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Elements of Behavior Support Plans: A Technical Brief

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In their efforts to address challenging problem behaviors, educators and families have indicated a great need to develop and implement effective behavior support plans (BSPs). Fortunately, the functional behavioral assessment technology provides an excellent base for building behavior intervention plans. However, educators and families need guidelines to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevance of the BSPs they develop. The purpose of this article is to review the features of a BSP that teams should consider as they develop effective responses to problem behavior.

As schools struggle to implement the 1997 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), interest in defining the key elements of effective behavior support has been renewed. The purpose of this “technical brief” is to review the features of a behavior support plan (BSP) that teams should consider as they develop responses to problem behavior. Our hope is that this article responds especially to the requests from families seeking clarification of what they should look for in a positive BSP developed for their son or daughter. In addition, teachers, special support staff, and administrators should find the guidelines reviewed in this article to be helpful in their efforts to develop effective and relevant BSPs and work collaboratively with families.

We recognize that a comprehensive description of positive behavior support would require a full book and that a number of excellent resources (see References) exist for each of the elements we list. Our focus here is to provide a brief overview with the hope that the reader will explore cited references to gain a more in-depth understanding of relevant elements. To achieve this purpose, we describe the purposes of BSPs and main sec

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tions of the BSP: (a) demonstrating an understanding of the problem, (b) redesigning the environment, and (c) organizing for success. In the end, we also provide a simple check list that includes these elements and is intended to serve as a self-monitoring and self-assessment guide for anyone involved in the development of BSPs.

A BSP defines how an environment will change to help a student reduce problem behaviors, improve prosocial behaviors, and become more successful within the school (Sugai, Horner, et al., 2000). The behavior plan defines what “we” will do differently and how we will know if our efforts to change have been effective in changing student behavior. Behavior plans also are seen as documents that provide professional accountability and increase the consistency with which a team of adults implements a support plan.

Behavior plans typically are developed by a team of individuals who know the student well and are prepared to commit time and resources toward the goal of helping the child change his or her behavior patterns. The team often will include teachers, administrators, specialists, family members, and (in many cases) the student. The information that is needed to guide the development of BSPs is obtained by conducting a functional behavioral assessment (FBA; see Sugai, Horner, & Sprague, 1999; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Hagan, 1998; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, & Hagan-Burke, 1999–2000/*this issue*). Together, the FBA and BSP assist the team to (a) demonstrate an understanding of the problem, (b) redesign the environment, and (c) organize for success.

DEMONSTRATING AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM

An effective BSP should begin by defining the extent to which the team understands what is occurring and why problems keep occurring. This section of the plan typically has four parts.

Positive Contributions

A good BSP often begins by defining positive contributions of the student. Effective plans build on the strengths of a student (e.g., enjoys reading and writing science fiction short stories, volunteers at the recycling center, visits with school nurse two to three times a week), and defining what the student brings to the school is a useful way to begin the process of identifying effective solutions (e.g., positive reinforcers, engagement activities).

Operational Definitions

The reason for spending time and effort in the design of behavior support is the belief that this investment will result in behavior change that is in the best interest of the child. An important first step is to agree on all the problem behaviors that currently serve as barriers

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to effective education and social inclusion for the student. The two most common errors made in defining problem behaviors are (a) to define only one behavior when many are problematic and (b) to describe behaviors as internal states (e.g., angry, mean) or diagnostic categories (autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD], Asperger syndrome) rather than as observable events (e.g., runs away, does not respond to other-initiated conversations, uses profanity).

It is very important for a team to agree on the exact behaviors that are being targeted. A good definition of problem behavior will allow someone who reads the plan to recognize or record occurrences of the behavior. A poor example of a behavior description would be the following: “Karl is cruel to the other children.” On reading that statement, the reader does not know what Karl does that is cruel. A better alternative would be “Karl pushes other children, calls them rude names, and threatens physical violence.” A good behavioral definition tells us something about how often it

occurs (frequency), where it occurs (locus), what it looks like (topography), how long it occurs (duration), how strong it is (intensity), and how long it takes for it to occur (latency).

A team needs to agree with precision on the full set of problem behaviors that will be the focus of the BSP. A common misrule is to focus on one problem behavior when, in fact, the student displays a number of different behaviors. Some of these behaviors are unrelated and independent of each other (i.e., used only under specific conditions or routines and for specific reasons), are part of behavioral chains (i.e., behavioral escalations), or are members of a response class (i.e., different behaviors that have a similar function). It is important to remember to look at and define all of the problem behaviors that a student displays and then look for similarities and differences among them.

Problem Routines

One of the most important features of effective behavior support is focusing on the context where problem behavior occurs. One effective way to accomplish this focus is to write out the student's daily schedule and rate each daily routine as being more or less likely to be associated with problem behaviors. Routines might be individual classes (e.g. math, art, social science), transitions (arrival, passing periods, lunch), or specific activities (independent seatwork, small-group project time, class lecture). By listing the student's schedule and defining where problems do and do not occur, the team often will identify where additional assessment information is needed (e.g., all classes, times when the team is unclear if the child is having difficulty) and identify where the student is doing well. It is as important to learn where a student is being successful as it is to learn where she or he is having difficulty.

By collecting information about problem behavior, teams will be able to focus the strategies they identify and develop in their BSPs. For example, features of the times and places where the problem behavior is less likely to occur can be built into strategies to inhibit or prevent occurrences of problem behavior or to encourage displays of desirable behavior. Similarly, those conditions that are associated with a high likelihood of problem behavior can be modified to discourage problem behavior and encourage expected

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behavior. Routine information also can be used to identify specific times and places where the interventions of the BSP should be initiated.

FBA

FBA is a process for identifying the events that reliably predict and maintain problem behaviors (Horner & Carr, 1997; O'Neill et al., 1997). Information from the FBA process is essential for the development of BSPs, and the process typically is led or coordinated by trained special educators, school psychologists, counselors, or specialists with input and collaboration from the behavior support team. The process can occur through a wide array of strategies, but the most common approach is to interview those who know the student best (this also might include interviewing the student) and complete direct observations (or even systematic manipulations of the setting) to confirm the hypotheses that arise from the interviews.

The process might be very simple or in complex situations might require considerable skill and expertise (Repp & Horner, 1999). In all cases, however, a competent FBA will result in (a) operational definitions of problem behavior, (b) identification of the events that reliably predict where problem behaviors are most and least likely, (c) identification of the consequences that are believed to maintain the

problem behavior, and (d) some form of direct observation data supporting the hypotheses.

Effective functional assessments often are organized around problem routines and result in a “summary” statement that describes what the student does, the conditions that are likely to trigger the problem behavior, and an assumption or hypothesis about what consequences appear to maintain the behavior. An assessment might conclude that, for example, “When Carla is asked to perform tasks where she is likely to fail, she will whine, complain and be verbally abusive. These behaviors appear to be maintained by escaping the demanding situation.” FBAs also result in the collection of direct observation data that help to confirm or refine our confidence in the summary statement. In our example with Carla, “direct observation data collected by the teacher over three days confirmed that 4 of 5 problem instances were consistent with this hypothesis.”

If a team takes the time to understand a pattern of problem behavior, they are more likely to build a plan of support that will be both implemented by staff and effective (Carr et al., 1999; Didden, Duker, & Korzilius, 1997). The goal is to use what we learn about the problem behavior and the contexts in which it occurs to construct BSPs that will make the problem behavior less effective and the more desirable replacement behaviors more adaptive and effective for the student.

Redesigning the Environment

Another common misrule is that BSPs are developed to “change” student behavior. Although a change or improvement in student behavior is the ultimate outcome, this change actually is associated with a change in the environment or what the adults (or peers) typi-

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cally do. Thus, a good behavior plan typically focuses on or defines what adults (or peers) in the environment will do differently to produce a change in the student’s behavior. A tremendous amount has been learned in the past 10 years about how to build effective behavior support in schools. The technology is large and worthy of time and study. This literature can be condensed, however, into a few key elements that should be part of positive BSPs and are described next.

Element 1: Learn how the student perceives or experiences events in his or her environment. A number of disabilities (e.g., ADHD, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder) alter how a child experiences the world around him or her. It is worth the time to consider and learn about medical, physiological, and social factors that alter how a child is experiencing school. In particular, attention should be focused on factors that might make seemingly neutral events either very positive or very negative for the child (e.g., change in seating arrangement or typical classroom routine, substitute teacher). It is also appropriate for a behavior plan to include identification of the type and level of disability, but this information becomes helpful only if it includes discussion about how these factors affect the student’s daily experience and how the BSP might be implemented.

Element 2: Invest in preventing occurrences of problem behavior. A BSP should include strategies that will be implemented *before* problem behaviors occur. The goal is to identify both general and specific features of targeted routines that might reduce the likelihood of problems. For example, changing the way greetings are presented to a student, engaging the student in a successful academic task before presenting a difficult task, asking a student to review a social skill strategy in a situation where it might be used, and so on, could preempt the conditions that

encourage problem behavior and create situations that increase the likelihood of more appropriate behavior.

When considering the quality of a BSP, a team should examine “general features” of the classroom, playground, lunchroom, or other locations of problem routines. Research suggests that problems are more likely if the student (a) does not have an effective way to communicate with peers and adults; (b) does not have effective way to move from one place to another; (c) is unable to predict the schedule of events throughout the day; (d) has no choices about what he or she does, with whom, or how long they last; (e) is socially isolated; (f) has access to a limited number of activities; and (g) does not receive positive attention or acknowledgment. This list is long and complex, but the real message is that before intense behavioral interventions are considered, a team should reflect on the extent to which problem environments have these “general” features. Attending to these general features often results in benefits for many students, not just the student for whom the BSP is being considered.

In addition to changing general features to prevent problem behaviors, it also is possible to alter *specific* environmental features that prevent problems, which effective teachers often do as a regular part of how they teach. The changing of seating arrangements to separate students in conflict is a prevention effort. The modification of the reading difficulty of a math assignment to accommodate the reading skills of a low-functioning stu

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dent is a method of preventing problem behaviors. As a general rule, if a student is identified as engaging in problem behaviors to escape from aversive events (e.g., demands, public performance), one prevention strategy might focus on eliminating or modifying these aversive events so that they are no longer aversive. The goal is not to remove the child from tasks, expectations, or instruction but to look at how those events can be changed so that they are not aversive for the student (Dunlap, Kern-Dunlap, Clarke, & Robbins, 1991; Dunlap, White, Vera, Wilson, & Panacek, 1996).

Similarly, if a child appears to engage in problem behaviors to gain access to denied events (e.g., peer attention, adult recognition), prevention strategies might consist of (a) making that reward more readily available before problem behaviors occur, (b) making access to the reward more predictable, or (c) giving the child choices that lead to that exact outcome. Preventive approaches are not possible in all situations but might be very effective when they are feasible and might be beneficial as one element of a multielement plan of support.

Element 3: Teaching is the most powerful behavior support strategy available in schools. Most BSPs should include an *instructional* objective. We seldom think of teaching new skills as part of behavior support, but recent research suggests that teaching new, adaptive skills is perhaps the single most powerful strategy for producing durable behavior change. Behavior problems might be perceived as either the result of mislearning or a lack of learning (Wolery, Bailey, & Sugai, 1988). If the team has taken time to understand what conditions lead to problem behavior and what maintains the problem behavior, then it often is possible to identify the skills the student needs to learn to be effective without engaging in problem behavior. This might be as simple as teaching a child with poor communication skills how to ask for a “break” or “help,” or as complex as teaching skills for self-management and the development of peer social relationships.

The real message is that effective behavior support is not just about defining the consequences that will punish or control problem behaviors, but about teaching the student the skills that will make problem behaviors irrelevant and comparatively inefficient. The student will *not* perform problem behaviors if he or she has a better, socially acceptable way to get what he or she needs—not simply because he or she wants to avoid being punished.

Among the most exciting advances in the past 10 years has been the addition of systematic instruction as a key element in behavior support. Teachers and families should

expect to see instructional objectives that relate directly to building appropriate skills as part of positive BSPs. Explicit strategies for teaching prosocial alternative behaviors will become more prevalent and emphasize general case rules about when and how to use alternative behaviors, consideration of the contexts in which the alternative behaviors are required, direct teacher-led social skills instruction (e.g., model–lead–test), informative corrections when social behavior errors occur, and high-frequency positive reinforcement for displays of acceptable and desired alternative behaviors.

Element 4: Avoid rewarding problem behavior. Among the great ironies in behavior support today is the finding that many families and teachers inadvertently *reward* the very behaviors that they find most troubling. This rewarding of problem behaviors might occur by a teacher choosing to say something like “Ok, you can have your way to

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day so the rest of us can finish the assignment” (i.e., positive reinforcement) or via the more subtle process by which children get out of difficult activities by behaving inappropriately (being sent to the office is an excellent way of avoiding difficult work; i.e., negative reinforcement). As a general rule, problem behaviors should not be ignored in schools. Instead, clear consequences for problem behaviors should be applied consistently and immediately. By taking the time to understand what consequences maintain problem behaviors within daily routines, teachers and families often can identify how to avoid inadvertently rewarding problem behaviors.

Research on disruptive and dangerous behavior in schools has identified that in all too many cases, either teachers or peers reliably reward students when they engage in problem behaviors. A good BSP alters the environment so problem behaviors do not result in gaining access to preferred events (e.g., teacher or peer attention or tangible objects or activities) or escape from demanding situations.

Element 5: Reward positive behaviors. Among the first skills that new teachers are taught is that they must create positive environments. However, new teachers often falsely assume that all children look forward to coming to school, being in the class, and in interacting with teachers and peers and as a result do not create, build, and implement sufficient positive learning environments. Thus, teachers must establish and sustain classroom and behavior management systems that emphasize the reward of positive behaviors.

One of the major ways that positive environments are established is by providing students with regular acknowledgments for their efforts and success at academic and behavioral tasks. Children must learn to “try,” try to learn, and succeed in learning. They must receive positive acknowledgments for engaging in appropriate learning and social skills. These acknowledgments do not need to be artificial, but they need to be valuable, informative, and meaningful for the student. Effective teachers learn and use what is uniquely rewarding for each of their students. When a team has developed an effective BSP, the team has identified what the student finds rewarding and organized the environment so that the student receives this recognition, acknowledgment, reward, or reinforcer on a regular and frequent schedule. The use of positive acknowledgment should be a prominent, dominant, and an obvious feature of the BSP and its implementation.

Children who engage in problem behaviors are at major risk of gaining even less positive attention in school than are other children. Thus, great care and attention should be directed toward organizing effective systems of recognition for children who receive behavior support. In particular, special attention should be given to rewarding those new social and communication skills that have been selected and included in the BSP because they compete with the problem behavior and are more efficient, effective, and relevant for the student than the problem behaviors.

Element 6: Know what to do in the most difficult situations. A good BSP will define with high precision what the staff and family should do if the most extreme problem behavior is displayed by the child. The designers and implementers of a good plan of support should never assume that prevention strategies and efforts to teach and reward al

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ternative behaviors will result in the immediate and total elimination of dangerous and difficult behaviors. In contrast, the assumption always should be that the most extreme behavior a child has done in the past will occur again in the future. If the behavior does not occur, those individuals involved in implementing the plan should be gratified; however, they also must have a very clear understanding of and training for what they should do if problems arise under more extreme situations.

Organizing for Success

A behavior plan is more than a set of procedures; it is an agreement and commitment on how a team will work toward a new level of success for a student. A BSP is incomplete and inadequate if the focus is on containing a student rather than defining how the plan will lead that student toward an effective and successful future. Such a plan takes more than procedures. Careful planning, effective procedures, sustained and accurate implementation, and data-based decision making are required. In addition, organizing for success involves attending to how the BSP will be monitored and adjusted over time and ensuring that the elements of the plan are practical and “doable” in the school or home environment.

Monitoring and evaluation. Individuals who implement a BSP have a professional obligation to monitor the impact of a BSP. Each plan should specify observable outcomes that are monitored and used to assess if the plan is being effective. The evaluation section of the plan should indicate what will be monitored (e.g., frequency of fights, duration of off task) and how often the team will meet to review the evaluation information. The basic message is that most BSPs require modifications, especially in the initial implementation stages when training and time are being organized around a plan. An effective BSP is rarely left unchanged for long time periods; instead, frequent adjustments, deletions, and additions are likely. These modifications can occur in a planful manner, or they might be left to the daily judgment of the staff. Experience suggests that planful monitoring and modification is more effective, especially if information about the student’s behavior can be collected and evaluated on a regular basis. The team needs a process to gain the information that will allow modifications in the BSP to be logical and effective (Todd, Horner, Sugai, & Sprague, 1999). Instead of waiting until problems get worse and then reacting to the situation, teams should establish data decision rules that signal a careful examination of the plan because an early indication of problems is suspected.

The contextual fit of BSPs. All too often, teams meet and build BSPs, but the plan becomes only a paper document, not a design for changing real school environment. The best plan will fail if the procedures are not implemented accurately and consistently. It is always important to remember that a BSP is developed and written to guide the actions and behaviors of the implementers of the plan. If the plan is implemented with high fidelity, maximum outcomes for the student are likely. Thus, the development of a BSP should consider the contextual fit between the features of the plan, the skill level and motivation of the implementers of the plan, and the capacity of the environment (e.g., resources, schedule).

Plans often are not implemented because the people who are expected to implement the plan are not involved in the design, are not trained how to implement the plan, do not have the time or resources to do what is written in the plan, and do not believe that the plan will be effective (Albin, Lucyshyn, Horner, & Flannery, 1996). BSPs should be constructed with the direct and active input of the people who will implement the plan. No plan should be developed that is not consistent with the skills, values, resources, and administrative support of those who will implement the plan. This commitment to making sure the plan “fits” the context is seldom emphasized, yet it is essential if the plan is to work. Environments can be altered in many different ways to assist a student to succeed. The goal is to find an approach that is both likely to be effective *and* is likely to be used.

SUMMARY

Our goal has been to provide an overview of elements of BSPs that characterize positive behavior support. We have not emphasized specific procedures or strategies but tried to provide an outline that might be used by school teams as they build plans or by parents as they assess the plans proposed for their children. We recognize that every BSP will not need all of the elements listed to be effective. It might be helpful, however, at least to consider each of the elements as a plan is developed and implemented. Toward that end, Table 1 includes a short checklist that teams and families might find useful as they build and review plans.

TABLE 1
BSP Checklist

Student	
When developing and implementing behavior support plans, judge the degree to which each of the following has been considered:	
	G = Good, O = Okay, P = poor, N = not applicable
	<i>Date</i>
Functional assessment: Develop understanding of problem behavior.	1. Describe problem behavior in operational terms. 2. Identify problem routines.
	3. State complete functional assessment hypothesis.
	4. Collect data to confirm hypothesis statement.
Foundations: Consider factors that go across routines.	1. Health and physiology.
	2. Communication.
	3. Mobility.
	4. Predictability.
	5. Choice.
	6. Social relationships.
	7. Activity patterns.

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

	<i>Date</i>
Prevention: Make problem behavior irrelevant.	1. Modify activity schedule.
	2. Adapt curriculum.
	3. Modify design of instruction.
	4. Adapt instructional procedures.
	5. Add prompts for appropriate behavior.
	6. Precorrect for typical problem.
Teaching: Make problem behavior	

- less efficient. 1. Teach specific replacement skills.
2. Teach adaptive social skills.
- Extinction: Make problem behavior less effective. 1. Minimize positive reinforcement for problem behavior.
2. Minimize negative reinforcement for problem behavior.
- Reinforcement: Make appropriate behavior more effective. 1. Select range of effective positive reinforcers. 2. Maximize schedule of positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior.
- Crisis Intervention Plan: Prevent injury. 1. Arrange environment and practice procedures to prevent crisis and emergency situations. 2. Arrange environment and practice procedures to respond to crisis and emergency situations.
- Ensure Contextual Fit: Match intervention to social and treatment context. 1. Consider values and expectations of adults. 2. Assess skill level and fluency of adults.
3. Determine budget.
4. Assess time requirements.
5. Secure administrative support system.
6. Give priority to best interests of student and family.
- Evaluation and Assessment: Make plan more effective, efficient, and relevant. 1. Specify what questions need to be answered. 2. Specify information to be collected.
3. Develop measurement system.
4. Establish schedule for collecting data.
5. Collect and evaluate data.
6. Use data to improve plan.

Note. BSP = behavior support plan.

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