

Positive behavior support becomes a family affair

By TANYA B. LOPEZ, Med., BCBA

Defiance, tantrums and aggression ... the only thing more challenging or concerning than when a child exhibits these behaviors is how to correctly address them. When dealing with behaviors of concern, parents may forget that challenging behavior serves as a form of communication expressing feelings of frustration or anxiety, particularly in children with autism.

Because of its success with decreasing and even eliminating challenging behavior, many schools and organizations have adopted positive behavior support plans for their students. This strategy analyzes the situations surrounding the behavior of concern to determine why it is occurring and selects interventions to teach and reward appropriate behaviors.

Ultimately, the goal of a positive behavior support plan is to teach the student that the behavior of concern is no longer functional and that the learned positive behaviors are more efficient at meeting his/her needs.

In the school setting, through a preventive and proactive approach, teachers, instructors and parents collaborate to develop a highly individualized positive behavior support plan that identifies environmental changes, selects the appropriate interventions to teach replacement behavior and determines how a child's positive behavior will be reinforced.

Usually, a reward system, such as a point sheet, access to leisure activities or a special treat is used to reinforce positive behavior.

Positive behavior support plans are most effective when:

- All involved are able to identify and provide an operational definition of the behaviors of concern. (i.e., when someone reads the definition, he/she should be able to visualize the behaviors.)



- Behavioral expectations are clearly communicated.
- The target student is involved in the planning process so he/she knows exactly what is expected of his/her behavior.
- Alternative, appropriate behaviors are taught.
- Rewards are clearly identified and everyone has agreed on how and when to utilize.
- The planning process involves teachers, instructors, parents, outside providers and extended family.
- There is adequate communication between parents, instructors and teachers.
- The plan is followed through consistently and behaviors of concern are never reinforced. The less reinforcement of challenging behaviors, the clearer the message becomes and the student learns that the behavior is no longer functional.

Parental involvement with the behavior plan not only helps to improve a child's behavior in an academic sense, but parents can also adapt the plan to address behaviors of concern at home. Parents can identify why the behavior of concern is occurring and then select interventions to teach replacement behaviors using the same, or similar, reinforcement system that the child receives at school.

When implementing a positive behavior

support plan at home, it is important to keep frustrations low and consistency of implementation of the behavioral interventions high. Compared to school, however, there is less professional support in the home, not to mention that between work, carpools, preparing meals and life's unpredictability, devoting time and attention to correcting challenging behaviors can seem impossible at times.

For this reason, parents should seek out their own support system by involving family members such as siblings, grandparents and aunts and uncles in the implementation of a behavior plan.

With the entire family involved in a child's behavior plan, there's an underlying potential to strengthen the family's understanding of the child's diagnosis, relieve the parents' stress and decrease reinforcement of behaviors of concern. When the child receives the same message from everyone, this improves consistency in positive behavior support and increases the likelihood of improved behavior.

Here's how to involve the whole family in shaping positive behaviors:

- Share the behavior plan with family members and discuss how they can get involved.
- Invite those who regularly visit with

the child to attend behavior support planning meetings.

- Maintain open communication about the child's diagnosis and progress.
- Ask family members to spend time with your child to provide you with respite.

Here are the best practices for family involvement:

- Model the process for interventions and rewards.
- Make sure all involved have access to and are able to identify when to use interventions and rewards.
- Make sure everyone's interpretation of the behavior plan is correct.
- Prepare for behaviors to get worse before they improve. The best way to ease the transition into a behavior support plan is to practice intervention scenarios. For example, the family and in-home team can recreate a behavioral episode and role play the best way to address the situation, according to the interventions in the positive behavior support plan.

Most importantly, consistency to the positive behavior support plan is the key to its success. Families must remember that challenging behavior is not fixed in a day or even a week. It is a process that involves an intense commitment and investment of time but praising even the smallest accomplishments along the way empowers the family to keep progressing forward.

As behavior strategies become routine, there is great potential for stress among the family to decrease and the child becomes more aware and in control of his/her behaviors.

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