

Using Positive Behavior Intervention Support for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in
Inclusive Classrooms

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Abstract

The prevalence of autism and related disorders, now categorized under the common thread of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is increasing, with one in 88 children being diagnosed each year. With this increase in prevalence comes an urgent need for interventions that will address the behavioral and learning challenges faced by children with ASD in the classroom. The need for more scrutiny of behavior-based therapies is critical given the number of children with ASD who are receiving instruction in mainstream classroom settings. The use of Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) may help educators and support personnel who are challenged when trying to find ways to meet the needs of their students with autism spectrum disorder.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, behavior, inclusion, intervention, Positive Behavior Intervention Support

Using Positive Behavior Intervention Support for Children with Autism in Inclusion

Although the official estimation is that one in 88 children will be affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD), recent indications place the numbers closer to the range of one in every 68 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). This means school leaders and teachers will face a growing number of students on the spectrum transitioning into the inclusive classroom. An inclusive classroom is one in which a child with a disability is supported while remaining in an environment with his non-disabled peers. Support for children within the special education program is generally provided by a certified special education teacher. Children with autism often demonstrate challenging behaviors that can range from mild to severe (Szymanski, 2012). Inclusive education is beneficial to all students (Carter & Hughes, 2006). A program's ability to offer the flexibility needed in an inclusive environment is crucial because there are an increasing number of children with autism being served in the regular education classroom alongside other typically developing students (Williams, Johnson, & Sukhodolsky, 2005). As more children are identified as having ASD, it becomes important for classroom teachers to prepare themselves to welcome these children into the general education classroom. What educators do and how will be extremely important to the success of ASD children in the school setting. Being able to address the needs of children in a holistic manner is an essential component of their academic and functional achievement.

Autism in the Inclusion Classroom

As more children diagnosed with ASD enter the general education classroom, educators and other professionals are challenged to find evidence-based practices that are effective in curbing behaviors that distract from the learning environment. Moreover, many teachers are admittedly underprepared to work with children with ASD, further putting these children's

learning outcomes in jeopardy (Dymond & Gilson, 2007). While a child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) may include goals for behavior, it may not be realistically possible to cover all behaviors in one document. As a result, more generalized behavior management strategies are needed to ensure the student with autism spectrum disorder is successful.

As different theories about autism began to emerge, different intervention approaches began to develop as well (Skokut, Robinson, Openden, & Jimerson, 2008; Tews, 2007). However, it has been noted that programs for children diagnosed with ASD should be based primarily on the individual needs of the child (Simpson, 2005). Currently, no empirical studies exist to establish the validity of any behavioral methodologies as they relate to children with autism (Marks, 2007).

Implications for Positive Behavior Intervention Support

Despite the scant empirical research on behavior management for children with ASD, decades of scientific evidence has been gathered to support the effectiveness of practices that are rooted in applied behavior analysis (ABA) to improve learning outcomes for children on the autism spectrum (Heflin & Alaimo, 2007). Research findings show Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) can be a successful method for eliminating and preventing problem behaviors of children with ASD, and in some cases reducing challenging behaviors by 80% for approximately two-thirds of the cases studied. PBIS was endorsed within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) as a preferred form of intervention for managing the challenging behavior of students with disabilities (Tincani, 2007).

PBIS was designed to address pre-determined behaviors on a school-wide basis. Grounded in the theory of operant conditioning, students are rewarded for positive behaviors using tokens, free-time passes, edible treats, and other items, and theoretically punished for

behavioral infractions. While PBIS does not specifically target children with ASD in isolation, it is an appropriate method to use for behavior modification or management in the general education setting with ASD children because of its inclusiveness and targeted behavior.

Preparing the Classroom Environment

Under a PBIS system, rituals and routines should be inclusive and designed to decrease the frequency and duration of problem behaviors (Scott, Park, Swaim-Bradway, & Landers, 2007). Hence, classroom rules and expectations should not be created for the sole purpose of controlling a single child, nor should rules be so rigid that success is less likely an option. Students should be allowed an opportunity to earn their way back if an infraction occurs and praised for their efforts to correct their behaviors.

All children benefit from stability, particularly in the learning environment, an idea that becomes even more important for children with autism spectrum disorder who may experience language deficits (receptive or expressive), auditory processing delays, or sensory issues that prevent them from accessing the classroom environment in a manner that is appropriate. It is important for teachers to model, remind, visually support, and enforce behavior rules and expectations consistently and revise them if necessary. Teachers who establish basic classroom rule (See Figure 1 for example) and review them frequently are likely to have greater success with children with ASD. As with rules and expectations, classroom routines should begin small and increase as the child shows mastery of the basics. Overwhelming a child with ASD with too many directives can cause the child to misunderstand what the teacher is expecting of him or her or cause a behavioral meltdown if the child becomes frustrated with not being able to accomplish a task. Routines should be developmentally appropriate and remain stable, with few (if any) changes.

Providing Visual Support

When using PBIS in inclusion classrooms, teachers should take into consideration many factors. Verbal communication of expectations and rules should use simple language and, when feasible, be accompanied by visual representations (See Figure 2). Previous research has shown children with ASD are more visually stimulated (Dunn Buron & Wolfberg, 2008), which impacts their learning style preferences. Visual cues and reminders take into account those children on the autism spectrum who may have weak receptive language abilities (Loring & Hamilton, 2011) and lack the skills to differentiate the multiple levels of verbal and non-verbal cues that are present in the learning environment throughout the course of the day. Being able to tie what they hear with what they see gives added assurance that the student will be able to understand expectations and respond appropriately when given the opportunity.

Creating a System of Rewards

Creating and implementing a reward system based on students' interests will encourage students to buy into the rules and routines established in the classroom with the expectation that doing so will get them what they want in the end. The rewards component of the PBIS process is based largely on the principles of ABA, a widely used evidence-based practice for children with ASD that combines student responses, when appropriate, with corresponding rewards (Tincani, 2007). Using an area of interest connects the student with the behavioral objectives and increases the probability that he or she will execute the targeted behavior. Reward systems that acknowledge students for positive behavior should include both verbal praise as well as tangible rewards such as those found in a token economy system that students can accrue over a designated period (McKevitt, Dempsey, Ternus, & Shriver, 2012).

Conclusion

It has been well-established through the literature that no one program or method works for all children on the autism spectrum. Despite the scant empirical research on the behavior management of children with autism spectrum disorder, decades of research have led to scientific evidence to support the effectiveness of practices that are rooted in ABA to improve learning outcomes and have a positive impact on the behavior of children on the autism spectrum (Heflin & Alaimo, 2007) when implemented with fidelity.

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Activity	Yes	In Progress	Not Yet Started (Indicate Projected Start Date)
1. PBIS Team formed (should include EC teachers, specialists, assistants)			
2. Classroom-based rules and expectations have been created			
3. Student data sheets have been created			
4. Parent information has been collected for parent contacts			
5. Visual Representations have been included with written rules and expectations			
6. Rewards system created based on identified student interests			
7. Team meeting dates tentatively planned			

Figure 1. Sample PBIS classroom readiness checklist action plan.

Be Prepared for Class	
Raise Your Hand Before Speaking	
Be Respectful of Each Other	

Figure 2. Sample rules chart with visual support.