



PBS Practice

The purpose of the series on PBS Practices is to provide information about important elements of positive behavior support. PBS Practices are not specific recommendations for implementation, and they should always be considered within the larger context of planning, assessment and comprehensive support.

Addressing Cultural and Economic Diversity in PBS

There may be significant differences in how individuals from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds perceive and participate in the PBS process. Although there has been increased attention to contextual issues, little has been written about cultural and economic diversity in PBS. Practitioners need to be sensitive to cultural and economic issues in families as they guide individuals, family members and their support providers through the PBS process. It is important to acknowledge and respect cultural and economic differences and to be sensitive in addressing these issues in the design of PBS plans. In this way, the facilitator can better gain the trust and cooperation of family members and significant others, enhance “buy-in” for the plan and, perhaps most importantly, encourage active participation and solicit meaningful contributions from all PBS team members. Culturally-sensitive practices therefore enhance the quality of information shared and lead to effective interventions that are valued and endorsed by the family.

To increase the likelihood that the PBS process will be responsive to families of diverse backgrounds, several strategies are suggested. First, PBS facilitators must take time to establish rapport and build a caring relationship as a “reliable ally” on whom the individual with problem behaviors and his/her family can count for support. Second, PBS facilitators should learn as much as they can about the culture and socioeconomic background of the family, as well as how their background influences daily routines, activities, and expectations for quality of life outcomes. Third, it is important that PBS facilitators understand the roles of family members (e.g., who is the primary caregiver, who is the disciplinarian), the family’s perspectives on its resources (e.g., expectations for immediate vs. extended family members in providing behavior support), and the family’s priorities for their son or daughter with problem behaviors (e.g., academic success may or may not be a priority, suspensions may or may not be viewed as cause for concern). Fourth, PBS facilitators must be willing to enlist support from others when necessary, and work collaboratively throughout the PBS process. Finally, PBS facilitators must feel comfortable “owning up to” what they do *not* know about the family’s needs and preferences, and gain their permission to ask questions that will help them better appreciate possible areas of misunderstanding or disagreement.

Example: When working with a 15 year-old male student with inappropriate verbal interactions with teachers and peers, some of the alternative behaviors initially suggested by teachers included “just walk away,” “zip it (close his mouth),” and “think it but don’t say it.” Unfortunately, the student and his Latino father felt that some of the so-called “problem” behaviors were quite acceptable and very reasonable responses to situations he faced. They also felt strongly that none of the suggested competing behaviors were acceptable alternatives. The student would lose respect if he merely tried to ignore teachers or peers who said things that he saw as critical, disrespectful, or “in his face.” One PBS team member, who the family saw as a “reliable ally,” worked with the student and his father to help them see that power struggles or disagreements with teachers and peers were not attempts to “put him down” or disrespect him. By respecting the family’s Latino heritage and understanding their behavioral norms, the PBS team was able to engage the father and son in problem-solving to come up with behaviors that all could agree on. For example, statements such as “I don’t agree with what you said/told me to do, but I’ll make an attempt to...” were acceptable to David, his family, his teachers.

Sensitivity to cultural and economic diversity must pervade all aspects of goal identification, assessment, plan design, intervention selection, implementation, and monitoring outcomes in PBS. For example, when working with school personnel and family members of an individual's PBS team, the facilitator may face situations when there is disagreement as to what constitutes a problem behavior. This may be due to the variety of orientations among team members and differing cultural norms regarding what behaviors are seen as problematic, for whom, and why. It is also essential to avoid creating—even unintentionally—a label for the individual based on his/her perceived behavioral deficiencies or excesses. For example, one African-American middle school student whose family could not afford to buy him his own bed, rarely got a good night's sleep. At school, he routinely put his head on his desk and fell asleep during his first period math class. His teacher labeled him "lazy" without understanding the reasons for his sleeping in her class; this label upset the student and his mother. A more culturally-sensitive approach revealed the problem and resulted in team members procuring beds for him and two brothers. His sleeping problems in math class were reduced significantly.

Another area in which multicultural perspectives must be considered is in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the PBS plan. Parents must not feel as if they have somehow "failed", or that PBS professionals are criticizing them, if an intervention does not achieve desired outcomes. Multicultural research suggests that family members and consultants may gradually disengage from each other to avoid frustrations of failed efforts. Therefore, it is extremely important that every PBS team contain a person who the family views as a "reliable ally," to help focus on maintaining a productive relationship with the family and other team members.

Frequently Asked Question

How does our own cultural identity have an impact on PBS activities with families?

Each of us brings a unique set of cultural and ethnic experiences to our work with individuals with challenging behaviors and their families. It is important to recognize that we are used to operating within parameters established by our own traditions—and to acknowledge how these traditions have viewed problem behaviors. When the cultural biases of the consumer and the PBS practitioner do not match, there may be barriers to the successful implementation of effective PBS. At the very least, it is important to examine one's own cultural biases and acknowledge their possible impact when working with culturally, ethnically and socio-economically diverse families.

Other Resources

Sheridan, S. (2000). Considerations of multiculturalism and diversity in behavioral consultation with parents and teachers. *School Psychology Review*, 29 (3).

Santarelli, G., Koegel, R.L., Casas, J.M., & Koegel, L.K. (2001). Culturally diverse families participating in behavior therapy parent education programs for children with developmental disabilities. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 3 (2), 120-123.

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