

Reducing the Effectiveness of Bullying Behavior in Schoolsⁱⁱⁱ

OSEP Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

www.pbis.org

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Ensuring that children and youth have safe, caring, and respectful places to learn and socialize has been among the top concerns of the general public over the past 40 years (Bushaw & Lopez, 2010). However, effective classroom management and school discipline receive relatively minor attention in many teacher preparation programs and remain in the informal shadows of the academic mission of many schools (Baker, 2005; Oliver & Reschly, 2007; Siebert, 2005). The assumption is that students will come to school ready to learn, adequately prepared to navigate the classroom expectations, and have the social skills to establish lasting relationships with others. In addition, disciplinary consequences and policies are used to “control and punish” norm-violating actions; and, too often, learning the school and classroom behavioral expectations is informal and trial and error by consequence at best.

Calls for effective behavior management and better discipline spike when a school shooting occurs, a student takes her own life, or a youth hurts his classmate. At these times, professionals’ immediate reactions are to demand more punishment-oriented consequences, greater student accountability and personal responsibility, and intensive screening for identification. Concerns about recent tragic bullying events and general lack of civility of children and youth have raised priority initiatives for bully proofing and violence prevention.

Although such efforts are understandable and admirable, they are not implemented for long, student behavior does not improve, and school climate remains negative and control-oriented. A **major message** of this paper is that the challenge is not that we don’t know the characteristics of effective violence prevention strategies, but that we need to implement a systemic framework or process through which these strategies might actually prevent the development and occurrences of violent behavior for all students.

The **purpose** of this document is to provide an overview of how **school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS)** as a framework for improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of practices can help prevent school violence and bullying behavior, in particular. This overview is organized around eight main questions.

What Do We Know about Preventing Violence in Schools?

Decades of research provide excellent guidance on what competent school environments look like and do to prevent the development and occurrence of violent behavior, including bullying behavior, in schools and neighborhoods (e.g., Biglan, 1995; Gottfredson, 1997; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993; Mayer, 1995; Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1997; Tolan & Guerra, 1994; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). In general, effective schools formally invest in the following protective activities:

1. School-wide curriculum that emphasizes targeted social skills instruction.
2. Establishment of positive school and classroom social cultures where teaching and learning are emphasized.
3. Challenging and engaging instructional practices that effectively maximize academic success for all students.
4. Continuous, positive, and active supervision and monitoring of student behavior and learning.
5. Regular, frequent, and positive acknowledgements and reinforcement for student displays of academic and social behavior success.
6. Active involvement of all students and family, faculty, and community members.
7. Multi-year and multi-component approaches to implementation.
8. Adults who model the same positive social behaviors and values expected of students.

What is “Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports?”

PBIS IS a prevention-oriented multi-tiered framework for school personnel to (a) organize evidence-based practices, (b) implement those practices with high fidelity, and (c) maximize academic and social behavior outcomes for all students (Sugai et al., 1999). It is important to understand that PBIS is NOT a packaged curriculum, scripted intervention, or manualized strategy, and is grounded in the eight protective activities summarized in the answer for the previous question.

To maximize the impact of effective violence prevention strategies, careful attention must be directed to the systemic supports that enable accurate, durable, and scalable implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005). In 1996, the U.S. Congress reauthorized the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), and included authority to establish the National Technical Assistance Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS, www.pbis.org). The Center’s primary responsibility is the study, demonstration, and dissemination of evidence-based, prevention-oriented practices and systems that promote positive and effective classroom and school social cultures.

How Does School-wide PBIS Relate to the Prevention of Bullying Behavior?

School-wide PBIS begins with the premise that all students should have access to supports to prevent the development and occurrence of problem behavior, including bullying behavior. To avoid stigmatizing any student, school-wide PBIS emphasizes what a student does and where it occurs. Instead of negatively labeling a student as a bully, victim, perpetrator, or aggressor, the emphasis is on labeling what the student does, for example, name-calling, teasing, intimidation, verbal aggression, and cyber-harassment. Bullying behavior is always described in the context or setting in which it occurs, for example, cyberspace, hallway, dance, field trip, bus, or other “setting.”

From a school-wide PBIS perspective, successful prevention of bullying behavior is linked directly to teaching adults and students (a) what bullying looks like, (b) what to do before and when bullying behavior is observed, (c) how to teach others what to do, and (d) how to establish a positive and preventive environment that reduces the effectiveness of bullying behavior (Ross, Horner, & Stiller, 2009).

What is the PBIS Approach to Preventing Bullying Behavior?

PBIS takes a multi-tiered responsiveness-to-intervention approach to preventing bullying behavior (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007; Sugai & Horner, 2009), which is derived directly from the “3-tiered” public health prevention logic (Walker et al., 1996).

At Tier I, all students and staff are taught directly and formally about how to behave in safe, respectful, and responsible ways across all school settings. The emphasis is on teaching and encouraging positive social skills and character traits. If implemented well, most students will benefit and be successful (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Taylor-Greene et al., 1997; Sugai et al., 1999).

At Tier II, students whose behaviors do not respond to Tier I supports are provided additional preventive strategies (Crone, Hawken, & Horner, 2010; Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007) that involve (a) more targeted social skills instruction, (b) increased adult monitoring and positive attention, (c) specific and regular daily feedback on their behavioral progress, and (d) additional academic supports, if necessary.

At Tier III, students whose behaviors do not respond to Tier I and II supports are provided intensive preventive strategies (Crone & Horner, 2003; Eber, Sugai, Smith, & Scott, 2002; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004) that involve (a) highly individualized academic and/or behavior intervention planning; (b) more comprehensive, person-centered and function-based wraparound processes; and (c) school-family-community mental health supports.

From a prevention and responsiveness-to-intervention perspective, not all students respond equally to bully prevention strategies because of a variety of risk and protective factors, for example, behavioral learning history, socio-economic status, social skill competence, academic achievement, disability, peer and family influences (Biglan, 1995; Mayer, 1995; Spivak & Prothrow-Stith, 2001; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). Effective Tier I prevention programs are intended to support most students and then to identify when more intensive and specialized assistance (Tier II and III) is required. This logic is important for students who engage in bullying behavior as well as those who are targets and observers of bullying behaviors. It is important to note that increasing the severity and number of more punishing consequences is not emphasized.

Many evidence-based practices for preventing bullying behavior are available (Bradshaw, Johnson, 2011; Elliott, Hamburg, & Williams, 1998; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Lipsey & Wilson, 1993; Mayer, 1995; Morrison, Furlong, & Morrison, 1997; Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1990; Ross & Horner, 2009); however, their effectiveness and durability are dependent upon the use of good data systems, efficient progress monitoring tools, competent school personnel, on-going and embedded professional development, formal coaching and coordination supports, and adequate school and district systems to sustain meaningful outcomes with accurate implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005; PBIS Implementation Blueprint, 2010; PBIS Evaluation Blueprint, 2009).

What Costs are Associated with Implementing PBIS?

The National PBIS Center is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education to disseminate and provide technical assistance to schools, districts, and states. The PBIS Center’s website (www.pbis.org) provides a comprehensive collection of free and downloadable materials related to the multi-tiered approach to PBIS, including bullying behavior prevention.

Contact information for a network of state and district implementation efforts is also available at the website. Some states have formalized their training and professional development efforts such that costs are minimized. PBIS state coordinators can be contacted for more information about school and district implementation opportunities and costs.

Although specific trainer costs may vary depending on whether a state or district has established its own training capacity or relies on external trainers, a school's major costs will be associated with professional development days for a PBIS leadership team to develop, implement, and monitor the progress of a PBIS action plan (e.g., substitute teachers). Professional development costs depend on demographic characteristics (e.g., school and district size, number of schools, prior PBIS experiences). During the initial implementation years, schools should expect each team member to participate in 4 to 6 full days of professional development, and implementation action planning (PBIS Professional Development Blueprint, 2010).

Because implementation occurs in phases, the first two to three years are focused on establishing the working infrastructure and capacity for initial implementation of the three-tiered prevention continuum, especially Tier I supports. Over time, action planning shifts to sustaining and improving implementation outcomes, behavioral capacity, and efficiency, and addressing other behavioral needs.

Most importantly, before implementing any PBIS component, schools, districts, and states are encouraged to complete a self-assessment audit of existing behavioral initiatives, programs, interventions, and priorities. The goal is to discontinue ineffective or poorly implemented practices, adjust effective initiatives to improve efficiency and durability, and combine or integrate efforts that have similar outcome expectations and objectives. PBIS implementation cannot be an "add-on" to existing initiatives and programs. Instead, existing resources are re-invested in the smallest number of the most effective, efficient, and relevant practices and initiatives possible. Doing a few things really well is preferred to doing many things partially, or not at all.

Does PBIS Work Better with Different Groups, Settings, or Contexts?

The research base for PBIS is established and expanding (e.g., Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010; Horner et al., 2009; Safran & Oswald, 2003). In general, experimental and quasi-experimental studies have demonstrated that when implemented with fidelity, school-wide PBIS is associated with improvements in perceived school health and safety; decreases in disciplinary referrals, detentions, and suspensions; increases in academic achievement; and improvements in concerns related to over-representation and disproportionality for students with disabilities and of color.

Although PBIS implementation has generally occurred at the elementary and middle school levels, high school applications are expanding. In general, the elements, processes, practices, and systems of PBIS are similar across all school levels; however, the specific appearance and implementation characteristics vary based on developmental, cultural, linguistic, organizational, etc. features of individual schools and communities (Flannery et al., 2009).

What Does School-wide PBIS Look like When Bullying Behavior needs to be Addressed?

By investing in the implementation of multi-tiered prevention frameworks, like PBIS, schools are creating school cultures that prevent the development and occurrences of bullying behavior. However, if

a school suspects that bullying behavior might be becoming problematic, a team-based and data-driven problem-solving process is initiated. The following table summarizes the key features of this process.

PBIS Steps to Addressing Bullying Behavior at School
Step 1. If bullying behavior is identified as a concern, members of a PBIS school leadership team would start by examining their discipline data to determine ☐ How often specific bullying behaviors (e.g., verbal/physical aggression, intimidation, teasing) were occurring. ☐ Where those behaviors were being reported (e.g., hallways, parking lots, cyberspace). ☐ How many and which students are involved in displays of bullying behavior (including students who are targets and/or observers of bullying behavior). ☐ Which staff members have been involved in bullying behavior incidents. ☐ When during the day (time/period) and week are bullying behavior being reported.
Step 2. A PBIS school leadership team would examine the extent to which Tier I practices and systems are being implemented accurately, fluently, and school-wide. The focus is on the extent to which staff members have ☐ Taught, provided practice for, and acknowledged the behaviors that represent three to five positive school-wide behavioral expectations (e.g., “respecting self, others, and environment;” “safety, responsibility, and honor”). ☐ Actively and positively supervised all students across all school settings. ☐ Had high rates of positive interactions and contact with all students. ☐ Arranged their instruction so all students are actively academically engaged, successful, and challenged.
Step 3. To address bullying behaviors at Tier I, all students and staff would be taught a common strategy for preventing and responding to bullying behavior: ☐ How to avoid situations where bullying behavior is likely. ☐ How to intervene and respond early and quickly to interrupt bullying behavior, remove the social rewards for bullying behavior, and prevent bullying behavior from escalating. ☐ How to remove what triggers and maintains bullying behavior. ☐ How to improve the accuracy, fluency, and sustainability of implementation efforts. ☐ What to do when prevention efforts do not work. ☐ How and what to report and record when a bullying behavior incident occurs.

PBIS Steps to Addressing Bullying Behavior at School

Step 4. If Steps 1 through 3 are done well, a relatively small proportion of students (initiators, targets, bystanders) will require more than Tier I supports. These students should not receive more of the same ineffective strategies, especially, more severe consequences. Instead, students whose bullying behavior does not improve should be considered for Tiers II and III supports.

- ☐ These supports would be initiated by increasing consideration of behavioral function or purpose (e.g., “bully behavior results in access to bystander, target, and/or adult attention;” “target behavior results in access to peer and/or adult attention;” “bystander behavior results in access to initiator attention”).
- ☐ Based on the function of a student’s behavior, students would (a) begin the day with a check-in or reminder about the daily expectations; (b) be more overtly and actively supervised; (c) receive more frequent, regular and positive performance feedback each day; and (d) conclude each day with a checkout or debriefing with an adult.
- ☐ More intensive supports would be highly individualized, multi-disciplinary, trans-situational (i.e., school, family, community), and long-term.

Step 5. Improving and sustaining implementation of an effective intervention or practice requires that

- ☐ Accuracy and fluency of implementation are monitored frequently and regularly.
- ☐ Behavioral data are reviewed regularly.
- ☐ Intervention features are adapted to improve outcomes and sustain implementation.
- ☐ Efficient and expert capacity is established to enable consideration of new or other behavioral concerns (scaling and continuous regeneration).

Where can more information about PBIS be found?

Information about PBIS can be obtained from a number of sources:

- National Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (www.pbis.org)
- Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools (www.ed.gov/osdfs)
- Office of Special Education Programs (www.ed.gov/osers/osep)
- Individual State Departments of Education

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