

Challenging Behavior & Effective Discipline for All Students: Best Practice Strategies for Educators

A. Canter, Ph.D., NCSP and Browning Wright, M.S.
National Association of School Psychologists

Disciplining students, particularly those with disabilities, is a long-standing challenge for educators. In recent years, schools have increasingly responded to chronic and serious misbehavior by adopting a "zero tolerance" approach to school discipline. Generally, zero tolerance entails the expulsion or suspension of students as a consequence of serious acts of misconduct, particularly the possession of weapons or drugs.

Unfortunately, however, an increasing number of schools apply a zero tolerance approach to behaviors that do not necessarily threaten the safety or welfare of others. Furthermore, harsh consequences are invoked automatically, irrespective of the severity of the misbehavior or the circumstance involved, and without consideration of the negative impact of these consequences on the welfare of the offending student or on the overall climate of the school. Both research and legislation offer alternative "best practice" strategies that support the safe education of all students.

What Do We Know About Punish-Based Discipline?

Research repeatedly has demonstrated that suspension, expulsion, and other punitive consequences are not the solution to dangerous and disruptive student behaviors. In fact, evidence indicates that dangerous students do not become less dangerous to others when they are excluded from appropriate school settings; quite often they become more so.

As usually implemented, zero tolerance policies are ineffective in the long run, do not increase school safety, and are related to a number of negative consequences, including increased rates of school drop out and discriminatory application of school discipline. Zero tolerance policies may negatively impact students from minority cultures and students with disabilities to a greater degree than other students, as studies have shown that these students constitute a disproportionately large percentage of expulsions and suspensions. Further, discipline practices that restrict access to appropriate education often exacerbate the problems of students with disabilities, increasing the probability that these students will not complete high school.

What Do We Know About Positive Discipline Strategies?

Research has also proven that positive discipline strategies benefit all students:

- Opportunities to forge relationships with caring adults, coupled with engaging curriculum, prevent discipline problems.
- Discipline that is fair, corrective and includes therapeutic relationship-building with students reduces the likelihood of further problems.
- Strategies that effectively maintain appropriate social behavior make schools safer. Safer schools are more effective learning environments.
- Positive solutions address student needs, environmental conditions, teacher interactions and matching student with curriculum.
- Reducing student alienation through "schools-within-a-school" and other peer relationship models can dramatically reduce acting out in schools, especially in large settings.
- When students are given an appropriate education in a supportive environment, they improve behavior and performance.
- Appropriately implemented proactive behavior support systems can lead to dramatic improvements that have long-term effects on the lifestyle, communication skills and problem behavior in individuals with disabilities and those at-risk for poor adult outcomes.

Positive Behavioral Interventions, Strategies and Supports

The IDEA Amendments of 1997 provided new requirements to support students with disabilities who exhibit challenging behaviors, through the implementation of "positive behavior interventions, strategies and supports" when a student's behavior "impedes his or her own learning or that of others." The amendments apply not only to direct implementation of supports for individual students, but also address the broader issues of school safety and climates conducive to learning for all students. Systemic changes in a school's or district's approach to discipline and behavioral intervention, including parent and community involvement, can significantly impact school climate and student learning. All students, both disabled and nondisabled, can benefit from proactive behavioral support systems.

Positive behavioral interventions, strategies and supports focus on increasing desirable behaviors instead of punishing undesirable behaviors. They emphasized the importance of making positive changes in the student's environment in order to improve the student's behavior. Such changes may entail the use of positive reinforcement, modeling, supportive teacher-student relations, family support and assistance from a variety of educational and mental health specialists. Research indicates that effective implementation of proactive behavioral supports includes:

- **Culturally competent, family-friendly** behavior support
- For individual students, a **Functional Behavior Assessment**, conducted when the problem behavior is first observed or as a **proactive** activity
- Focus both on **prevention** of problem behaviors and **early access** to effective behavior support
- Implementation with **sufficient intensity and precision** to produce behavioral gains that have a significant and durable impact on the academic, social and living options available to the student

Examples of effective proactive behavioral strategies: There are a number of research-based approaches to providing proactive systems of behavioral support, including Positive Behavior Support (PBS), violence prevention programs, social skills instruction and school-based mental health services. Examples of effective strategies include:

- **Violence prevention:** The most frequent components of a violence prevention program include a prevention curriculum; services from school psychologists, counselors or social workers; family and community involvement; and implementation of effective school-wide discipline practices.
- **Social skills training and positive behavioral supports:** Interventions that help students with emotional/behavioral disorders and social skills deficits have the potential to significantly improve school-wide behavior and safety.
- **Early intervention strategies:** Interventions that target low levels of inappropriate behavior before they escalate into violence can significantly reduce the need for harsh consequences later.
- **In-school suspension:** Focusing on continuing the curriculum while therapeutically debriefing to identify and eliminate the root cause of an acting out episode offers a constructive alternative to exclusion.
- **Mentors:** Adults from the school or community work with at-risk students to improve self-concept and motivation to engage in appropriate behavior.
- **Teacher support teams:** Teams of school personnel meet on a regular basis to evaluate both class climate and student needs, and provide support and strategies to engage difficult students as a prevention effort.

Interim Alternative Educational Settings

Not all significant behavior problems can be adequately addressed through proactive behavioral support strategies, given the wide range of causal factors and the immediate concern for student safety. The IDEA '97 provisions for Interim Alternative Educational Settings (IAES) allow school personnel to quickly intervene and remove from the classroom or school a student with disabilities who engages in behavior that seriously threatens

the safety and well-being of self or others. The rules specify that, for certain dangerous behaviors, school personnel can treat the student with disabilities as they would treat students without disabilities in removing without parent consent, with certain restrictions. (See Bear, Quinn & Burkholder, below, for extensive information about IAES.)

Research indicates that effective alternative programs for students with disabilities include the following characteristics: 1) Low staff to student ratio with highly trained, culturally diverse staff; 2) a strong component of parent and community agency involvement; 3) use of nontraditional instruction, adapted curriculum and flexible staff roles; 4) sufficient funding and resources to implement program; 5) sensitivity to individual and cultural differences; 6) clear program and student goals; 7) onsite counseling services; 8) multidisciplinary case management; 9) research-based interventions; 10) formative and summative program evaluation.

Resources

Bear, G., Quinn, M. & Burkholder, S. (2001). *Interim alternative educational settings for children with disabilities*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

National Association of School Psychologists <http://www.nasponline.org/> -- (see fact sheets on Positive Behavior Supports; Zero Tolerance; IDEA and Discipline)

Safe and Responsive Schools Project <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/>

Sugai, G. & Horner, R. (2001, June). School climate and discipline: Going to scale (The National Summit on the Shared Implementation of IDEA, OSEP, Washington, D.C., June 2001). Available at: www.ideainfo.org

Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (University of Oregon) <http://www.pbis.org/main.htm>

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