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The Behavior Intervention Support Team (BIST) Program: Underlying Theories

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BIST is a proactive school-wide behavior management plan for all students, emphasizing schools partnering with students and parents through caring relationships and high expectations. The BIST program is well-grounded in behavioral theory and combines strength-based and resiliency principles within the context of the ecological, person-in-environment model.

Decades of research supports the importance of classroom management and sheds light on the dynamics of effective classroom management (Marzano & Marzano, 2003). It has demonstrated that disruptive behaviors divert both the teacher's and the students' attention away from instruction, causing excess time to be spent engaged in disciplinary action (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008; Little 2003); compete with student learning time; and negatively impact the academic achievements of the whole class, not just the child who is being disruptive (Little, 2003; Luiselli, Putnam, & Sutherland, 2002).

A major study combining the findings from 135 separate meta-analyses, involving 228 variables affecting student achievement, found that of all the variables, classroom management had the largest effect on student achievement (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Additional research indicated that teachers' actions in their classrooms had twice the impact on student achievement as school policies concerning curriculum, assessment, staff collegiality, and community involvement (Marzano, 2003a). Seminal research of the 1980s (Emmer, 1984; Evertson & Emmer, 1982) points to the importance of establishing rules and procedures for general
classroom behavior. Research has emphasized the need for classroom management strategies with well-designed and clearly communicated rules and procedures, accompanied by acknowledgement of students' behavior, reinforcement of acceptable behavior, and provision of consequences for unacceptable behavior (Marzano & Marzano, 2003).

Classroom management strategies generally fall into the categories of reactive and proactive (Wilks, 1996). Reactive strategies follow a student’s inappropriate behavior, provide consequences (Little, Hudson, & Wilks, 2000), and are basically remedial in nature. Proactive strategies are conceptualized as being preventative with strong antecedent-based components intended to reduce the likelihood of a student demonstrating inappropriate behavior (Clunies-Ross, Little, & Kienhuis, 2008).

The Behavior Intervention Support Team (BIST) program is a proactive school-wide behavior management plan for all students, emphasizing schools partnering with students and parents through caring relationships and high expectations. The BIST model provides teachers, counselors, and administrators with strategies to respond to students who exhibit disruptive behaviors by assessing and providing what they need (proactive), rather than what the teacher may think they deserve (reactive). Developed in 1990 by the counseling staff at the Ozaram treatment facility for troubled youth in Kansas City, Missouri, BIST’s mission is to help teachers, administrators, parents, and students learn techniques to effect positive change and create a healthy learning environment for all. The primary goals of the BIST program are to: prevent the development of inappropriate behavior, reduce ongoing patterns of disruptive and hurtful behavior, teach skills that will lead to school and life success, and enhance the likelihood of improved academic performance for all students through increased time for teaching and learning when inappropriate behaviors are reduced. This is accomplished through G.R.A.C.E.—Giving Responsibility and Accountability to Children in Education (Osterhaus & Lowe, 1997).

Research has found that poor social and behavioral skills are risk factors for both disruptive behaviors (Henderson & Hollin, 1986) and academic underachievement (Hughes & Sullivan, 1988). The literature emphasizes the importance of neutralizing or eliminating student risk factors while enhancing protective factors to prevent or reduce the occurrence and prevalence of problem behaviors and increase students’ academic gains (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999). BIST, like other intervention approaches which include training elements to enhance the social and behavioral skills of students, is based on the assumption that certain students lack the requisite behavioral skills to engage in adequate interaction with others (Goldstein, 1973; Lazarus, 1971) and strives to address the socio-developmental needs of these students (Beelman, Pfingsten, & Lösel, 1994).

The BIST program provides a multi-level approach which parallels several other multi-tier proactive discipline models (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000). The complete multi-level BIST discipline plan was conceived as a school-wide model, but the strategies can be implemented within single or multiple classroom settings, when the school-wide approach is infeasible at the time of introduction. The BIST model involves clarifying expectations for faculty members, establishing clear and consistent rules, teaching expectations to all students, enhancing student social and problem-solving skills, affording students the opportunity to practice expectations, reinforcing appropriate behavior through an array of progressively intense levels of assessment for students who need more teaching and practice to develop social and behavioral skills, and increasing levels of intervention matched to the types of skill deficits exhibited and needs identified.
BIST trains teachers to intervene at the moment an unacceptable behavior occurs. Early intervention provides the structure and consistency that offers security to all students. These early stages of intervention are implemented in the classroom in the form of progressive levels of inclusion/separation from reinforcing elements of the environment, while encouraging students to evaluate their feelings and behaviors and make more appropriate behavior choices without missing out on academic instruction.

Additional secondary prevention strategies may include increased supervision, restrictive class environments, and a recovery room system for students who need time away from the situation to consider their actions and to change the behaviors that are unacceptable. With the adult involved, a student sent to recovery processes the situation and the choices made which precipitated being sent to recovery. This is a time for the student and teacher to develop a partnership that permits the student to accept responsibility for his or her actions and to develop a plan of action in case problems occur in the future.

A tertiary level of intervention may be needed with some students and would involve the development of a protective plan for the student, as well as a classroom and/or building-wide plan of action. That plan may include a triage process which provides teachers with a scheduled time to check with students before they begin as well as throughout the school day. This interaction is used to determine if the student is capable of continuing with his or her school routine, or if a break is needed to allow time for him or her to regain composure.

BIST is grounded in behavioral theory (Anderson & Kincaid, 2005), which emphasizes the interplay between physiology and environment, and the ability to affect behavior through environmental manipulations (Alberto & Troutman, 1995). The BIST approach combines strength-based and resiliency principles such as the provision of caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute (Benard, 2004) within the context of the ecological, person-in-environment model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Both classroom management and academic achievement depend on the joint efforts and abilities of teachers, students, parents, and administrators, and on the ways these efforts interact and complement each other (Becker & Baumol, 1996). BIST encourages and offers a framework for communication with parents and guardians so they understand and support the BIST process of teaching children appropriate social and behavioral skills.

Research indicates that in order to be effective, resiliency-based programming must provide information in a manner that is salient and acceptable to the children, families, and communities it serves (Dumka, Roosa, Michaels, & Suh, 1995). A 2003 meta-analysis of more than 100 studies found that the quality of teacher-student relationships is the keystone for all other aspects of classroom management (Marzano, 2003b). When students feel they are respected, believe that the teacher’s positive feelings towards them is not dependent on their perfect fulfillment of all the teacher’s expectations (Fox, 1993), and know that the students have a role in the decisions effecting their behavior and learning, they are more likely to accept the responsibility for those behaviors (Gatongi, 2007). Additional research indicates that working within a safe and respectful environment and establishing specific learning (academic and/or behavioral) agreed upon by both teacher and student provides a means of focusing students’ learning efforts (Locke & Latham, 2002). Conversely, if students do not believe they have the teacher’s respect, they are unlikely to take the necessary risks for learning new and difficult skills (Snyder & Lopez, 2006).
The BIST model is designed to assist students in learning to separate feelings and behaviors in order to develop problem-solving skills which will enhance their ability to make choices that will keep them safe, out of trouble, and focused on learning. This person-centered approach provides a way of understanding and developing strategies to address behavior problems in the classroom and school (Gatonga, 2007). Based on the core conditions of congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard, the person-centered approach involves expressing respect with no judgment and separating the student from the behavior (Rogers, 1986).

BIST focuses on allowing students the time necessary to recognize the feelings that motivated their choice of behavior and planning how to react appropriately the next time they feel that way. Through modeling and instruction, teachers help students learn to separate their feelings from their disruptive behavior, and learn problem-solving skills, focusing on the cognitive process of behavioral change and practicing those problem-solving skills (Kendall & Hollon, 1979). Research supports this BIST approach of behavioral skill development through directed covert thinking processes (Urbain & Kendall, 1980). Students are taught skills related to alternative solution thinking, means-end thinking, consequential thinking, causal thinking, and sensitivity to interpersonal problems (Spivack, Platt, & Shure, 1976).

The BIST program simultaneously engages school administrators, teachers, parents, and students in a proactive/preventative, problem-solving school discipline plan, designed to teach social and behavioral skills and enhancing the academic and social growth of students. This ecological approach requires the skills necessary to engage issues at all levels, in multiple modalities, and in a collaborative way (Gutierrez, Yeakly, & Ortega, 2000).

A primary feature distinguishing the BIST program from other proactive discipline plans is that BIST does not just provide teacher training workshops. A key element of the model is the establishment of an ongoing partnership between school personnel and BIST consultants who meet monthly with school personnel in a collaborative problem-solving capacity in support of their ongoing professional development. BIST also provides ongoing phone and email support as well as personal consulting if a teacher feels a student is in crisis. As part of that professional development, staff members are also taught how to collect and utilize data on an ongoing basis for effective decision-making regarding the social skills and behavior instruction in their classroom and school. The importance of this element of the BIST discipline plan was emphasized in a recent longitudinal evaluation of the impact of the school-wide implementation of the BIST program at a public middle school (Boulden, 2009).

Conclusion

The Behavior Intervention Support Team (BIST) program is well-grounded in behavioral theory (Anderson & Kincaid, 2005) and combines strength-based and resiliency principles (Benard, 2004) within the context of the ecological, person-in-environment model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). BIST strategies are person-centered and based on the core conditions of congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1986).

This strong theoretical basis with evaluations that have demonstrated success in reducing disruptive behaviors in the classroom (Boulden, 2009; Osterhaus & Lowe, 1997) positions BIST as a promising, evidence-based, proactive classroom management and school-wide discipline plan. It is recommended that additional evaluations of the BIST program be conducted across multiple sites to facilitate comparative analyses and further explore the impact of BIST’s emphasis on ongoing technical assistance as part of teacher professional development.

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References


