



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.

Systems Change in Positive Behavior Support

Positive behavior support (PBS) occurs in the context of the broad ecologies of family, school, agency, and community. The degree to which the features of these systems promote and maintain positive behavior support may be a critical factor in the effectiveness and longevity of this approach. The growing research base supporting the effectiveness of PBS and recent policy changes (e.g., IDEA 1997) have created an impetus for systems change. Our assumption is that, in order for systems to effectively support PBS, they must be generally proactive, inclusive, flexible, and respectful of diversity.

There is a broad range of issues within systems that may influence the implementation of PBS, and may need to be addressed in a systems change process. They include:

1. Degree to which prevailing mission, vision, and values of the system are consistent with positive behavior support
2. Availability of administrative support, including methods to promote buy-in and accountability among staff
3. Flexibility and adequacy of fiscal and material resources
4. Degree to which existing policies and procedures align with PBS practices
5. Skills and capacities of support providers in the system, and opportunities for staff development
6. Mechanisms for promoting collaboration among families and professionals from various disciplines
7. Availability of consultation and technical assistance from individuals/agencies with expertise in PBS
8. Overall stability of the system (e.g., consistency in support providers, financial security)

In PBS, systems change is the application of problem-solving processes relevant to positive behavioral support with the system as the unit of analysis. There are different levels of systems change (e.g. individual, setting, program, agency, and community). Systems change involves assessing contextual factors that affect performance, as well as existing capacities and skills of practitioners; identifying possible inhibitors and enablers to systems change; designing interventions and supports to facilitate durable change; and planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating ongoing change efforts.

Example: In response to IDEA requirements and a directive from the Superintendent, Mrs. Gill (Principal of Gardner Middle School) made efforts to establish a proactive process for conducting functional behavioral assessments and designing support plans. In the process, she determined that there were barriers to implementing PBS (e.g., staff attitudes, contradictory approaches). Therefore, she convened a school-wide team that included teachers, parents, and support personnel from each grade level and special program. The team identified enablers and inhibitors to change through record reviews, surveys, and personal observations. The school had strengths that could be utilized including a few 'champions' of PBS, openings in their staff-development calendar (when they could conduct PBS training), and a willingness to try new things.

However, aspects of the existing code of conduct were an inhibitor because they exclusively emphasized negative consequences with no reference to FBA or individualized programs. Further, the staff predominantly utilized “quick fix” reactive strategies. This was compounded by the lack of an effective planning and problem-solving processes at Gardner Middle (e.g. no strength-based approaches to prevention or early intervention). In response, the team designed an action plan that involved modifications to the code of conduct, a school-wide staff development program emphasizing prevention and early intervention, and a new child-study team procedure that specifically integrated FBA procedures throughout the decision making process. The team defined specific action steps and responsibilities for implementation that were spread out over the course of a few months. The team’s plan was to prospectively review disciplinary records and conduct periodic interviews with staff to evaluate progress over time. Ultimately, the building team was to become a part of the strategic planning process at Gardner Middle School.

Systems change may be best viewed as a developmental process. Personnel and other relevant stakeholders need to become empowered to expand their creativity and flexibility and develop ownership of changes being made. Generally, adaptations should be introduced gradually to avoid over-taxing the system to the point that other issues and needs are compromised. It may be necessary to address competing priorities to overcome barriers (e.g., problems posed by traditional, expert-driven models). Further, given time and resource constraints, it may be important to embed PBS within existing policies and procedures (e.g., within the instructional problem-solving process), rather than establish separate structures and processes. These, and other considerations, may improve the practicality and sustainability of PBS within systems.

Frequently-Asked Questions

1. *Our agency/school/program has a history of jumping on the latest bandwagons. How is PBS different and how might we approach it so that it does not become another “innovation du jour?”* First, it is important to clarify that PBS is supported by extensive research and experience-based practice. Therefore, it is not a set of procedures, but a dynamic problem-solving model that can be applied across a range of circumstances. Second, as with any broad-based change in practice, implementation requires planning and continual re-evaluation on the part of relevant stakeholders in the system. The objective should be to systematically embed (or “institutionalize”) PBS within existing structures and processes.
2. *We have made significant efforts to adopt and utilize PBS in our agency/school/ program, but have been unsuccessful. What might we be doing wrong?* In order for system-wide changes to occur, stakeholder teams need to have a clear vision, skills necessary to enact the process, incentives to operate differently, sufficient resources, and a definitive action plan. If one or more of these elements are missing, sustainable change will be unlikely.

Other Resources

Dunlap, G., Hieneman, M., Knoster, T., Fox, L., Anderson, J., & Albin, R.W. (2000). Essential elements of inservice training in positive behavioral support. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, *2*(1), 22-32.

Hieneman, M. & Dunlap, G. (2000). Factors affecting the outcomes of community-based behavioral support: I. Identification and description of factor categories. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, *2*(3), 161-169, 178.

Knoster, T.P., Villa, R.A., & Thousand, J.S. (2000). A framework for thinking about systems change. In R.A. Villa & J.S. Thousand (Eds.), *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (pp. 93-128). Baltimore, Paul H. Brookes.

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