Audience  Elementary school educators and school-and district-level administrators.

Grade level  K–5.


Introduction

Much of the attention currently given to improving students’ academic achievement addresses issues of curriculum, instructional strategies, and interventions or services for struggling learners. However, even after addressing these issues, barriers still remain for some students. An estimated one-third of students fail to learn because of psychosocial problems that interfere with their ability to fully attend to and engage in instructional activities, prompting a call for “new directions for addressing barriers to learning.” These new approaches go beyond explicitly academic interventions to take on the learning challenges posed by problematic student behavior and the ways schools deal with it.

Approaches aimed at improving school and classroom environments, including reducing the negative effects of disruptive or distracting behaviors, can enhance the chances that effective teaching and learning will occur, both for the students exhibiting problem behaviors and for their classmates. In many schools general education elementary classrooms are generally orderly, teacher-student and student-student relationships are positive, and teaching and learning go on without major disruption. Teachers in such classrooms recognize the importance of preventing significant behavior problems and are effectively using fundamental prevention tools—engaging instruction, well-managed classrooms, and positive relationships with students.

Looking to these prevention fundamentals should always be the first step in promoting good behavior at school. However, some teachers have a class in which one or a few students exhibit persistent or significant problem behaviors—those that are disruptive, oppositional, distracting, or defiant. Sometimes when a number of students in a classroom demonstrate such behaviors, it can create a chaotic environment that is a serious impediment to learning for all students. In these cases teachers have exhausted their classroom management strategies without successfully eliminating the obstacles to learning that problem behaviors pose. The purpose of this practice guide is to give teachers additional tools to help them deal proactively and effectively with behaviors that seriously or consistently fail to meet classroom expectations.

Recommendations

1. Identify the specifics of the problem behavior and the conditions that prompt and reinforce it.
   - Concretely describe the behavior problem and its effect on learning.
   - Observe and record the frequency and context of the problem behavior.
   - Identify what prompts and reinforces the problem behavior.

2. Modify the classroom learning environment to decrease problem behavior.
   - Revisit, re-practice, and reinforce classroom behavior expectations.
   - Modify the classroom environment to encourage instructional momentum.
   - Adapt or vary instructional strategies to increase opportunities for academic success and engagement.

3. Teach and reinforce new skills to increase appropriate behavior and preserve a positive classroom climate.
   - Identify where the student needs explicit instruction for appropriate behavior.
   - Teach skills by providing examples, practice, and feedback.
   - Manage consequences so that reinforcers are provided for appropriate behavior and withheld for inappropriate behavior.
4. Draw on relationships with professional colleagues and students’ families for continued guidance and support.
   • Collaborate with other teachers for continued guidance and support.
   • Build collaborative partnerships with school, district, and community behavior experts who can consult with teachers when problems are serious enough to warrant help from outside the classroom.
   • Encourage parents and other family members to participate as active partners in teaching and reinforcing appropriate behavior.

5. Assess whether schoolwide behavior problems warrant adopting schoolwide strategies or programs and, if so, implement ones shown to reduce negative and foster positive interactions.
   • Address schoolwide behavior issues by involving a school improvement team.
   • Collect information on the hot spots throughout the school, such as the frequency of particular schoolwide behavior problems and when and where they occur.
   • Monitor implementation and outcomes using an efficient method of data collection and allow ample time for the program to work.
   • If warranted, adopt a packaged intervention program that fits well with identified behavior problem(s) and the school context.