

Developing behaviour programs

Key components for effective planning

Students with additional behaviour needs can often be labelled as challenging and demanding. When difficulties with academic performance, interpersonal relationships and social skills begin early in life, the impact can often be long-term.

Common outcomes can include:

- disengagement from learning
- poor attendance
- higher rates of suspension and expulsion
- ongoing difficulties with interpersonal relationships
- reduced post-school and employment options
- difficulties with maintaining positive mental health and wellbeing.

Effective school programs

There is a body of evidence about what works for students with additional behaviour needs. The following seven elements are identified as common components of effective school programs:

1. Qualified and committed professionals

The single-most influential factor in successful school programs is the quality of teachers and support staff. Overwhelming evidence suggests that educators of students with additional behaviour needs should ideally have specific knowledge about:

- individual student characteristics
- a full range of instructional methods
- behaviour management approaches and social skills instruction
- adjusted curriculum delivery
- adjusted assessment tasks
- effective collaboration with parents and carers.

2. Environmental supports

An organised and orderly classroom provides consistent and predictable expectations and routines. When disruptions are reduced, student engagement, learning and prosocial behaviour are maximised. Other contributing factors are:

- clear and explicit expectations
- consistent monitoring
- immediate and instructional feedback
- developmentally appropriate content and materials.

3. Effective behaviour management systems

The most beneficial approaches are student centred, positive, consistent and strengths-based, implemented in a climate of inclusion, respect, optimism and encouragement.

This culture is characterised by teachers who:

- build genuine relationships with students
- take responsibility for student success
- adopt a teacher-mentor role
- persist with all students
- believe that all students can learn.

Although these conditions are important, they are not sufficient on their own. A comprehensive behaviour approach also needs to include individual support strategies and reflect the unique needs of each student.

4. Social skills training

Ongoing social-emotional skill development has been shown to assist with behaviour change. However, this training must be matched to individual circumstances and include sufficient time for instruction, practice in natural settings, feedback and reinforcement. Training should include a range of methods such as explicit teaching, ongoing coaching, cognitive problem solving and the use of realistic scenarios across four general areas:

- peer relationships
- self-management and responsibility
- social compliance and cooperation
- assertiveness and social initiative.

5. Academic support

Academic support is often regarded as secondary to behaviour management for students with behaviour needs, despite extensive recognition that the two are closely linked. Academic support should incorporate:

- careful use of instructional time
- planning for individual student needs
- specific and essential learning targets
- curriculum based assessment
- regular evaluation of strategies
- high expectations
- applied use of learned skills
- frequent experiences of success.

6. Involvement of families

Parents and families are the primary source of influence and support. Schools and teachers should aim to build a strong alliance with parents and carers and family members by establishing effective communication and ensuring their inclusion in the teaching and learning process.

7. Coordinated community support

Even with active parental and family involvement, schools may require the participation and contribution of broader community services to support students with additional behaviour needs.

Community programs augment the work of schools and provide ongoing contact and guidance for families beyond the school setting. Schools can be instrumental in bringing these services to the attention of families and assisting with initial contact.

Community based supports may include:

- access to information and resources
- counselling and crisis intervention
- recreation services
- child care
- other specialist services for students with disability.

An additional factor in behaviour support is the beneficial effect of giving attention, showing positive regard and forging an alliance with a student to address an acknowledged difficulty. Although hard to quantify, the very act of sincerely trying to assist can influence the outcome.

References

Simpson, R.L., Peterson, R.L. & Smith, C.R. (2011). Critical educational program components for students with EBD. *Remedial and Special Education* 32(3) 230-242.