

5 strategies target bad behavior

By **Carla Thomas McClure**

Over the past two decades, behavioral interventions in U.S. elementary schools have addressed problem behaviors at the individual, classroom, and school levels.

Nearly all of the interventions include multiple strategies.

The U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) recently convened a panel of experts in behavioral research to examine the research on these interventions.

In their analysis, the experts gave special attention to findings that appeared across rigorous studies. Moderate to strong evidence was found for five key intervention components (see p. 11) that teachers can put to work in their schools and classrooms. These strategies are discussed in *Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom*, an IES practice guide for educators.

The relationship between student behavior and learning

Efforts to improve student achievement rightly focus on academic interventions. To increase the likelihood that these efforts will yield positive results, however, schools need to mitigate the potentially negative effects of students’ disruptive or distracting behaviors. As every teacher knows, such behaviors can affect the student exhibiting them and also can erode the effectiveness of teaching and learning for everyone in the classroom.

The need to address problem behaviors is widespread. By some estimates, psychosocial problems that interfere with students’ ability to learn affect one in three students (Adelman & Taylor, 2005). The strategies recommended in the IES practice guide are intended for elementary teachers in general education classrooms. An underlying premise: Children’s behavior is learned, and classroom teachers play a critical role in establishing expectations and examples.

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Carla Thomas McClure is a staff writer at Edvantia (www.edvantia.org), a nonprofit research and development organization that works with federal, state, and local education agencies to improve student achievement.

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES

The expert panel convened by IES says the following principles run throughout the recommendations (p. 11):

Relationships are key.

Positive interactions between teachers and students — and between teachers within a school — are hallmarks of a healthy school environment. Small gestures such as greeting students by name and sending positive notes to parents show warmth and respect.

Cultural competence matters.

Teachers who establish inclusive classroom environments are careful to use unbiased language and select curriculum materials that honor the cultures and life experiences of all students.

Contextual factors should be taken into account.

Behavioral interventions will look different in 1st- and 5th-grade classrooms because of the difference in students’ ages and developmental levels. Large urban schools often face behavioral issues that differ in type and intensity from those seen in affluent suburban schools.

Data-driven practice is needed.

To target resources and interventions effectively, schools need to identify and address “behavioral hot spots,” times and places within the school in which challenging behaviors recur. Monitor progress and celebrate small successes; acknowledge that change doesn’t happen overnight.

Strategies to try

IN THE CLASSROOM

1. Identify the specifics of the problem behavior and the conditions that prompt and reinforce it.

If preventative measures have not worked for an individual student, try to pinpoint the problem and its effect on learning. Observe and take notes on how often the behavior occurs, and in what contexts. Try to identify what prompts and reinforces the behavior. Use this information to tailor an intervention that responds to the student's needs within the context of the classroom.



2. Modify the classroom learning environment to decrease problem behavior.

Clearly explain and reinforce classroom behavior expectations. Modify the room arrangement, schedule, or learning activities to meet student needs. Adapt or vary instruction to increase student engagement and opportunities for success.

3. Teach and reinforce new skills to increase appropriate behavior and preserve a positive classroom climate.

Use individual and whole-class instruction to teach students socially and behaviorally appropriate skills. Give examples, opportunities for practice, and feedback. Maintain a positive climate in the classroom by emphasizing positive reinforcements for appropriate behaviors rather than “punishment” for inappropriate behaviors.

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

4. Draw on relationships with professional colleagues and students' families for continued guidance and support.

Parents, school personnel, and behavioral or mental health professionals can provide insights, strategies, and supports.

5. Assess whether schoolwide behavior problems warrant adopting schoolwide strategies or programs, and, if so, implement strategies shown to reduce negative and foster positive interactions.

A systemic approach requires that teachers, administrators, and other school personnel share responsibility for increasing positive interactions among students and staff.

References

Adelman, H. & Taylor, L. (2005). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New directions for addressing barriers to learning.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Epstein, M., Atkins, M., Cullinan, D., Kutash, K., & Weaver, R. (2008). *Reducing behavior problems in the elementary school classroom: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-012). Retrieved from U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/behavior_pg_092308.pdf