Educating Students with Behavioral Challenges

Lee Kern, George P. White, and Frank M. Gresham

When conventional school and classroom strategies fail, a special classroom setting for students with severe behavioral problems can be an effective alternative.
Amid growing public pressure to assure the safety of our nation’s schools, several prevention models have come to the forefront. One such model, referred to as schoolwide positive behavior support, has emerged as highly promising. This three-level model, aimed at all students, generally eliminates behavior problems exhibited by approximately 80 percent of a school’s students at the first level. About 15 percent of students may require somewhat more intensive interventions, such as supplemental academic or social skills instruction. This leaves roughly 5 percent who require the most intensive and individualized intervention.

The variables that make this smallest group nonresponsive to less intensive interventions are not altogether clear, although research points to several likely explanations. One is exposure to risk factors that makes them unprepared to face both the expectations and demands that are presented at school. Through Project REACH’s longitudinal study (see box), we have learned that risk factors such as parental incarceration, mobility, and parent drug and alcohol use recur at an alarming rate for many children with behavioral problems.

In addition, many children enter school without the needed academic readiness skills, fail to keep up with the pace of instruction, or simply do not receive adequate teaching. Numerous research studies have substantiated the relationship between poor academic skills and problem behaviors.

Although these factors do not portend well for student success, features of the classroom setting can nonetheless be designed to create an optimal social and learning experience. Based on our work in more than 100 classrooms for students with behavior problems, we have seen that a structured, consistent, and supportive environment, coupled with interesting instruction that is well matched to each student’s skill level, will greatly reduce and even eliminate the problem behaviors of almost all students.

Teaching the Hard-to-Teach

Students with challenging behavior problems who cannot be managed through typical intervention strategies are often placed in self-contained classrooms. There is a faulty assumption that these classrooms should have different standards and expectations than general education classrooms. On the contrary, such classrooms should be characterized by high rates of student engagement in academic activities, just like typical classrooms, although added supports or modifications should be in place to facilitate academic achievement.

Together with ongoing academic instruction should be clear schedules and routines. In other words, it should be apparent to the observer that students know what they should be doing.

According to polls, surveys, and research studies, problem behaviors have remained among the foremost concerns of educators in public school settings for more than 40 years (Walker, Ramsey, and Gresham 2004). Schools are typically not equipped to deal with moderate to severe behavior problems (Walker et al. 2000) and many teachers feel unprepared to address the myriad challenges students bring to their classrooms. In fact, teachers often exacerbate their students’ difficulties through attempts to “force” the curriculum on them without considering strategies that might prevent behavioral escalation, such as modifying tasks or allowing students to choose alternative activities (Kern et al. 1998).
Managing Classroom Behavior

Student-teacher interactions in self-contained classrooms should be predominately positive, with students being told they are doing well most of the time. Corrective feedback should be infrequent, at a ratio of about one correction to at least four positive comments.

All of the self-contained classrooms in our longitudinal study employed some type of behavior management system, such as a point system. However, in many of the classrooms the systems were simply ineffective. Effective systems must be based on positive expectations, with students rewarded for following those expectations. Points, tokens, or rewards should be administered at reasonable intervals. Young children (grades K–3) usually need intervals as brief as 15 minutes, while intervals for older children can generally encompass an entire class period. It is critical for any behavior management system to be implemented with integrity.

A few considerations are in order regarding class-wide behavior management systems. While they often address most of the problem behaviors in a given classroom, students with intensive problems usually require individualized management strategies. Too often we see classes with point systems that are void of any specialized programming.

In the end, the hallmark of effective programming is reduction in problem behaviors so that students are able to make the transition to general education and cope with the demands of typical school environments. It is essential that transition planning remains a primary objective after students are placed in restrictive settings. Such planning also requires identifying post-transition supports that can and should be maintained.

About Project REACH

Project REACH (Research Exploring Alternatives for Children), funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs, is a collaborative five-year project of Lehigh University and the University of California, Riverside. Its purpose is to identify, develop, and evaluate interventions that are effective over the long term with students who have intensive social, emotional, and behavioral needs.

Toward this purpose, Project REACH is following 125 students in Pennsylvania and California during a four-year period and assisting behavior support teams in implementing support plans for schools and homes. Project REACH also is evaluating how risk factors influence intervention effectiveness. For more information about Project REACH and a description of evidence-based strategies that teachers and parents can use to decrease behavior problems and approve appropriate behavior, visit its Web site at www.lehigh.edu/ProjectREACH.
Managing Behavior Beyond the Classroom

Although students with behavioral difficulties spend a large part of their day in the classroom, comprehensive programming must extend across the broader school context, such as hallways and bus stops. Students who have difficulty managing their behavior in the classroom are likely to have problems exerting self-control in other school environments. Thus, it is essential to introduce specific management strategies across all problematic school settings.

The first step is to identify the specific settings where problems are most likely to occur. This can be accomplished by reviewing disciplinary referrals for activity outside of the classroom. Specific interventions can then be matched to those settings. For example, dismissing students successively as their buses arrive, rather than all at once, might reduce a high frequency of problems at the bus stop. Problems in specific hallway locations may be reduced by increasing supervision at those locations during transitions.

In addition to these preventive procedures, a systematic approach for addressing both desirable and undesirable behavior will assure that students understand what is expected of them throughout the school day. Staff members need to acknowledge students when they are following school expectations, and consistently apply uniform consequences when students fail to follow expectations.

References

Lee Kern is principal investigator of Project REACH at Lehigh University. Her e-mail address is lek6@lehigh.edu.

George P. White is a consultant to Project REACH. His e-mail address is gpw1@lehigh.edu.

Frank M. Gresham is co-principal investigator of Project REACH at the University of California-Riverside and Louisiana State University. His e-mail address is gresham@lsu.edu.

WEB RESOURCES

The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders is dedicated to supporting the professional development and enhancing the expertise of those who work on behalf of children with challenging behavior.
www.ccbd.net

The Center for Evidence-Based Practice: Young Children with Challenging Behavior is funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, to promote the use of evidence-based practice to meet the needs of young children who have, or at risk for, problem behavior.
http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu

The Association for Positive Behavior Support is a multidisciplinary international organization dedicated to helping individuals improve their quality of life by reducing problem behaviors.
www.apbs.org

The Behavior Home Page, sponsored by the Kentucky Department of Education and the University of Kentucky, provides an interactive format for school personnel and parents to receive and share effective practices concerning behavior problems and challenges of children in school and community settings.
http://www.state.ky.us/agencies/behave/homepage.html

Hands-on Activities
Content Knowledge
Strategies for Implementation
Correlated to Your State Standards
Grades K-9

“Teachers consistently tell me that the AIMS workshops are the best and most useful they have ever attended.”
- Margaret Johnson
Curriculum Coordinator
El Paso, TX

AIMS DESIGNS AND PRESENTS HUNDREDS OF MATH AND SCIENCE WORKSHOPS EACH YEAR.

CALL US TODAY TO DISCUSS HOW WE CAN HELP RAISE THE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF YOUR STUDENTS.

1.888.733.2467
www.aimsedu.org