, and policies, we increase the likelihood of success. Strong universal systems allow schools to make critical alterations in the environment to support newly taught functionally-based replacement behaviors. In addition, through the use of small group interventions schools are able to prevent student problems from becoming chronic and support individual students through less intensive, less intrusive, and less costly interventions.

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