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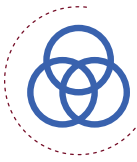
SUPPORTING DEAF STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM WITHIN A PBIS FRAMEWORK

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Supporting Deaf Students in the Classroom within a PBIS Framework

Authors Center on PBIS
National Center on Deafblindness
National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes

Purpose

Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support (PBIS) is a multi-tiered approach to supporting all students including the unique population of deaf students (note that the term deaf is used generally for people who may identify as deaf, deafblind, deaf disabled, or hard of hearing). A high percentage of deaf students have additional disabilities. Assessment and identification of additional disabilities within this population is challenging. Each deaf student has a specific set of skills, communication preferences, and accommodation needs. Teachers should be flexible and prepared to accommodate a range of needs in the classroom.

Introduction

Most deaf students (88%) spend some portion of their day in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Data from the National Center on Deafblindness also indicates that 62% of deafblind students spend some portion of their day in the general education classroom (NCDB, 2021). These data suggest that teachers should be prepared to support deaf students in the classroom.

Deaf student needs are highly individualized and context dependent. It is important to consider what may manifest as contextually “inappropriate” behaviors can often be a result of inaccessible and unaccommodating environments and/or unmet needs. Rather than jumping to disciplinary action, it is important to (a) understand why behaviors occur, (b) enhance environmental supports, and (c) teach educators and students better ways to meet the needs of deaf students. Many schools do not have the resources to provide appropriate support to deaf students, which increases the risk of the school-to-prison pipeline for deaf people (Guthmann et al., 2021).

Students with disabilities are more likely to experience exclusionary and reactive discipline practices than students without disabilities. For example, according to the Office of Civil Rights (OCR), students with disabilities comprise 12% of the school enrollment; however, they experience 26% of out of school suspensions, 24% of expulsions, 28% of referrals to law enforcement or arrests, 71% of restraints, and 66% of seclusions (Office of Civil Rights [OCR], 2018). The



OCR does not disaggregate disciplinary action data by type of disability, however, data from educational programs that serve deaf students demonstrate that of deaf students in these programs, 5.6% have experienced out of school suspension, 1.3% were referred to law enforcement or arrested, and 0.8% had experienced being restrained (National Deaf Center, 2022). Another study using data from one residential school for the deaf revealed consistently higher suspension rates compared to the state average, particularly among Black deaf students and Black deaf male students (LaMarr & Egbert, 2020).

To reduce reliance on exclusionary discipline and promote positive outcomes, educators can organize environmental and instructional supports within a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework to create supportive, positive, and predictable environments for this learner population.

Features of PBIS

Research demonstrates that when educators implement positive, proactive, and evidence-based practices within a PBIS framework, students experience (a) improved academic, social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes and (b) reduced exclusionary and reactive discipline (Center on PBIS, 2021; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Within a PBIS framework, educators implement universal practices (Tier 1) to support all students, targeted practices (Tier 2) for students who require an enhanced level of support to experience success, and intensive and individualized practices (Tier 3) for students with more significant or chronic levels of need. It is important to note that students with disabilities may receive and benefit from supports within each tier, including Tier 1. ([See Center on PBIS, 2022 for a brief research summary on effects of Tier 1 for students with disabilities.](#)¹)

Implementing PBIS at Tier 1 involves the following core features:

- **Invest in prevention.** Within each classroom, effective educators [support and respond to students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs](#)² by (a) implementing foundation, prevention, and response practices, and (b) using data to guide their implementation and differentiation of practices (Center on PBIS, 2021b).
- **Integrate classroom practices.** Educators [integrate effective academic and behavior support](#)³ to increase the likelihood that all students, including students with disabilities, benefit from classroom supports.
- **Tier 1 is for all.** Effective educators design, implement, and differentiate [Tier 1](#)⁴ practices for all students with a focus of meeting the needs of the majority (>80%) of their learners. For students who continue to require additional support to be successful, educators may layer on additional [Tier 2](#)⁵ or [Tier 3](#)⁶ supports.
- **All means all.** To increase likelihood of equitable outcomes with Tier 1 practices, effective educators engage students and families in selecting, implementing, and adjusting practices to consider cultural and contextual factors that may affect teachers' implementation, students' experiences and outcomes, and other key factors that contribute to the discipline gap. Further, to increase the likelihood that deaf students and families engage with and benefit from Tier 1 support, educators adopt and communicate positive [attitudes toward deaf individuals](#)⁷ (National Deaf Center, 2019).

A number of schools for the deaf have adapted PBIS for their students. These include:

- [American School for the Deaf](#)⁸
- [Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind](#)⁹
- [Florida School for the Deaf and Blind](#)¹⁰
- [Iowa School for the Deaf](#)¹¹
- [St. Francis de Sales School for the Deaf](#)¹²
- [Texas School for the Deaf](#)¹³
- [Wisconsin School for the Deaf](#)¹⁴

PBIS implementation at schools of the deaf has been demonstrated to allow schools to better meet the unique needs of their students and decrease restraint, seclusion (Wilson et al., 2022), and behavioral incidents (Sinnot, 2009).

Do an Access Check

When providing supports for deaf students, it is critical to take the time to do an access check to ensure that there are not any barriers to accessibility in the learning environment. Ineffective or subpar accessibility can contribute to student frustration and fatigue, preventing effective implementation of supportive practices. Providing access involves more than providing accommodations. Accessibility involves effective and student-centered instruction as well as ensuring a welcoming and inclusive school culture. Teachers should be prepared to identify potential access barriers to learning environments including learning materials (e.g., are all videos captioned and described?) or peer interactions (e.g., are deaf students included in conversations?). Deaf students, particularly younger deaf students, may not realize how much they are missing in the classroom. For example, hard of hearing students who rely on assistive listening devices may have accommodations in the classroom but not necessarily understand everything taking place during instruction and interaction. When providing effective environments for deaf students, it is important to consider how biophysical factors (e.g., alertness, attentiveness) and external context may interact to influence the child's behavior.

Implement Supportive Practices

Guided by PBIS core features, inclusive educators implement the following “top ten” practices to support and respond to students’ social, emotional, and behavioral needs in their classroom with considerations for deaf students.

- 1. Design and adapt the *physical environment* of the classroom to meet the needs of *all* students, including deaf students.**

To support all students, consider (a) mobility around and access to all areas of the classroom, (b) visual and/or tactile supports for students, and (c) assistive technology, including [universal core communication systems](#)¹⁵ and other supports, to promote learning within the classroom environment (Archer & Huges, 2011; Wong & Wong, 2009). Deaf students should have visual and/or tactile access to interpreters, other support providers, and their teachers.

- 2. Develop and explicitly teach *predictable classroom routines* to maximize students’ ability to independently navigate the classroom.**

To increase the likelihood that all students benefit from [predictable classroom routines](#),¹⁶ consider using strategies like using signed core vocabulary to explicitly define and teach the routine, review and re-teach on a regular schedule, and provide and gradually fade prompts until students are able to independently navigate classroom routines (Kern & Clemens, 2007). [Routines for students who are deaf or deafblind](#)¹⁷ help them build communication skills, learn new concepts, access the general education curriculum, and improve interactions and social skills.

- 3. Select, define, teach, and prompt 3-5 *positive classroom expectations*.**

Engage students in selecting, defining, and accessing a small number of positively stated expectations. Ensure expectations are accessible to learners from a variety of language and ability backgrounds (e.g., providing access via American Sign Language, signed [core vocabulary](#) and/or [universal core communication systems](#),¹⁸ protactile, braille, large print, pictures, and other

representations of expectations). To maximize efficiency, explicitly teach expectations in the context of classroom routines, leveraging the planned schedule for reviewing, re-teaching, and fading prompts to also teach expectations (Alter & Haydon, 2017).

4. Promote *active engagement* with high rates of opportunities to respond.

All students, across all grades and content areas, benefit from engaging instruction that includes high quality, high rate, and varied opportunities to respond (Alter et al., 2011; Partin et al., 2010; Sutherland et al., 2003). To increase engagement opportunities for all students, consider incorporating instructional and assistive technology (Hirsch et al., 2019) and other empirically-supported strategies to increase [opportunities to respond](#).¹⁹ Provide students with multimodal ways of engaging with classroom content to ensure all students, including deaf students, can authentically and effectively engage in instruction.

5. Provide *prompts, pre-corrections, and other reminders to set students up for success*.

Simple strategies, like providing “[positive greetings at the door](#)”²⁰ (i.e., connect with each student as they enter the classroom, prompt routines and expected behavior, and provide specific praise for transition), result in positive outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities (Allday & Pakurar, 2007; Allday et al., 2011; Cook et al., 2018). Individualize prompt modalities to meet the individual needs and preferences of students (e.g., gentle physical guidance, visual signals, protactile, American Sign Language).

6. Engage in *active supervision* to monitor student behavior.

By engaging in [active supervision](#)²¹—that is, moving around the classroom, scanning frequently, and



interacting with students—educators promote contextually appropriate behavior and prevent or reduce contextually inappropriate behavior (Colvin et al., 1997; DePry & Sugai, 2002).

7. Deliver *behavior specific praise* and other strategies to acknowledge behavior that is appropriate for the context.

Specific praise “tags” a contextually appropriate behavior with a positive statement (“Thank you for participating respectfully.”) and results in an increase in desired behavior for most students (Floress et al., 2017). Supplement specific praise with additional strategies to acknowledge student behavior (Center on PBIS, 2021). The specific praise should be timely and understandable for the student.

- 8. Provide behavior *specific error corrections* and other strategies to respond instructionally to behavior that is inappropriate for the context.** [Specific error corrections](#)²² signal an error (e.g., contextually inappropriate behavior), share how to “correct” the error (e.g., engage in contextually appropriate behavior) in the future, and provide an opportunity to practice and receive praise for the contextually appropriate behavior. When needed, supplement this approach with additional strategies to respond to contextually inappropriate behavior (OSEP, 2015).
- 9. Ensure each student experiences a favorable *ratio of positive to negative interactions* (e.g., praise to corrections).** As highlighted in [national news](#),²³ all students benefit when they experience more positive than negative feedback, and this is especially true for students with or at-risk for disabilities, who may require even more favorable ratios (as high as 9:1) to experience benefit (Caldarella et al., 2019; Downs et al., 2019).

- 10. Collect and use fidelity and outcome *data* to guide implementation and differentiation of practices.**

Educators use data to evaluate their own implementation fidelity and students' outcomes (indicating responsiveness to classroom practices). Based on data, educators may (a) adjust or differentiate Tier 1 supports or (b) layer on additional Tier 2 or Tier 3 supports to meet the needs of all.

The Bottom Line

All students, including students who are deaf, deafblind, deaf disabled, or hard of hearing benefit from effective implementation of empirically supported practices within a PBIS framework.

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Embedded Hyperlinks

1. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/why-implement-tier-1-pbis-for-students-with-disabilities-what-does-research-say>
2. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/supporting-and-responding-to-behavior-evidence-based-classroom-strategies-for-teachers>
3. <https://www.pbis.org/resource/classroom-integrated-academics-and-behavior-brief>
4. <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tier-1>
5. <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tier-2>
6. <https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tier-3>
7. <https://nationaldeafcenter.org/resource-items/attitudes-toward-deaf-people/>
8. <https://www.asd-1817.org/news-story?pk=1102482>
9. <https://csdb.colorado.gov/student-services/pbis>
10. <https://www.fsdbk12.org/post/deaf-elementary-school-celebrates-being-named-a-pbis-model-school>
11. <https://www.iowaschoolforthe deaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/ISD-PBIS-Handbook.pdf>
12. <https://sfdesales.org/positive-behaviorai-interventions-supports>
13. https://www.tsd.state.tx.us/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=170905&type=d&pREC_ID=1018486
14. <https://wesp-dhh.wi.gov/wsd/academics/pbis/>
15. <http://www.project-core.com/communication-systems/>
16. <http://pbissmissouri.org/classroom-procedures-and-routines-content-acquisition-video/>
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22. <http://louisville.edu/education/abri/primarylevel/correction/group>
23. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/30/health/teacher-praise-wellness/index.html>

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