

Positive Behavior Support Offered In Juvenile Corrections

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Across the U.S., schools are shifting their approach to school-wide discipline. Rather than assuming that all students enter school with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet expectations for behavioral decorum, educators are directly teaching and acknowledging those behavioral expectations that lead to social success in classrooms and other school settings.

Instead of relying on punishment and school exclusion to control problem behavior, many educators are emphasizing early screening for students who are at-risk of problem behavior and using assessment strategies that identify the function or purpose of problem behaviors to develop more effective, efficient and relevant behavior intervention plans. Although the behavioral foundations for this approach have their beginnings in the psychological research of the 1960s, only recently has interest developed in school-wide adoption and use of effective behavioral interventions.

This approach has become known as school-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) and it is being implemented in thousands of schools across the country, resulting in improved school climate, reductions in problem student behavior, enhanced instructional time and outcomes, and increased efficiency in the implementation of school-wide discipline.

SWPBS is best defined by interaction of four main elements:

- regular use of locally relevant data for decision making;
- establishment of measurable data-justified targeted outcomes;
- adoption and sustained use of evidence-based practices; and
- ongoing and relevant support for local implementers.

SWPBS is conceptualized as a three-tiered continuum of prevention strategies. Primary prevention strategies are put in place school-wide to reduce the development and occurrences of new problem behavior by teaching and encouraging expected pro-social behavior among all students, across all school settings and by all staff members.

When these strategies are implemented accurately and school-wide, about 80 percent of students contribute to a positive and safe school environment and rarely experience an office discipline referral for a major rule violation.

Secondary prevention strategies are implemented to reduce repeated episodes of established problem behavior through the use of more intensive interventions, especially for the relatively small proportion of students (about 15 percent) for whom primary prevention strategies are not sufficient to support their behavioral success.

Tertiary prevention interventions are developed specifically to address the behavior support needs of the smallest proportion of students (about 5 percent) with the most challenging problem behaviors.

These students receive highly individualized and intensive behavior supports that, for example, are shaped by specific functional behavioral assessment information, comprehensive team-driven intervention meetings and on-going monitoring and intervention modifications.

The success of SWPBS has encouraged implementation initiatives that facilitate its adoption and sustained use at the school district and state-wide levels. In addition, professionals working with youth in juvenile detention and corrections programs have become interested in how this approach might improve the social climate and behavior of youth in these settings.

The National Technical Assistance Center for Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has responded by launching an initiative to facilitate the adoption of SWPBS in programs and facilities operated by state and local juvenile justice systems. In particular, PBIS staff researchers are learning about where SWPBS is being implemented; what implementation issues, obstacles and strategies are being experienced; and what impact SWPBS is having on these programs and the youth involved.

This article describes the application of SWPBS in juvenile justice programs, including its role in addressing the significant mental health needs of incarcerated youth.

Implementation issues and strategies also are briefly described.

Why Implement SWPBS in Juvenile Justice Programs?

The success of PBS in public schools is one reason for considering its adoption in juvenile justice programs. Another is the need to move beyond a focus on punishment and “get tough” policies for youthful offenders, as intervention based solely on punishment is known to be ineffective, especially with youth who display significant mental health conditions and educational disabilities.

Understandably, the attitude (held by many public officials and corrections workers) that incarceration should not be “positive” is an obstacle to the adoption of SWPBS.

However, results achieved in programs where SWPBS is being implemented present a convincing alternative to this position. For example, the education program in a youth development center in southern Illinois compared data on behavior incidents for a one-month period before and after the implementation of PBS and found an 89 percent reduction in major behavior incidents and a 95 percent reduction in minor incidents.

Moreover, in this medium-to-maximum security facility for approximately 400 boys, zero fights were reported in the school program for a two-year period following the implementation of SWPBS.

In a program in Iowa that serves primarily girls, 62 percent of whom had a diagnosis of a serious mental health disorder, substantial reductions in the use of restraint and classroom removals were documented following the implementation of SWPBS.

Achieving a reduction in the number of behavior incidents across a majority of youth in a program reduces occurrences of relatively minor behavior problems that occupy a great deal of staff time and distracts them from addressing—or even recognizing—the needs of youth who have more serious behavioral and emotional issues. Therefore, primary prevention strategies establish a climate in which expectations are clear, routines well structured and appropriate behavior receives staff recognition and reinforcement.

This constitutes a therapeutic milieu that supports all youth, including the estimated 50 to 75 percent of approximately 170,000 incarcerated youth who have one or more mental health disorders (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2005), and 30 to 50 percent who are estimated to have educational. By reducing the number of new occurrences of misbehavior, staff are able to identify and address the needs of youth who present more serious issues.

In juvenile programs, the presence of staff from a variety of disciplines, who often have competing priorities and employ differing treatment modalities set up conflicting expectations that are hard for youth to understand, particularly those with learning or emotional problems.

Furthermore, youth with these limitations often do not succeed in the complex treatment or disciplinary systems frequently used in juvenile facilities. SWPBS is an alternative to such cognitively demanding approaches. Its simplicity and structure also make it more likely that staff will implement it with fidelity.

Finally, although programs for incarcerated juvenile offenders often collect copious amounts of data on youth behavior, seldom are these data systematically analyzed or used as a basis for making program or intervention decisions. As a result, the same youths may spend day after day in disciplinary confinement, often being deprived of critical educational or treatment services; a situation that presents significant professional questions and potential legal challenges.

SWPBS is data driven, meaning that staff review and analyze behavior data and make adjustments in rules, routines and physical arrangements based on what is working or not working. Staff in juvenile programs in which SWPBS is being used point out the improvements that have occurred in youth behavior, and to back these claims up with data.

Implementing SWPBS in Juvenile Justice Programs

The diversity among individual juvenile correctional settings, as well as their obvious differences from public school environments, renders the implementation of SWPBS more difficult and complex.

Some of the differences in correctional facilities are seen in the attitude staff adopt toward treatment, clashes in treatment approaches, and a failure to use data on youth

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behavior for programmatic decision making.

In this section, each of these challenges are described and SWPBS strategies for addressing each challenge are suggested.

The traditional correctional model focuses on power, punishment and expediency. It is assumed that “being positive” sends the wrong message to the incarcerated youth. On the surface these perspectives and assumptions have appeal because punishment is seen as being deserved and necessary in “turning around” troubled youth.

However, as pointed out earlier, strategies based on punishment are ineffective, especially with youth who display significant mental health conditions and educational disabilities. In contrast, SWPBS focuses on giving youth more control over their lives, on providing positive reinforcement, and on long-term.

While education professionals in juvenile settings perhaps are more likely to endorse a model of positive support, other facility staff (e.g., security, cottage, administrative, and even treatment) may adhere to an emphasis on strict and punitive discipline.

Several approaches may be taken to address these obstacles. An overarching strategy is to blend SWPBS into correctional systems, emphasizing that the former is a useful tool for achieving the primary corrections focus on safety and security.

Documenting positive changes in data that impact safety and security within a facility also expedites staff buy-in to the concept of SWPBS.

Another strategy is to initiate PBS in a single program within a juvenile facility. This seems essential in large facilities that include multiple programs. The education program is a logical entry point for SWPBS. However, youth only spend one-third of their day in school; therefore, a systematic plan should be developed for extending SWPBS to other program elements.

Additional behavioral programming challenges in juvenile programs include the presence of staff members from a variety of disciplines such as social work or corrections. Staff members have varied degrees of sophistication and training and operate from different and often competing approaches. Other challenges include the “corrections mindset” of staff.

However, SWPBS can bring order, consistency and comprehensiveness to the overall living and educational environments of all youth by:

- establishing and teaching expectations that are positively stated, clear and behaviorally exemplified;
- defining and teaching typical routines that are efficient and clearly structured and prompted; and
- formally, regularly and positively acknowledging and recognizing youth when they display desired behavioral expectations and engage in established routines.

Other barriers to extending SWPBS include staff communications across programs and housing units and incompatibility between SWPBS and the treatment or disciplinary

model used across a facility.

Again, behavior incident data are useful tools to facilitate communication. Program and facility staff can be shown how to use data that they keep anyway (e.g., behavior reports, incidents involving physical restraint or disciplinary confinement) to identify the contexts in which problems are occurring and to evaluate the effects of interventions or program changes.

For example, a youth may experience repeated isolation or seclusion consequences for violating school or residence rules.

Although these behavioral incidents and consequences are diligently recorded, staff members often do not analyze these data to evaluate the effectiveness of these consequences.

It is not uncommon for youth to experience days and even weeks of the same (or more intensely punitive) ineffective intervention. SWPBS treatment teams engage in regular data reviews (e.g., weekly) and apply data decision rules (e.g., “3 consecutive intervention days w/o behavior improvement, change intervention”) to evaluate and change the youth’s treatment plan.

Most importantly, intervention changes do not focus on increasing the aversiveness of a consequence, but instead emphasize re-teaching desired behaviors and routines, increasing attention to displays of these behaviors and routines, and rearranging teaching

and learning environments so that pro-social behaviors and supports are more likely. Although the need and challenges are clear, the application of SWPBS in programs operated within the juvenile justice system is in its infancy.

The SWPBS Approach Is Potentially Useful For Supporting The Behavior Needs Of Youth In Juvenile Programs.

Increased knowledge about how to address the unique differences between public school and juvenile correction settings is key to deciding which proven strategies should be stressed in supporting youth with significant problem behaviors and mental health issues. This is also critical in deciding what supports staff need to improve adoption and sustained use of SWPBS practices and systems.

In addition, more needs to be learned about the effectiveness and efficiency of secondary and tertiary levels of interventions, such as function-based behavior intervention planning, targeted social skills instruction and wraparound planning for youth with mental health and disabling conditions, in the context of juvenile correctional settings. Finally, efforts to enhance team-based, data-driven decision making are needed to guide implementation efforts, improve outcomes, evaluate practices and systems, demonstrate what is possible and increase the consistency with which intervention approaches are selected and put in place.

The SWPBS approach has been demonstrated to be effective in public school settings,

and many of its defining features have great promise in enhancing supports for youth in juvenile justice programs.

SWPBS has potential as a practical framework in which to implement the rehabilitative purpose of the juvenile justice system; for increasing the efficiency and consistency of behavior management systems across staff, programs, and settings; for enhancing communications and operations across staff and settings; and for strengthening the pro-social skills of youth for their reentry into the community.

The PBIS Center maintains a dynamic website at www.pbis.org where a wealth of information may be accessed, including:

- descriptions of SWPBS;
- implementation guidelines and examples;
- self-assessment tools for guiding team-based action planning;
- state training resources; and
- upcoming professional development and conference events.

Finally, a second Center sponsored site at www.swis.org provides guidelines, examples, and supporting information for developing and maintaining an effective and efficient behavior incident and referral data base and for using the data to guide decision making that is locally relevant.

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