

PBIS in Early Childhood Classrooms on School Campuses

Anna Winnekar & Lise Fox, *University of South Florida*

This Practice Brief was developed as result of the roundtable dialogue that occurred at the 2019 PBIS Leadership Forum in Chicago, IL for the purpose of exploring how all classes on school campuses can meet the developmental needs of students, specifically our youngest students.

Operational Definition

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) for Early Childhood refers to implementation of the critical elements in a developmentally appropriate way for children birth through five.

Rationale

This document is intended to assist School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS) teams to ensure they are meeting the developmental needs of all grade levels on campus. When implementing SW-PBIS, contextual fit is a key piece to which schools should pay attention (Sugai, O’Keeffe, & Fallon, 2012). Many elementary school campuses include Pre-Kindergarten (PreK) classes. However, the application of the critical elements of SW-PBIS, as they are implemented for older students, is not always a contextual fit for classrooms for younger children. There are several common themes that emerge when examining the issues associated with implementation of PBIS in early childhood classrooms.

One of the core elements for implementation of a successful school-wide system is having a PBIS team with representation of all stakeholders at the school. While this often includes representation from various grade levels, PreK is often not at the table. This leaves out valuable input of the considerations needed to ensure that these classrooms can successfully participate in school-wide implementation (Fox & Binder, 2015). Additionally, PreK teachers can provide valuable input related to social emotional teaching strategies that might benefit teachers in other grades. The developmentally appropriate strategies used for younger students (i.e., use of visuals to support teaching the school-wide expectations) can also benefit many other students within the school.

PreK teachers might not advocate to be a part of the PBIS team because they do not see SW-PBIS as being a fit for their students. In some districts, PreK teachers have not been involved as key stakeholders in training and technical



assistance and therefore might not make the connections as to the relevance of PBIS in their classrooms. A key universal strategy used in the implementation of SW-PBIS is feedback and acknowledgement. Many schools adopt a token system as a means of reinforcing students when they are demonstrating the school-wide behavioral expectations. For our youngest students, children who are developmentally three to five years old (or even younger), the way these systems are typically set up is not a match to their development and skills. Most children in a preschool classroom will lack the symbolic representation skills to understand a token economy and would benefit more from reinforcers that are more immediate.

Young children may demonstrate challenging behaviors as they are just developing the necessary language and social skills needed to understand and meet school-wide behavioral expectations. Teachers of preschool-age children often expect that they will encounter behavior as it is related to the child's maturation of social emotional skills. Preschool curricula and high quality teaching practices include the explicit instruction of social and emotional skills as a critical feature. Some of the behaviors that early educators see as an appropriate part of development in a PreK classroom would be considered problematic in students in older grades. While SW-PBIS utilizes a code of conduct or similar policies as they relate to behavior, applying the same guidelines to students through the age of five would not be applicable. The emphasis is largely on promotion of social and emotional competencies and the prevention of persistent challenging behavior.

SW-PBIS teams should be utilizing data to make decisions on how to best support students in the school. Often times, schools use office-discipline referrals (ODRs) to look for common themes around behavior. Data-based decision making should also occur in early childhood classrooms. However, students in PreK classrooms should not be receiving office discipline referrals. While a preschool child's challenging behavior might warrant an office discipline referral if the child was older (e.g., crying and throwing an object at another child), these are behaviors that are commonly managed within the preschool classroom. Similarly, the use of code of conduct linked to suspension and expulsion criteria are not appropriate for students in the preschool classroom.

A key component of SW-PBIS is coaching for implementation. Often times, the person acting in the role of coach might not have experience with children five and under. For teachers of these students seeking assistance with classroom systems, coaches might find they are not adequately prepared to implement developmentally appropriate approaches for promotion, prevention and intervention. Coaches might lack the experience needed to help teachers be successfully included in what is being implemented school-wide.

For preschool teachers wanting to utilize an evidence-based framework to teach social and emotional competencies and to address persistence challenging behavior in their classroom, they can implement the Pyramid Model for Promoting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children (Pyramid Model). By implementing the Pyramid Model, teachers are using developmentally appropriate practices to meet the needs of

their students (Hemmeter, Snyder, Fox & Algina, 2017). Information on how the Pyramid Model is used for SW-PBIS can be found here <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Pyramid/pbis.html>

Procedures

Review Team Membership

For existing SW-PBIS teams, team membership should be reviewed to ensure representation from early childhood classrooms. This provides opportunity for PreK classrooms to have input on how to have implementation in these classrooms developmentally appropriate for young students. Additionally teachers using the Pyramid Model can share strategies and resources that can also meet the needs of children in older grades. This reciprocal relationship helps to improve the existing critical elements and practices to improve outcomes for all students. For teams just beginning implementation, it is recommended to include PreK representation from the outset. By doing this, teams are ensuring that they include all students from the very beginning instead of it feeling as an add-on at a later time. This helps develop a comprehensive system from the start of implementation.

Ensure Teachers and Staff in Roles Supporting Early Childhood Classrooms are Trained on Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Practices

As PBIS teams are addressing the element of classroom systems needed to implement PBIS with fidelity, it is critical to ensure that the systems developed for PreK classrooms are developmentally appropriate. Teams should utilize the Pyramid Model for guidance on what evidence-based practices are recommended for children five and under. It is also necessary that those in the role of coaching for implementation be familiar with these practices to better assist with each tier of support. Attempting to use strategies designed for older students might not result in the desired outcomes for preschool children.

Adapt School-wide Expectations for Younger Students

The general guidelines for developing school-wide expectations are that the school keep them to a minimum of five, positively stated, and observable and measurable. Often times, teams use vocabulary that might be more appropriate for students in older grades and might have up to five phrases. When developing materials for posting the school-wide expectations, teams often rely on the written words only. Preschool students and other students who do not read, need additional information (e.g., visual or symbol) to understand posted expectations. With the assistance of the PreK representatives on the PBIS team, visual representations of the expectations should be selected and used consistently across settings.

For expectations that may be high in number or use a more advanced vocabulary, the team should work to identify how to modify these to work for younger classrooms. (An example will be given in the 'Specific Implementation Examples' section.) This might result in reduction of the overall number of expectations or the use of alternative phrasing of the expectation. Teams still need to ensure these are broad enough to apply in multiple settings and that they align with the intention of the school-wide expectations taught to the older students.

Consider Appropriate Adaptations for Acknowledgement and Recognition

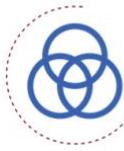
Given the contextual fit of PBIS for younger children, teams need to consider whether or not the ways of acknowledgement and recognition make sense for these classrooms. Younger children need more immediate reinforcement rather than the traditional approach of SW-PBIS, which often includes monthly celebrations or quarterly goals. PreK classrooms may choose to acknowledge students as a class or provide more immediate feedback when students demonstrate the school-wide expectations. Additionally, PreK teachers should be aware of what the school-wide recognition and acknowledgement system is in order to encourage and respond to older students when they see them meeting the behavioral expectations of the school. The opposite is also true for teachers of older grades being able to provide appropriate recognition to the younger students in a meaningful way. Having this mutual understanding helps to ensure the cohesive system that is a goal of SW-PBIS.

Use Data to Make Decisions for Early Childhood Classrooms

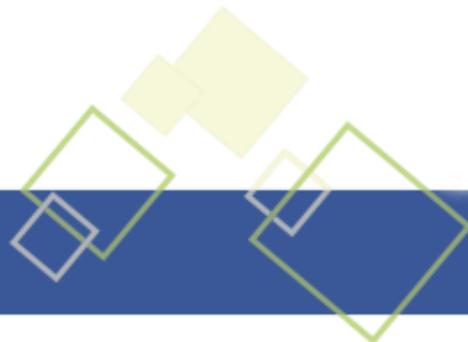
Traditionally in SW-PBIS, teams use data points such as office-discipline referrals (ODRs) to monitor the effectiveness of implementation at all tiers. The collection of data related to incidents of challenging behavior is also important in the early childhood classroom. However, preschool students should not be receiving an ODR or being sent to see an administrator. For our youngest children in school, we would expect to see a range of behaviors that might be deemed inappropriate for older students. For example, excessive crying might be a behavior our teachers in PreK would expect to see as children are getting acclimated to school and are learning a variety of strategies to handle emotions such as disappointment or anger. Teachers would still want to document this behavior, if it is persistent and occurring for prolonged periods of time, in order to develop strategies for teaching alternate behaviors and to look for patterns to better align any interventions. Additionally, teams may want to review the tools they use to monitor fidelity of SW-PBIS implementation. Typically, these tools include items or indicators related to the use of tangible rewards or the application of a discipline response flowchart. These indicators or items would not be applicable for use with the preschool classroom. Therefore, teams are encouraged to use tools that have been explicitly designed for preschool classrooms.

Making SW-PBIS Meaningful

Specific Implementation Examples	
Practice	Examples
Team membership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representation of all stakeholders • Specifically include teachers from early childhood classrooms • Use PreK teacher suggestions to inform practices for all grades • Gain input on ways to adapt implementation of critical elements from PreK teachers
Ensure teachers and staff in roles supporting early childhood classrooms are trained on implementing developmentally appropriate practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review with PBIS coaches the developmental expectations of children in PreK classrooms • Provide training to PBIS team and coaches who support implementation of SW-PBIS on developmentally appropriate practices by grade level • Structure opportunities for teachers to visit model classrooms for better understanding of application of practices
Adapt school-wide expectations for younger students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • With the input of PreK teachers, review school-wide expectations and determine contextual fit • Revise expectations by reducing the number, or substituting vocabulary that is more appropriate for younger children • Add visual supports for younger students who cannot read or might otherwise benefit from their use <p><i>Example</i> Original School-wide Expectations are: Be Safe Be Organized Be Accountable Be Respectful</p>



Specific Implementation Examples	
	<p>The PBIS team with PreK representation revised these to: Be Safe Be Respectful</p> <p>They added visuals to help students connect with the words. These are the two expectations that are taught all year.</p>
Consider appropriate adaptations to acknowledgement and recognition	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognition and acknowledgement should be more frequent and immediate in early childhood classrooms• Consider the appropriate extent for these classrooms to participate <p><i>Example</i> The PBIS team is working to increase attendance at the school. Being on time is part of their school-wide expectation to “Be Responsible”. For all students who have perfect attendance for the month of October, there will be a popcorn and movie party.</p> <p>For the early childhood classrooms, “Be Responsible” might still be the focus but there is acknowledgement daily to recognize students who are in attendance. The teacher still emphasizes ‘being responsible’ but celebrates during circle by letting the children know how happy she is they are at school that day.</p> <p><i>Example</i> Students are earning ‘Dragon Dollars’ for being a friend. Any teacher is able to distribute ‘Dragon Dollars’ to any student they see being a friend. PreK teachers can give out ‘Dragon Dollars’ to older students they see demonstrating characteristics of being a friend.</p>



Specific Implementation Examples

Use data to make decisions for early childhood classrooms

- Review the current use of ODRs to make data-based decisions for children in early childhood classrooms
- Use the 'Behavior Incident Recording System' (BIRS) to capture incidents of challenging behavior for young children
- Review the implementation fidelity tool currently used to determine if it is applicable for early childhood classrooms
- Review tools designed to measure implementation in PreK classrooms

Example

The SW-PBIS team is consistently getting requests for help with persistent challenging behavior in the early childhood classrooms. Traditionally, ODRs are used to determine such things as patterns of behavior, possible motivation, time of day, etc. PreK teachers are not writing ODRs because the behavior can be managed in the classroom but the teacher wants support to reduce the instances. The PBIS coach reviews how to complete a behavior incident report which has options to capture behaviors not typically seen in older grades but are developmentally expected in younger grades. Through the use of this type of data collection, the coach is able to determine a pattern in this behavior and can more accurately plan for strategies to help reduce this from occurring in the classroom.

Resources

- Training materials on evidence-based practices for preschool classroom implementation of PBIS can be found here: <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Training/Module/index.html>
- Data tools that are designed for preschool classrooms and SW-PBIS can be found here: <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Implementation/Data/index.html>
- Classroom coaching resources for guiding preschool teachers can be found here: <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Implementation/coach.html>

References

Fox, L. & Binder, D. (2015). Getting preschool classrooms on board with school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports. Retrieved December 1, 2019 from <https://challengingbehavior.cbcs.usf.edu/Pyramid/pbis.html>

Hemmeter, M. L., Snyder, P. A., Fox, L., & Algina, J. (2016). Evaluating the implementation of the pyramid model for promoting social emotional competence in early childhood classrooms. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 36, 133-146.

Hemmeter, M. L., Snyder, P., Fox, L., & Algina, J. (2017, April). Research on the pyramid model: Findings, issues and implications. Paper presented at the 14th Annual National Training Institute on Young Children with Challenging Behavior, Tampa, FL.

Snyder, P. A., Hemmeter, M. L., & Fox, L. (2015). Supporting implementation of evidence-based practices through practice-based coaching. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 35, 133–143.

Sugai, G., O’Keeffe, B. V., & Fallon, L. M. (2012). A contextual consideration of culture and school-wide positive behavior support. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 14, 197-208.

This document was supported from funds provided by the Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports cooperative grant supported by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education (H326S180001). Dr. Renee Bradley served as the project officer. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, or enterprise mentioned in this document is intended or should be inferred.

Suggested Citation for this Publication

Winnekar, A., & Fox, L., (April 2020). *PBIS in Early Childhood Classrooms on School Campuses*. Eugene, OR: Center on PBIS, University of Oregon. Retrieved from www.pbis.org.