



High-Leverage Practices in Special Education

*Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices:
Research Syntheses*

Effective special education teachers establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment to support student success. To do this, they employ several practices that are critical in promoting student social and emotional well-being. First, effective teachers focus on increasing appropriate behavior by adopting an instructional approach that incorporates the explicit teaching of social skills and offers students multiple opportunities to practice appropriate social behaviors throughout the school day followed by positive specific feedback. Second, they implement evidence-based practices to prevent social, emotional,

and behavioral challenges and provide early intervention at the first sign of risk. Third, effective teachers provide increasingly comprehensive supports through a team-based problem-solving strategy, to match the intensity of student challenges guided by behavioral assessment. Finally, they implement all behavioral supports—even those in response to significant problem behavior—in a caring, respectful, and culturally relevant manner. Effective teachers recognize that academic and behavioral support strategies are more effective when delivered within the context of positive and caring teacher-student relationships.

HLP7	Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment.
To build and foster positive relationships, teachers should establish age-appropriate and culturally responsive expectations, routines, and procedures within their classrooms that are positively stated and explicitly taught and practiced across the school year. When students demonstrate mastery and follow established rules and routines, teachers should provide age-appropriate specific performance feedback in meaningful and caring ways. By establishing, following, and reinforcing expectations of all students within the classroom, teachers will reduce the potential for challenging behavior and increase student engagement. When establishing learning environments, teachers should build mutually respectful relationships with students and engage them in setting the classroom climate (e.g., rules and routines); be respectful; and value ethnic, cultural, contextual, and linguistic diversity to foster student engagement across learning environments.	

Special educators cannot “make” students learn or behave; they can, however, create environments to increase the likelihood that students do both (Lewis, 2009). The foundation of any effective learning environment includes clear and consistent rules, routines, and procedures that keep students engaged and on track throughout the school day. All classroom procedures should be implemented in a proactive and positive manner in which the special educator is always the exemplar in treating students and other adults in a respectful and caring manner.

Rules should be stated positively (i.e., what the teacher wants students to do rather than does not want them to do) and kept to five or fewer. Examples and non-examples of behavioral expectations should be directly taught and expectations should be practiced throughout the school year until students demonstrate mastery.

Routines such as entering and exiting the classroom, how to respond to the teacher’s attention signal, how to seek assistance, and expectations during activity transitions should be considered, as well as other daily routines. Critical steps to comply with procedures and routines should be task-analyzed and explicitly taught and practiced with students.

The conventional recommended ratio found in the professional literature is for every corrective statement a teacher makes, educators should look for at least four opportunities to acknowledge appropriate behavior (i.e., student demonstrations of classroom expectations). The goal is to

acknowledge student mastery of social-behavioral expectations and compliance with procedures, not to point out frequent errors.

Special educators should provide students with opportunities to respond to both social and academic requests throughout the day, and prompts should reflect the nature of the academic or social expectation (e.g., “who can tell me what voice level we use when we walk to lunch?”). The rate of opportunities to respond will vary across age and severity of disability, but should be a primary instructional strategy during acquisition and fluency building among all students.

Special educators should strive for a balance of direct instruction, multiple opportunities for students to practice with high rates of feedback, and high rates of student success (i.e., 80% or better proficiency on tasks) to promote high engagement time and low rates of off-task behavior. For every lesson, student learning progress should be carefully monitored and instruction, practice, and feedback adjusted accordingly.

Research Support

A clear body of evidence exists to support these classroom strategies, as well as several others (see Hattie, 2008, for a comprehensive review). Researchers have examined combinations of the above on both academic and social behavior effects (Armendariz & Umbreit, 1999; Blackwell & McLaughlin, 2005; Bowman-Perrott, 2009;



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Haydon et al., 2010; Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004; Spencer, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2003; Sutherland, Wehby, & Yoder, 2002) and the essential features to increase teacher use of evidence-based practices (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008; Simonsen, Myers, & DeLuca, 2010; Stichter et al., 2009; Wehby, Tally, & Falk, 2004). The Institute for Education Science’s What Works Clearinghouse has indicated these and several similar strategies as having moderate to strong empirical evidence at the elementary level (What Works Clearinghouse, 2008).

Conclusion

Establishing a clear, consistent, and positive learning environment serves as the foundation for all other high-leverage practices (HLPs). It increases the likelihood of student academic and social behavior success, it increases educator opportunities to engage in effective instructional practices, and it fosters caring and respectful interactions between educators and students. Research over the past 50 years consistently reaffirms the effects that classroom management and instruction have on both academic and social performance (Hattie, 2008).



HLP8	Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior.
<p>The purpose of feedback is to guide student learning and behavior and increase student motivation, engagement, and independence, leading to improved student learning and behavior. Effective feedback must be strategically delivered and goal directed; feedback is most effective when the learner has a goal and the feedback informs the learner regarding areas needing improvement and ways to improve performance. Feedback may be verbal, nonverbal, or written, and should be timely, contingent, genuine, meaningful, age appropriate, and at rates commensurate with task and phase of learning (i.e., acquisition, fluency, maintenance). Teachers should provide ongoing feedback until learners reach their established learning goals.</p>	

Note. As discussed in the Preface, two research syntheses were developed for the practice of providing effective feedback; this item appears in both the Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices HLPs and the Instruction HLPs.



There is a common misconception that high rates of positive reinforcement will do “harm” to students’ intrinsic motivation or “don’t work.” *Positive reinforcement* means that when the environment contingently follows a student’s behavior with an action, and that behavior maintains or increases, whatever followed the behavior is reinforcing to the student. Just like academic skill mastery, if teachers want students to build social behavior skill mastery they must provide specific, contingent feedback. If students make social behavior learning errors, (i.e., problem behavior), feedback should focus on what social skill the student should have used (Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010). If students demonstrate the appropriate social skill, feedback should acknowledge student effort and include the classroom expectation or rule (e.g., “I see you are working hard to be a ‘respectful’ learner: You are working quietly so others can learn”).

The idea that students should always be motivated intrinsically simply is not possible. Activities that are *intrinsically motivating* are those that in and of themselves are reinforcing to the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Unfortunately, most students do not find writing reports or solving algebra problems intrinsically motivating. What special educators should do is use actions and activities that are extrinsically motivating, but work toward student self-regula-

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tion of those motivators. For example, the goal is for students to complete a difficult math assignment not because the assignment is intrinsically motivating (i.e., inherently fun and enjoyable) but rather because they choose to engage in the task (i.e., self-regulation) because they know it will lead to an outcome that is reinforcing (i.e., free time, acknowledgment from parents—both of which are extrinsic motivators; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Research Support

From early seminal work such as the “good behavior game” (Medland & Stachnik, 1972) and Brophy’s (1981) work on key teacher behaviors within effective classrooms, there is a strong literature base to support the use of positive specific feedback to acknowledge and increase academic and social skill mastery (Alberto & Troutman, 2013; Darch & Kame’enui, 2004; Lewis et al., 2010; Nelson & Roberts, 2000; Simonsen & Myers, 2005; Stichter & Lewis, 2006; Sutherland, Alder, & Gunter, 2003; Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000; Sutherland et al., 2002). The theoretical work to disprove the impact of acknowledgment is limited and often misinterprets conceptual frameworks or demonstrates limitations of external motivators within constrained research methodology (Ryan & Deci, 2000).



Conclusion

Confusion over terms such as *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation, *reinforcement*, *rewards*, *praise*, and similar terms continues—often intentionally by authors wishing to push their theoretical view, and many times inadvertently by well-meaning educators. If educators want to teach skills to mastery

and have them maintained and generalized beyond the school day, specific positive feedback, as well as corrective instructional feedback when learning errors occur, is an essential and crucial element of the teaching and learning process. This simple yet highly effective element of learning environments promotes both academic and social success.



HLP9	Teach social behaviors.
<p>Teachers should explicitly teach appropriate interpersonal skills, including communication, and self-management, aligning lessons with classroom and schoolwide expectations for student behavior. Prior to teaching, teachers should determine the nature of the social skill challenge. If students do not know how to perform a targeted social skill, direct social skill instruction should be provided until mastery is achieved. If students display performance problems, the appropriate social skill should initially be taught, then emphasis should shift to prompting the student to use the skill and ensuring the “appropriate” behavior accesses the same or a similar outcome (i.e., is reinforcing to the student) as the problem behavior.</p>	

An often noted concern regarding students with disabilities is their struggles to interact socially with adults and peers in appropriate ways. Regardless of disability category or overall emphasis of the student’s individualized education program, for most students special educators should include social skill instruction as part of their daily curriculum. Similar to academic skills, social skills should be taught through direct instruction, students should be given

multiple opportunities to practice targeted skills, and positive specific feedback should be given when targeted social skills are displayed (Sugai & Lewis, 1996). There are specific, empirically validated components of effective social skill instruction, including assessing and identifying students’ social skill patterns, using a “tell-show-practice” instructional format, and assessing students’ skill mastery and generalization across time and settings.

Although there are several quality social skill curriculums widely available, most approach social skills as if the student has a skill “deficit”; that is, the student does not know how to display the appropriate social skill. For students with moderate to severe disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, this might be the case. For most students with mild disabilities, however, social skill challenges are often “performance” problems. In other words, the student knows what social skill they should use under specific conditions (e.g., “count to 10 when I get angry”) but displays an inappropriate skill because it leads to outcomes that maintain the problem skill (e.g., “if I throw things, I am removed from the classroom and I am no longer angry”). It is essential to match the focus and outcome of each social skill lesson to the student problem type (i.e., deficit or performance).

Within each lesson, the special educator should first identify and define the social skill and when to use it (e.g., “When you are angry, the first thing you do is stop”). Second, after discussing what it means to *be angry* and a range of ways to “stop,” (*tell*), the teacher should demonstrate (*show*) a range of appropriate ways to stop and also inappropriate ways to stop (i.e., the non-example or social skills the student is currently using that have been labeled inappropriate). Following examples and non-examples, the student should practice using only the appropriate social skill through role plays.

Teaching social skills within a small group format is generally straightforward and

successful; the challenge is promoting generalization and maintenance of learned skills. Strategies such as teaching directly within targeted settings, providing frequent prompts or reminders to use newly learned skills, and providing high rates of positive specific feedback are all empirically validated strategies to promote generalized responding over time.

Research Support

With hundreds of social skill instruction investigations conducted to date, the evidence of effectiveness for these strategies has long been established (Ang & Hughes, 2001; Beelman, Pflingsten, & Losel, 1994; Cook et al., 2008; Losel & Beelman, 2003; Gresham, 2002b; Mikami, Jia, & Na, 2014). As with all interventions as broad and encompassing as “social skill instruction,” contra-indicated findings on effectiveness also exist (e.g., Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness, 1999). However, when intervention is matched to a presenting problem, sufficient treatment dosage is in effect, and contextual factors are programmed into instruction to promote generalized findings, social skill instruction continues to demonstrate improved social functioning among students with disabilities (Gresham, 2002a; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001).

Conclusion

The ability to interact with adults and peers and to manage one’s own behavior across settings is essential to student success.



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Unfortunately, students with disabilities often do not master these essential social skills in ways typically developing children do and therefore these must be explicitly taught. Social skill instruction has been found to improve social functional from preschool through adulthood, across

a variety of social skill challenges, and among a range of disabilities. The balance of the empirical evidence indicates that social skill instruction, paired with generalization strategies, can lead to improved social-emotional functioning of students with disabilities.



HLP10	Conduct functional behavioral assessments to develop individual student behavior support plans.
<p>Creating individual behavior plans is a central role of all special educators. Key to successful plans is to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) any time behavior is chronic, intense, or impedes learning. A comprehensive FBA results in a hypothesis about the function of the student’s problem behavior. Once the function is determined, a behavior intervention plan is developed that (a) teaches the student a pro-social replacement behavior that will serve the same or similar function, (b) alters the environment to make the replacement behavior more efficient and effective than the problem behavior, (c) alters the environment to no longer allow the problem behavior to access the previous outcome, and (d) includes ongoing data collection to monitor progress.</p>	

Functional behavioral assessments (FBA) are routinely conducted—and in some instances required by Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2006) regulations—to determine what occasions and what maintains current patterns of student problem behavior. Using indirect methods such as rating scales, interviews, and archival data search (e.g., student file, discipline and attendance reports) and direct methods that involve a trained observer watching during

problematic periods, hypotheses regarding the possible function of the problem behavior are developed using the following format (Lewis, Mitchell, Harvey, Green, & McKenzie, 2015):

- When [*conditions that trigger problem behavior, such as a worksheet that requires extensive writing*],
- The student will [*target problem behavior*],

- To get or avoid [*the outcome that maintains the behavior, such as getting peer attention or avoiding difficult tasks*].

Once a hypothesis is developed, a behavior support plan to address the function of the problem behavior is developed which includes a plan to teach a pro-social replacement behavior that results in the same or similar outcome (e.g., get attention or avoid a difficult task; Scott & Kamps, 2007). The plan should also include classroom and other learning environmental modifications that ensure (a) that when the student demonstrates the replacement behavior, the same or similar outcomes occur at high rates (e.g., student raises hand, teacher immediately recognizes and reinforces the student to give high rates of attention); and (b) that if the student demonstrates the problem behavior, the hypothesized function of the behavior is not accessed (e.g., student calls out instead of raising hand, teacher ignores and attends to a peer who did raise hand; Scott & Kamps, 2007).

Research and Policy Support

Given the highly individualized nature of the FBA-behavior support plan process, the majority of research conducted to date has employed the use of single-subject designs. Since the early 1980s, FBA research has moved from clinical settings targeting young adults with severe cognitive impairments (Carr & Durand, 1985; Iwata, Dorsey, Slifer, Bauman, & Richman, 1982) to a variety of school, home, and community settings focusing on students with

mild disabilities (Lalli, Browder, Mace & Brown, 1993; Northup et al., 1981) as well as students at risk for disabilities (Kamps et al., 1995; Kern, Childs, Dunlap, Clarke & Falk, 1994; Lewis & Sugai, 1996a, 1996b; Umbreit, 1995). Since 1997, IDEA regulations have required FBAs be conducted if students with disabilities are removed from school due to disciplinary infractions 10 days or more (34 C.F.R. § 300.530), and a wide range of studies have been conducted across multiple groups of research teams (e.g., Gage, Lewis, & Stichter, 2012; Solnick & Ardoin, 2010; Wood, Blair, & Ferro, 2009). FBA-based interventions have been found to be more efficient and effective in reducing challenging behavior among students with disabilities and those at high risk than non-function-based interventions (Gage et al., 2012; Ingram, Lewis-Palmer, & Sugai, 2005; Liaupsin, Umbreit, Ferro, Urso, & Upreti, 2006; Newcomer & Lewis, 2004; Park & Scott, 2009; Payne, Scott, & Conroy, 2007; Stichter, Lewis, Johnson, & Trussell, 2004).

Conclusion

FBA-based intervention planning has a wide range of empirical work to support its use as an effective practice in addressing intensive challenging behavior. There is no clearly delineated set of practices that make up a comprehensive FBA, but the elements listed above are routinely cited in the relevant research. Although the nature of conducting FBA-based intervention research

does not lend itself to the current What Works Clearinghouse requirement for multiple randomized control trials, both the Institute of Education Sciences and the Council for Exceptional Children have created guidelines for the inclusion of

single-subject research to be considered in establishing evidence-based practices. Based on the studies cited here, as well as numerous others, the practice may be considered as meeting the minimal standards for being evidence-based.

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