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Program-Wide Positive Behavior Support in Preschool: Lessons for Getting Started

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Abstract

There is growing concern over the number of young children who display challenging behavior and preschool teachers are reporting children's challenging behavior as their greatest concern. Program-wide Positive Behavior Support (PWPBS) is a promising model for supporting appropriate behavior and decreasing challenging behavior in early childhood programs. Implementation in early childhood settings is relatively new and guidance on how to implement PWPBS in early childhood settings is growing. This article documents the implementation process for an early childhood program serving children from six weeks to five years of age, shares lessons learned and offers practical advice for getting started with PWPBS.

Keywords: positive behavior support, program-wide, primary support, universal prevention, preschool

Preschool teachers report children's challenging behavior as their single greatest concern (Alkon, Ramler, & MacLennan, 2003; Joseph & Strain, 2003). This is no surprise when 10 to 20% of preschool-age children engage in significant challenging behavior (Campbell, 1995; Lavigne et al., 1996; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1998). The impact of these numbers is powerful when you examine the long-term negative outcomes of early problem behavior. Children ages three to six who display challenging behavior are more likely to experience school discipline, failure and drop out (Kazdin, 1993; Strain, Lambert, Kerr, Stragg & Lenker, 1983; Tremblay, 2000), encounter the juvenile justice system (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995), or experience peer rejection, unemployment, psychiatric illness, divorce, fatal accidents, or early death (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Kazdin, 1985). These outcomes are staggering given that fewer than 10% of young children who show early signs of problem behavior receive services (Kazdin & Kendall, 1998). The call for effective and efficient behavior support in early childhood is loud and clear.

Program-wide Positive Behavior Support (PWPBS) is a promising model for addressing the behavioral needs of children in early education environments. PWPBS provides a framework of tiered interventions focused on promoting social-emotional development and preventing challenging behavior in children (Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, & Strain, 2003; Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010; Sugai et al., 2000). At the primary prevention level, PWPBS focuses on developing positive relationships and designing high-quality supportive environments for all children. Secondary prevention focuses on providing explicit instruction in social skills and emotional regulation for children who need more structured support in developing these skills. Finally, tertiary interventions focus on developing comprehensive, function-based interventions for children who do not respond to primary or secondary supports (Fox et al., 2010). PWPBS provides a framework for implementing evidence-based practices at each level, for collecting and utilizing data for decision-making, and for building systems to support staff behavior in implementing the model (Stormont, Lewis, Beckner, & Johnson, 2008).

There is growing evidence to support the adoption of PWPBS in early education settings and guidance is provided regarding the key features of implementation (Benedict, Horner, & Squires, 2007; Duda, Dunlap, Fox, Lentini, & Clarke, 2004; Fox & Hemmeter, 2009; Hemmeter, Fox, Jack & Broyles, 2007; Stormont et al., 2008). Program-wide implementation at the primary level (for all children) begins with the establishment of a leadership team that guides the process through development of a program-wide implementation plan. This implementation plan includes several components: getting commitment from staff, identifying program-wide expectations and strategies for

teaching those expectations, developing systems for acknowledging appropriate behavior and addressing challenging behavior, developing plans for ongoing professional development, developing an evaluation plan and using data for decision-making, and planning for family involvement (Hemmeter et al., 2007).

This article documents the implementation process for an early childhood program that serves children from six weeks to five years of age. The third author is the program director and the first two authors are university faculty who partnered with the program to implement PWPBS. Our goal is to share lessons learned from our first year of implementation and offer practical advice for getting started with PWPBS.

Program Description

The early childhood program serves 250 children, from six weeks to five years of age, from an urban community. The program has a strong philosophy that recognizes the diverse needs, abilities, interests, and cultures in a setting where each child is valued and respected, uniquely developing at his or her own rate. The curriculum promotes the development of the whole child through a balanced schedule of individual, small group, and activity based learning experiences. Working closely with families is a vital component to the program's success. The school provides a fully inclusive environment for all children's learning experiences. Approximately 12% are children with disabilities who receive additional supports on site from early intervention service agencies and the county school district. The school is an active university research site and training center for students in the field of early childhood education and special education.

Starting Point

Before getting started with implementation and at two more points during the year, we conducted an assessment of the primary level PBS practices that were implemented using the *Preschool-wide Evaluation Tool* (Pre-SET; Horner, Benedict, & Todd, 2005). The Pre-SET was modified from the School-wide Evaluation Tool (SET; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, Todd, & Horner, 2001) to be developmentally appropriate and applicable to early childhood settings. Modifications to the SET maintained the format and scoring of the instrument but removed, added and amended items to target early childhood programs. The SET has high interobserver agreement (99%), test-retest reliability (97.3%) and construct validity (median $r = .65$) (Horner, Todd, Lewis-Palmer, Irvin, Sugai & Boland, 2004) and there is preliminary evidence of the reliability, validity, feasibility and usefulness of the Pre-SET (Steed & Pomerleau, 2008). The Pre-SET was selected for use in this project because it provides an objective measure of implementation of primary level PBS practices and was specifically designed for early childhood settings.

The Pre-SET consists of 36 items organized into nine critical categories of universal PBS in preschool settings. The first category (category A) is expectations defined, which includes three items targeting documentation of a small number of classroom rules, public posting of rules and documentation of routine-specific rules for each classroom routine (i.e., arrival, free play, circle). Category B is behavioral expectations taught, which includes three items targeting plans for teaching classroom rules and teachers' and children's knowledge of classroom rules. Category C is appropriate behavior acknowledged, which includes five items related to having a consistent system for acknowledging appropriate behavior, using a ratio of at least four positive statements to every negative statement, using specific verbal praise, and using pre-correction (reminder of the rule in the absence of misbehavior) to remind children of classroom rules before misbehavior occurs. Category D is organized and predictable environment, which includes five items related to having a classroom schedule that both teachers and students can use, and providing warnings and signals for transitions. Category E is additional supports and is an optional assessment category including six items that target systems and supports for children who may require secondary or tertiary level interventions. Category F is family involvement and includes three items targeting families' knowledge of and involvement in the development of classroom rules and behavior support strategies. Category G is monitoring and decision-making and includes three items targeting the program's documentation and management of children's behavioral incidents. Category H is management and includes five items related to the structure and functions of the PBS leadership team. Finally, category I is program and district-wide support and includes three items related to time and resources available to support implementation.

Administration of the Pre-SET requires an outside observer to (a) conduct interviews with the program director, teachers and children, (b) observe program environments and teaching, and (c) review permanent products. Scoring for the Pre-SET involves assigning a value of 0, 1, or 2 (0 = not implemented, 1 = partially implemented, 2 = fully implemented) for each of the 36 items. Category summary scores (percentage of possible points for each of the nine categories) are produced, and a total summary score as the mean of the nine category scores is computed.

We completed the Pre-SET in each classroom and then summarized our mean percentage of universal PBS practices implemented across the program. We did not complete Section E of the Pre-SET which is an optional assessment section because our program did not have and was not working on developing systems for identifying and supporting students for secondary- and tertiary-level interventions. Before we started with PWPBS, we were implementing 21% of universal PBS practices across classrooms. Our two highest rated categories prior to implementation were *appropriate behavior acknowledged* and *expectations defined*. In general, teachers were more positive than negative in their interactions with children but did not consistently use pre-correction or specific verbal praise. In each of the classrooms a small number of classroom rules were identified; however, these rules were not consistent across classrooms. Further, teachers had posted the classroom rules but had not included visuals or posted them at eye level for children. Figure 1 shows a graph documenting our implementation across each category at three different points in time.

What We Learned

Low implementation scores on a measure like the Pre-SET are to be expected before you begin PWPBS. In fact, assessment of 15 early childhood classrooms prior to formal implementation of PWPBS showed a mean percentage of 30.79% of features implemented, with a range of 13.33% to 46.48% (Benedict, Horner, & Squires, 2007). It is important to acknowledge PWPBS as a process and see initial scores as a starting point rather than an evaluation. For our program, we had several components in place but there was no real system being implemented. This initial data helped us make decisions about where to focus our efforts.

Implementation Process

Phase I: Commitment & Initial Training

Our first step was to provide an overview presentation to all program staff. This overview presented information about the importance of young children's social emotional development, the main logic for implementing PWPBS, the key components of a program-wide model, and the types of activities and commitment that would be required. Following the presentation, program staff members were given two weeks to consider the information and their willingness to participate. All staff signed a commitment form stating that behavior support was one of their top three goals and that they were committed to at least three years of effort in implementing PWPBS.

What We Learned

In an attempt to make the process entirely voluntary, staff were given personal time to consider their individual commitment to PWPBS; all staff agreed to sign a commitment form. As we moved forward in the process we discovered that not all staff were entirely committed and felt some pressure to sign the form. In order to meet recommendations that commitment from at least 80% of program staff is required (Horner & Sugai, 2000), we recommend creating a safe environment for staff to ask questions and an open dialogue, and making it clear to staff that there are no negative consequences of asking questions or not committing to the process.

Our overview presentation was delivered by the university partners rather than by program staff. We recommend having program staff take the lead in the overview presentation and share their perspective on adopting PWPBS. In an interview with the program director, it was indicated that some of her reasons for wanting to adopt PWPBS were to build a team approach, to enhance collaboration between staff and families, to develop a common vision, and to build consistency across settings and individuals in the program. If the presentation were given by the program director and staff, this message may have been communicated more clearly.

Following the overview presentation and the collection of staff signatures on the commitment form, the university partners delivered a two-day initial content training. This training was focused on defining, teaching and acknowledging program-wide expectations. The primary outcome from the training was the development of three positively stated program-wide expectations: Be Respectful, Be Safe, and Be a Team Player.

In order to utilize a team process in identifying those expectations, the training included a series of activities for program staff. On the first day, following a discussion of guidelines for program-wide expectations, staff members participated in a small group brainstorming session to generate words they felt were important for their program. One list was compiled for the large group and staff members were encouraged to think about the words that were important to them individually and to their program as a whole over the next two days before the group reconvened.

On the second day, each staff member listed three expectations they felt were important on an index card. These words were then organized into one group list. As a large group the staff then began to identify words that held similar meanings until they had three groupings of words. They then decided on one expectation for each of these groupings. In the final activities, small groups began to define what each of these expectations looked like across the various settings in their program so that at the end of the second day, the program had a draft for their program-wide expectation matrix. Figure 2 shows the final version of our expectation matrix that we are still using today. Shortly following this two-day training, we completed the Pre-SET a second time to assess any change in our implementation of universal PBS practices (see Figure 1). Interestingly, we saw an increase of only 1% following our training. We saw a slight decrease from 50% to 47% in Category A which appeared because one teacher took down the classroom rules that she had posted since the program had agreed upon a different set of program-wide expectations. The new expectations had not yet been posted when we conducted our observation. Slight increases were seen in Categories B (behavioral expectations taught), C (appropriate behavior acknowledged), and D (organized and predictable environment). Changes related to staff (including volunteer and university student staff) being more aware of classroom rules and schedules.

What We Learned

With our program-wide expectations, as with our initial staff commitment, we found that staff came to agreement on three program-wide expectations within the large group but that not all staff were truly committed to these expectations. We would recommend giving staff more time to consider the program-wide expectations individually and possibly having groups of staff make recommendations to the large group rather than having the process facilitated by outside partners. Written feedback may have allowed staff to communicate concerns or other ideas more freely.

Given the results of our second Pre-SET assessment, showing that we had only increased our implementation of universal PBS practices by 1% following our large group training, we surmised that group training alone may not be an efficient format for creating change. This is consistent with evaluation of participants' use of new skills in a classroom setting following various forms of training that showed that 0% of participants applied new skills following theory and discussion or demonstration in training, that 5% applied skills following practice and feedback in a training setting and that 95% applied skills following coaching in the classroom setting (Joyce & Showers, 2002). This information guided us in taking a different approach as we moved into the next phase of our implementation.

Phase 2: Leadership Team & Implementation Plan

Following the initial training, we focused on building our PBS leadership team and a consistent schedule for meeting to review data and develop a plan for implementation. Our leadership team included two program administrators, teachers and playground supervisors from the preschool classrooms and the toddler classrooms, a special education teacher, a family member, and our university partners.

As a team, we reviewed data from our Pre-SET assessment and from a survey of program staff. All staff were given the Effective Behavior Support Self-Assessment Survey (EBSSAS; Sugai, Horner, & Todd, 2003) that asked them to evaluate the current status (in place, partially in place, not in place) and priority for improvement (high, medium and low) across four behavior support systems: (a) school-wide discipline systems, (b) non-classroom management systems (e.g., cafeteria, hallway, playground), (c) classroom management systems, and (d) systems for individual

students engaging in chronic problem behaviors. This survey was designed for several purposes, including (a) annual action planning, (b) internal decision making, (c) assessment of change over time, (d) awareness building of staff, and (e) team validation. In our program 12 teachers and 2 administrators completed the survey as a method of providing feedback to the PBS leadership team about the status and need for improvement of specific components of PWPBS.

We developed an action plan based on where we were at and what the team and the rest of our staff thought we should target. Our initial goals focused on defining our expectations across settings and building consistent classroom schedules and routines. In response to the low rate of change following our initial training, we decided to provide four preschool classroom teachers with consultation and feedback to help develop supports and build on the previous group training. These teachers received individualized training on defining and teaching classroom expectations, building consistent routines, schedules and transitions, and acknowledging children's appropriate behavior. Using positive verbal supports with children was highly emphasized. We scheduled monthly meetings through the end of the school year and then conducted a final Pre-SET assessment in May as we were wrapping up the year. At the end of the year we were implementing 42% of universal PBS practices, which means we still have work to do but despite all of the lessons we learned along the way we doubled our initial implementation! The greatest changes in our implementation scores were seen in increases in Categories H (management), A (expectations defined), and D (organized and predictable environment) and a decrease in Category C (appropriate behavior acknowledged). The increases were as we would have expected since our action plan and activities focused on defining expectations (Category A) and implementing consistent schedules and routines (Category D) and since Category H focuses on the structure and functions of the leadership team which was not in place at the beginning of the year. The decrease in Category C (appropriate behavior acknowledged) came as a surprise. Within this category, we did see an increase in teachers' use of at least four positive statements to every negative. Decreases came in relation to items targeting the use of specific verbal praise and a system for acknowledging appropriate behavior that is consistent across staff. Category B (behavioral expectations taught) remained consistent as we planned for systematic teaching beginning at the start of our next school year. Similarly, Category F (family involvement) and Category G (monitoring and decision making) remained consistent at 0% implementation. We began planning for family involvement activities to begin in the fall and are hoping to build a system for monitoring behavior incidents and using data for decision making once we have better solidified our expectations and acknowledgement system.

What We Learned

Our leadership team had a great impact on implementation and on staff commitment. Having a representative group of staff members allowed for communication with other staff that included bringing ideas to the team and disseminating team activities. We would recommend establishing this team earlier and having them take a leadership role in the trainings provided to staff. We would also recommend scheduling all meetings in advance and sticking to the schedule. Our meetings were rescheduled two months in a row and our progress slowed greatly.

Use of the self-assessment survey to gather information from staff who are not part of the leadership team was a helpful activity for guiding the action planning process. We would recommend, however, using a tool that is specifically designed for early childhood environments. While we gathered useful information from the EBSSAS, some items were more targeted for K-12 settings. Since using the EBSSAS, we have been developing an early childhood version of the measure (Preschool Effective Behavior Support (PEBS) Self-Assessment Survey; Carter, Steed, & Pomerleau, 2009) that you can obtain from the first author.

We were faced with accreditation during our first year of implementation. Given that consistent schedules and routines were part of our accreditation process, we decided to focus our PWPBS efforts in that area. Aligning these two areas really helped us move forward.

Finally, we saw more growth in the classrooms where teachers received consultation and feedback on their implementation than in classrooms where the teachers only received group training. This finding is consistent with growing evidence that supports the use of consultation to strengthen teachers' management of young children with challenging behavior (Alkon et al., 2003; Duda et al., 2004; Benedict et al., 2007). We would recommend using strategies such as peer coaching to enhance staff members' understanding and ability to apply universal PBS practices.

Wrapping Up (or Revving Up)

We ended our first year of implementation with many lessons learned but with a growing amount of enthusiasm and support for implementation across staff. We found that teachers started to buy-in to the process after they started to see the results. Testimonials of the four teachers who received consultation and feedback impacted some of the teachers who were more skeptical of the process.

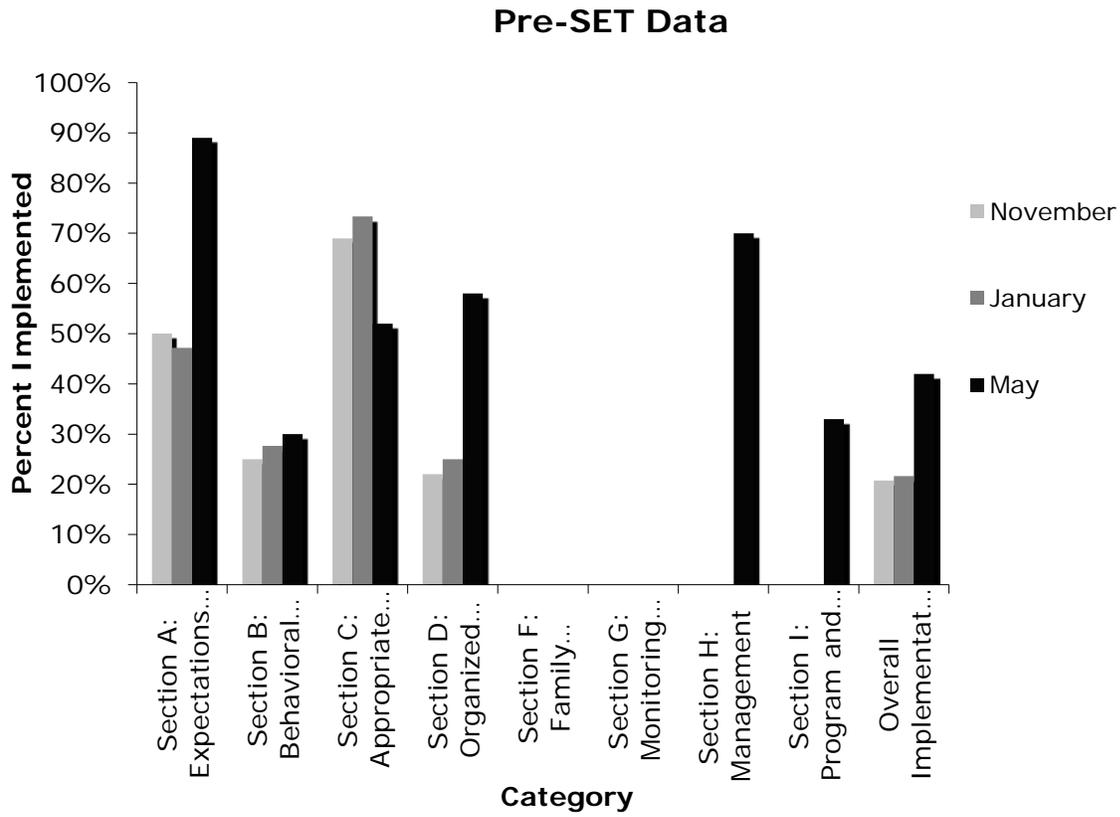
Perfect is not a word that we would use to describe our first year of implementation but we recognize that all programs will have their own challenges to face. Our strongest recommendations to other programs looking to adopt PWPBS are to establish your leadership team early, pay special attention to staff commitment and buy-in, find ways to support your staff in implementation (i.e., peer coaching and systems), and recognize that each program will grow at its own pace. Implementation of PWPBS is a process and we are looking forward to expanding PWPBS to a new level of motivation and commitment in our second year.

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Figure 1. Implementation of Universal PBS Practices Across Time



Note. Section E was not scored. Sections F and G were scored, but received a score of 0 at all three points in time.

Figure 2. Program-wide Expectation Matrix

	CLASSROOM	Date Taught	BATHROOM/ DIAPER ROOM	Date Taught	OUTDOORS	Date Taught
KEEP OUR BODY SAFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> walking feet feet on the floor push in chairs quick response to teacher direction 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> walking feet wash hands adult supervision / adult in bathroom with children at all times finish dressing before leaving 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> feet on the ground running feet on grass only turn-taking wear helmet for bikes and wagons gates closed at all times quick response to teacher direction only adults push blue button transition safely 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
KEEP OUR FRIENDS SAFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> inside voices turn-taking silent signals soft touches help others invite friends to play “we’re all friends” follow directions/ instructions 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> turn-taking privacy 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> soft touches turn-taking appropriate voices & play watch environment & people around you invite friends to play 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
KEEP OUR TOYS AND MATERIALS SAFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> use materials appropriately follow directions / instructions clean up 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> keep toys in classroom clean up respect bathroom materials 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> use outside materials appropriately clean up 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

	LENDING LIBRARY	Date Taught	FIELDTRIPS	Date Taught	REST TIME	Date Taught
KEEP OUR BODY SAFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> walking feet turn-taking adult supervision 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> walking feet follow the friend in front of you stay behind teacher follow directions quick response to teacher direction transition safely 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> quiet voices (based on child's individual needs) calm body on cot or at center 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
KEEP OUR FRIENDS SAFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> turn-taking respect your friends appropriate voices & play 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> follow directions respect friends & keep them safe respect for environment, rules, & people at field trip site model kind words hold hands 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> follow directions quiet bodies & voices respect others' resting area 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
KEEP OUR TOYS AND MATERIALS SAFE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shoes off in reading corner respect materials clean up keep food and drink out 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> respect for environment 	<p>_____</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> keep our cots/mats safe keep nap time materials safe 	<p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

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Note. The date taught column is a place for individual teachers to indicate when they taught specific expectations.