

William Dikel, M.D.  
Consulting Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist  
(612) 275-7385  
Fax: (612) 827-3237  
dikel002@umn.edu  
www.williamdikel.com

## **Evidence-based, Best-practices Educational Interventions for Students who Have Emotional and/or Behavioral Problems**

### **Classroom and School-Wide Learning environment**

#### **Proactive Classroom Management techniques (PCM)**

A variety of strategies can be used to prevent behavioral problems and to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning. It is essential to keep in mind that the classroom time devoted to instruction and the amount of time that students are engaged in academics are crucial factors in educational success. All too often, teachers in self-contained classrooms spend an inordinate amount of time managing students' behavioral difficulties, some of which can be prevented.

Group behavioral management is more difficult than individual management due to issues such as peer contagion and the tendency of individuals to behave inappropriately in groups in ways that they would not behave on an individual basis.

Examples of proactive strategies include common sense activities such as smiling and positively greeting students when they enter the classroom. Keeping the classroom organized, assuring that rules and expectations are understood by all students, setting goals and providing feedback about performance are important. Also, it is important to have cuing systems to release and regain students' attention, to provide numerous opportunities to respond, to have a visual schedule of classroom activities, to have a motivation system to reward desired behaviors, and to assure that significantly more positive than negative interactions take place in the classroom.

It is important to minimize classroom distractions, especially for students who have ADHD. Communication with students should focus on the positive, but if there is a need for reprimands or corrective statements, they should be brief, non-emotional, non-threatening and be spoken in close proximity to the student.

If a student is acting out and de-escalation is necessary, it is important to speak calmly, to attempt to be at the same height as the student rather than standing over him or her, to use a calm voice, to offer caring statements and to provide a way out via alternate activities, taking a break, etc.

## **Clear Rules/Expectations (CRE)**

It seems obvious that clearly established classroom rules and expectations are essential for classroom management and the prevention of behavior problems. However, many teachers do not realize that, no matter how obvious a rule may seem to be, rules need to be systematically and directly taught to students. Traditional approaches include modeling rules, reinforcing rules by the teacher, prompting or cuing students to remember the expectations, and structuring the school day and the classroom to promote compliance with rules. More recent approaches to instructional management reflect combining these strategies with both class-wide and school-wide student supports. Class-wide approaches include such techniques as including students in establishing and enforcing expectations, token systems to reinforce compliance, or other forms of recognition earned by specific students or the whole class. School-wide behavioral supports are those applied throughout the entire school to help all students learn and follow school and class rules/expectations, while offering additional support to those with behavioral problems.

Classroom expectations need to be clear, concise and specific. They should be reasonable, positively worded and few in number. They should be situationally and systematically taught to students to help them learn how to engage in them and to understand their importance. They should be taught at the beginning of the school year, at times of significant schedule changes, and periodically throughout the year to aid reinforcement. Consequences for not following rules need to be established and understood in advance. For some students who have difficulty learning and following the classroom expectations, significant repetition and re-teaching is necessary. It is important to recognize that students who have attentional difficulties, impulsivity and/or difficulty with executive functioning are especially prone to problems in this area. It should not be assumed that students are being “oppositional” when rules are not being followed. Often, with enough teaching and reinforcement, these students are able and willing to comply with rules and expectations.

## **Crisis Intervention Planning (CIP)**

Classroom interventions have changed significantly over the years, from the major problems in the 1940s (chewing gum, running in the hallways, talking out of turn) to today (drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, gang fights, etc.). It is essential for schools to have clearly defined and understood crisis plans for situations in which students present evidence of being in danger to self or others. For example, when a student makes suicidal statements, or threats to harm others, it is important for schools to have a pre-defined plan regarding who will intervene. Hennepin County has a crisis team that has the potential to do in-school assessments of a need for interventions such as hospitalization. Unless the relationship of the County team and the school staff is clearly agreed upon, County staff tend to defer to school professionals for crisis assessment. This can lead to districts taking on

unnecessary liability. It is also essential to clarify the role of the police in the community and of police liaison officers, and to define the threshold at which they will be asked to intervene. Although minor crises may be effectively dealt with by school administrative staff, counselors, social workers, psychologists, etc, it is important for thresholds to be defined for more intensive interventions that require community assistance. The process becomes more complex when a co-located mental health professional is working within the school setting, and that professional's client is making statements regarding potential harm to self or others. Protocols need to be established regarding the role of the therapist in crisis assessment within the school, and the ultimate responsibility of the school district to assure that crises are dealt with appropriately.

### **Classroom-Level Practices**

Research indicates that the effects of classroom practices, when added to those of other teacher characteristics, are comparable in size to those of students' background influences. Classroom practices encompass such issues as a balanced curriculum, focusing on an understanding of child development, the provision of a curriculum that is rigorous, relevant and promotes relationships, that creates active participants rather than passive observers and that allows students to use their whole brain. The curriculum should be integrated, empowering students to take ownership in their curriculum. It should be differentiated, regarding the content that is taught, the process used, the product expected and the physical factors of the environment. Active learning should be stressed, utilizing hands-on learning principles.

### **Academic**

#### **Academic supports and curricular/instructional modifications (CIM)**

Academic supports are designed to assist students in refining and strengthening the academic skills that are necessary for their success. Modifications involve combinations of altered content knowledge, conceptual difficulty, educational goals, and instructional methods. Content may be modified, for example, in ways that learning strategies are taught, in simplifying concepts or reading levels and in teaching different sets of knowledge and skills. Instructional methods may be modified in various ways such as reducing distractions and presenting smaller amounts of work. Modifying curriculum to incorporate a student's personal interests can be an effective tool in managing a student's behavior. Functional behavioral analysis can identify unique motivational features that can be incorporated into curricular modifications. When students have ongoing symptoms of mental health disorders, curriculum can be modified to take these into account and to increase the likelihood of academic success.

#### **Systemic approach to cooperative learning (CL)**

The term cooperative learning (CL) refers to students working in teams on an assignment or project under conditions in which certain criteria are satisfied. A systemic approach requires that the team members be held individually accountable for the complete content of the assignment or project. Team requirements include members relying on each other to meet academic goals (positive interdependence), individual accountability, shared interactive work, use of collaborative skills and group processing of information. A systemic approach that defines the parameters of cooperative learning increases the chances of success, utilizing guidelines for forming teams, and assuring that the defining criteria of cooperative learning are met.

### **Specialized instruction to promote learning and study skills**

Specialized instruction encompasses the types of unique instructional services that are required to accomplish IEP goals and objectives. They include modifications, alterations and adaptations of instructional methods, techniques, materials, physical setting, media and environment. Specialized instruction supplements the general curriculum, and addresses each student's unique learning characteristics. When students have mental health disorders that interfere with their ability to engage in classroom work, specialized instruction techniques can create teaching methodologies that take these symptoms (e.g., distractibility, anxiety, etc.) into account.

### **Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS)**

Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies have been shown to be effective in improving elementary students' reading proficiency. They show promise in the secondary school population as well. The program uses peer-mediated instruction, where students work in pairs or small groups to provide tutoring in reading strategies (information sequencing, generating main idea statements and generating and evaluating predictions. Goals include improved reading accuracy, fluency and comprehension. Peer tutors are taught to correct their partner's reading errors, to provide encouragement and feedback and to reward correct responses. The students alternate roles as reader and tutor ("players" and coaches". Sessions generally last for approximately a half hour and occur three to four times a week. Students are chosen according to their needs and abilities. Pairs are changed regularly, and students work on a variety of skills over time. Teachers can use reading materials of their own choice. The process allows teachers to circulate in the class, observing students and offering individual remediation.

Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies show promise with subjects other than reading, and can be adapted to the secondary school population. It is essential for teachers to be sensitive to the needs and learning styles of their students, and to create learning pairs of students who are compatible and cooperative with each other.

### **Non Academic**

### **Peer-mediated intervention to promote positive behavioral skills (PMI)**

Peer mediation can be helpful in situations other than academic tutoring. For example, similar approaches can be successful in learning life skills. For example, Peer-mediated intervention is effective in helping students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder learn appropriate social skills. Non-disabled peers are trained to implement interventions that increase and improve interactions of students who have ASD. These interventions promote the concept that learning from the very peers with whom a student is interacting on a daily basis produces an immediate, generalizable effect.

### **A conflict resolution program (CRP)**

Conflict resolution is a skill that can be taught. As useful as it is for the general population of students, it is all the more important for students who are impulsive, who have poor social skills, mood swings, cognitive difficulties, histories of abuse or neglect or other mental health challenges. Rather than responding to conflictual situations with anger, fear and confusion, resulting in either aggression or frightened passivity, students learn methods of peaceful resolution of the conflict. Students learn the skills necessary to stop and think about potential responses to perceived threats, and to use conflict resolution skills to deal with these challenging situations.

### **Social skills instruction taught as part of regular classroom instruction (SSI)**

Social skills are best taught in the context of real life classroom situations. They are more likely to generalize to that environment than if they are taught, for example, in a therapist's office. Social skills deficits can arise due to a student never having learned appropriate social behaviors, or can be the direct manifestation of an underlying disorder such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. Skills instruction includes initial training of skills, followed by ongoing skills practicing. It encourages cooperation, interpersonal communication and listening skills, self-discipline, problem solving and an increasing awareness of non-verbal communication. It combines a number of strategies to prevent and replace inappropriate behaviors, and increases skills that lead to social competence. Social skills instruction takes advantage of naturally occurring opportunities to teach appropriate behaviors in settings such as the cafeteria or hallways. The success of the training is measured by the ability of the student to generalize their skills in a variety of settings.

### **Anger management program (AMP)**

Anger management programs are focused on assisting individuals learn the skills to handle conflicts and to avoid engaging in hostile and aggressive behaviors that can stem from feelings of anger. They provide alternative choices for behavioral

responses that result in increased opportunities for conflict resolution and the reduced likelihood of aggression and violence. They help the individual communicate effectively when feelings of anger arise, and to assert himself or herself in an acceptable manner. They teach how to learn to respond appropriately rather than to automatically react in a negative manner. Anger management skills training dovetails with social skills training, as individuals who lack social skills are often prone to misinterpret the behaviors of others, resulting in feelings of frustration and anger.

### **A behavior support/management plan (BSM)**

Behavior support management fosters pro-social behaviors, and utilizes techniques such as respondent and operant conditioning, shaping, extinction of undesirable behaviors, redirection and social modeling. Interventions may include de-escalation procedures when students are agitated. Students and their parents should be fully informed about the classroom's behavior support system at the time of admission into the program.

Least restrictive methods should be utilized whenever possible. They include verbal directives, redirection and prompts. More restrictive interventions include having a quiet time or time-out. Even more restrictive interventions include physical holding when a student is demonstrating evidence of danger to self or others, or the use of seclusion. With appropriate early interventions, seclusion and restraint may be preventable.

Ideally, behavior support management for students in specialized programs for emotionally disturbed individuals should be provided within the larger context of school-wide and class-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports.

### **Pre-correction instructional strategies (PCIS)**

Pre-correction/Prompting is useful in situations where the teacher reminds a student of expectations prior to activities or contexts under which there is already a history of a high risk of failure. It can be delivered via the use of gestures, statements, visually, through modeling or with physical assistance, ideally immediately preceding the context in which the behavior is expected. Prompts can begin at a minimal level, but may need to be increased in intensity if minimal prompting is not effective. Positive reinforcement increases the likelihood of the effectiveness of prompting. When coupled with specific contingent statements of praise and increased student supervision, prompting significantly reduces inappropriate behaviors and increases appropriate behaviors.

### **Group-oriented contingency management (GOCM)**

Teachers often focus their behavioral intervention strategies on individual students who are manifesting behavioral difficulties, through the use of

techniques such as the use of reinforcement contingencies (e.g., verbal praise) to increase the probability of desired behaviors. These individualized techniques are difficult to practice in classrooms where there are multiple students who are manifesting inappropriate behaviors.

Group-oriented contingencies have proven to be as effective as individual contingencies, and are of practical use in classrooms where there are several students who have emotional and behavioral problems. They save teacher's time and facilitate positive social interactions among group members. They also assist in building improved levels of appropriate behaviors.

A group-oriented contingency is one in which a specific behavior or behaviors is required of a group of students, and in which the presentation or the loss of a reinforcer is based on the performance of an individual within a group, in a subset of a group, or the group as a whole. Group-oriented contingencies capitalize on peer influences, and peers, rather than teachers, are the primary change agents.

Group-oriented contingencies can be dependent, independent or interdependent. Dependent contingencies are those in which all members of the group receive a reinforce if one individual in the group meets the criterion. Independent contingencies reward the members of the group who have met the criteria for reinforcement. Interdependent contingencies require that all members of the group meet the criterion in order to receive the reinforcement.

Specific examples of targeted behaviors include talking out of turn and out of seat behavior. Token economies can be used as reinforcement techniques.

## **Individual Practices**

### **Academic**

#### **Choice-making opportunities for students**

Many students who have long histories of behavioral difficulties have been repeatedly been told how "wrong" their behavior has been, and this can lead to feelings of powerlessness and eventual power struggles. It is essential to re-frame interventions that address behavioral difficulties through the use of choice-making strategies. These strategies enable the student to have a sense of increased control over their lives. Allowing choices promotes independence, helps students to self-monitor appropriate behaviors, gives them a sense of control, encourages active participation in appropriate activities, improves self esteem, promotes a sense of responsibility and ultimately reduces inappropriate behaviors. Examples of choices include the choice of location where the student may work, the time that a project is worked on, the materials used for a project, etc. It is important to be

consistent with the types and numbers of choices, to provide a variety of choices and to reinforce choice-making opportunities that are initiated by the student.

### **Instruction in self-monitoring of student performance (SMSP)**

Self-monitoring is an important component in teaching activities, especially for students who have difficulty recognizing the nature of their educational difficulties. For example, students who have attentional deficits often are unaware of the nature and extent of these deficits, and may feel frustrated that they continue to have academic problems despite efforts to do well in the classroom. For these students, self monitoring of issues such as “Am I at my desk?”, “Am I doing my assignment?”, “Am I listening to the teacher?”, “Am I asking for help?”, etc. are more concrete than, “Am I paying attention?”. Students can identify a skill that can be measured, and can graph progress of activities such as correctly spelling words on spelling tests.

Target behaviors need to be clearly defined, and baseline data need to be collected. Students are taught to self-monitor, by learning the nature of the target behaviors, how these behaviors differ from other classroom behaviors, and learning how to self-assess and to self-record the target behaviors.

Self-monitoring can alter the frequency, intensity and duration of behaviors and saves teachers’ time in the monitoring of students’ behaviors. It provides immediate feedback, documents improvement over time, increases self-awareness and has been demonstrated to have positive results.

### **Non-Academic**

#### **A system of positive behavioral intervention and support**

Positive behavioral intervention and support (PBIS) has been shown to reduce behavioral problems and to improve academic outcomes. PBIS is based on the premise that continual teaching, combined with feedback regarding positive student behaviors reduces the need for discipline and promotes a climate of productivity, safety and learning. Students in the Pathways and Capstone program will be in the top tier of the three-tiered model. PBIS concepts dovetail with other best practices including choice-making, clear rules and expectations, proactive classroom management, pre-correction instructional strategies, etc. Ideally, PBIS would be in place at both the high school and the elementary school, with the goal of defining, teaching and sustaining appropriate student behaviors across all school settings. This would help facilitate transition out of the programs and to hopefully prevent some students from requiring restrictive programming.

#### **The use of peer reinforcement to promote appropriate student behavior (PR)**

Students who have emotional and/or behavioral difficulties are rejected by peers at a significantly higher rate than their non-disabled peers. Peer rejection is one of the strongest predictors of delinquency, aggressive behavior, and other negative life course outcomes. Students who have mental health disabilities often have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships, may misinterpret social cues and may have difficulty with interpersonal problem-solving skills. These difficulties put them at increased risk for peer rejection and subsequent emotional and behavior difficulties.

Alternatively, peers can bolster self-esteem and classroom functioning. The use of peers as reinforcement agents for appropriate social and behavioral functioning of classmates, known as peer-mediated interventions, relies on peers serving as the primary change agent either directly or indirectly. Positive peer reporting (PPR) has been used by teachers to increase social acceptance for students experiencing rejection by their peers. It is a simple peer-reinforcement intervention that involves teaching and rewarding classmates for providing descriptive praise during structured daily sessions to a target child who is considered peer rejected. It is based on the premise that peers play a powerful role in the development of prosocial behaviors. Even brief daily sessions of peer praise may improve peer acceptance, social interactions and social involvement of students who are socially withdrawn. It also can result in decreases in disruptive behaviors. Examples of positive behaviors that are reinforced by PPR include demonstrating good anger control, sharing with others, helping another classmate and working hard on assignments.

### **Instruction in self-monitoring of non-academic behaviors (SMAB)**

The methodology of self-monitoring of non-academic behaviors parallels that of monitoring for academic behaviors. In either circumstance, it is essential to identify concrete, quantifiable behaviors that the student recognizes and that can be monitored on an ongoing basis to determine improvement.

### **Behavior contracts (BC)**

Behavior contract are useful for students who have persistent behavioral difficulties, who are disorganized, who fail to comply with work assignments and who are defiant and oppositional. They have the advantage of holding students accountable, providing structure and consistency, promote responsibility, assist in communication with parents and improve students' grades and accountability. They generally utilize daily forms that identify target behaviors, and results are reviewed with the student and sent home to parents on a regular basis. The student has the opportunity to process the behavioral data and to identify methods of behavioral improvement. Behaviors should be observable and measurable, and reinforcers should be motivating and simple to provide. Bonuses can be provided if the desired behavior is completed in a shorter period of time than expected.

Contracts should be written and signed by all parties. Behaviors can be monitored by the teacher, but self-monitoring should be encouraged whenever possible.

### **A formal procedure for developing function-based interventions (FBA)**

Function-based interventions are designed to apply the findings of functional behavioral assessment to develop an intervention plan that addresses a student's behavioral difficulties. The key issue, in regard to students who have mental health disorders, is whether some of their behaviors stem directly from intrinsic manifestations of their disorder(s) versus reflecting functions such as gaining tangibles, avoiding schoolwork or seeking attention. Sensitivity to this issue, as well as consideration of hypotheses regarding where a student's behavior falls on the clinical-behavioral spectrum, will help assure that function-based interventions will be successful for behaviorally oriented issues.