

IES PRACTICE GUIDE

Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom



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Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom

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Panel

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Introduction

Managing challenging behaviour and enabling a safe learning environment can go a long way towards reducing the stress levels of teachers and learners alike and fostering meaningful learning. This guide explores the challenges involved in providing the optimum climate for learning and provides recommendations for encouraging positive behaviour and reducing negative behaviour.

About this Guide

This guide is intended to help elementary school educators as well as school administrators develop and implement effective prevention and intervention strategies that promote positive student behavior. The guide includes concrete recommendations and indicates the quality of the evidence that supports them. Additionally, the ways in which each recommendation could be carried out is also described. For each recommendation, roadblocks to implementation that may be encountered are mentioned. The authors of these recommendations are a small group with expertise in various dimensions of this topic and in research methods commonly used in behavior research. The evidence considered in developing this document ranges from experimental evaluations, to single-subject research studies, to expert analyses of behavioral intervention strategies and programs

How these recommendations were drawn

The process for deriving the recommendations began by collecting and examining research studies that have evaluated the impacts of individual, class wide, and school wide behavioral interventions. Identification of key components of each intervention necessarily relied, to a significant degree, on the panel's expert judgment. This is because the evidence of the impact of specific intervention components on students' behavior cannot formally be attributed to one component of an intervention.

Standards and their relevance to this guide

After identifying key components of individual interventions, the interventions and their key components were placed in a working matrix that helped to identify features that were common to multiple interventions and, therefore, were logical candidates for generally successful practices. The panel determined the level of evidence for each recommendation by considering the effects of the intervention.

Strong	Refers to consistent and generalizable evidence that an intervention strategy or program causes an improvement in behavioral outcomes.
Moderate	Refers either to evidence from studies that allow strong causal conclusions but cannot be generalized with assurance to the population on which a recommendation is focused (perhaps because the findings have not been widely replicated) or to evidence from studies that are generalizable.
Low	Refers to expert opinion based on reasonable extrapolations from research and theory on other topics and evidence from studies that do not meet the standards for moderate or strong evidence.

Table.1 Standards and their relevance to this guide

It is important for the reader to remember that the level of evidence is not a judgment by the panel of how effective each of these five recommended practices would be when implemented in a classroom or school or of what prior research has to say about an intervention's effectiveness or whether the efforts of implementing it are worth the benefits it might bestow. Instead, these levels of evidence ratings reflect judgments by the panel of the quality of the existing research literature to support a causal claim that when these recommended practices have been implemented in the past, positive effects on student behaviors have been observed.

Overview

Much of the attention currently given to improving students' academic achievement addresses issues of curriculum, instructional strategies, and interventions or services for struggling learners, and rightfully so. However, even after addressing these issues, barriers still remain for some students. An estimated one-third of students fail to learn because of psychosocial problems that interfere with their ability to fully attend to and engage in instructional activities, prompting a call for "new directions for addressing barriers to learning."¹ These new approaches go beyond explicitly academic interventions to take on the learning challenges posed by problematic student behavior and the ways schools deal with it. Approaches aimed at improving school and classroom environments, including reducing the negative effects of disruptive or distracting behaviors, can enhance the chances that effective teaching and learning will occur, both for the students exhibiting problem behaviors and for their classmates.

In many schools general education elementary classrooms are generally orderly, teacher-student and student-student relationships are positive, and teaching and learning go on without major disruption. Teachers in such classrooms recognize the importance of preventing significant behavior problems and are effectively using fundamental prevention tools—engaging instruction, well-managed classrooms, and positive relationships with students.

Looking to these prevention fundamentals should always be the first step in promoting good behavior at school. However, some teachers have a class in which one or a few students exhibit persistent or significant problem behaviors—those that are disruptive, oppositional, distracting, or defiant. Sometimes when a number of students in a classroom demonstrate such behaviors, it can create a chaotic environment that is a serious impediment to learning for all students. In these cases teachers have exhausted their classroom management strategies without successfully eliminating the obstacles to learning that problem behaviors pose. The purpose of this practice guide is to give teachers additional tools to help them deal proactively and effectively with behaviors that seriously or consistently fail to meet classroom expectations.

This practice guide offers five concrete recommendations (see table 2) to help elementary school general education teachers reduce the frequency of the most common types of behavior problems they encounter among their students. The recommendations begin with strategies teachers can use immediately on their own initiative in their classrooms (recommendations 1–3), then broaden to include approaches that involve resources from outside the classroom. We recognize that teachers encounter situations where they need the guidance, expertise, and support of parents and other teachers or behavior professionals (for example, a school psychologist or behavior specialist) in the school or community, and that school administrators play a critical role in enabling mentoring and collaborative opportunities for staff (recommendation 4). We also acknowledge that the social and behavioral climate of a classroom can reflect the climate of the school more broadly, and we address the contributions of school wide strategies or programs to improving student behavior (recommendation 5).

Table 2. Recommendations and corresponding level of evidence to support each

Recommendation	Level Of Evidence
<p>1. Identify the specifics of the problem behavior and the conditions that prompt and reinforce it. Every teacher experiences difficulty at one time or another in trying to remedy an individual student’s behavior problem that is not responsive to preventative efforts. Because research suggests that the success of a behavioral intervention hinges on identifying the specific conditions that prompt and reinforce the problem behavior (i.e., the behavior’s “antecedents” and “consequences”), we recommend that teachers carefully observe the conditions in which the problem behavior is likely to occur and not occur. Teachers then can use that information to tailor effective and efficient intervention strategies that respond to the needs of the individual student within the classroom context.</p>	Moderate
<p>2. Modify the classroom learning environment to decrease problem behavior. Many effective classroom-focused interventions to decrease students’ problematic behavior alter or remove factors that trigger them. These triggers can result from a mismatch between the classroom set-ting or academic demands and a student’s strengths, preferences, or skills. Teachers can reduce the occurrence of inappropriate behavior by revisiting and reinforcing classroom behavioral expectations; rear-ranging the classroom environment, schedule, or learning activities to meet students’ needs; and/or individually adapting instruction to promote high rates of student engagement and on-task behavior.</p>	Strong
<p>3. Teach and reinforce new skills to increase appropriate behavior and preserve a positive classroom climate. We recommend that teachers actively teach students socially-and behaviorally-appropriate skills to replace problem behaviors using strategies focused on both individual students and the whole classroom. In doing so, teachers help students with behavior problems learn how, when, and where to use these new skills; increase the opportunities that the students have to exhibit appropriate behaviors; preserve a positive classroom climate; and manage consequences to reinforce students’ display of positive “replacement” behaviors and adaptive skills.</p>	Strong
<p>4. Draw on relationships with professional colleagues and students’ families for continued guidance and support. Social relationships and collaborative opportunities can play a critical role in supporting teachers in managing disruptive behavior in their classrooms. We recommend that teachers draw on these relationships in finding ways to address the behavior problems of individual students and consider parents, school personnel, and behavioral experts as allies who can provide new insights, strategies, and support.</p>	Moderate
<p>5. Assess whether schoolwide behavior problems warrant adopting schoolwide strategies or programs and, if so, implement ones shown to reduce negative and foster positive interactions. Classroom teachers, in coordination with other school personnel (administrators, grade-level teams, and special educators), can benefit from adopting a schoolwide approach to preventing problem behaviors and increasing positive social interactions among students and with school staff. This type of systemic approach requires a shared responsibility on the part of all school personnel, particularly the administrators who establish and support consistent schoolwide practices and the teachers who implement these practices both in their individual classrooms and beyond.</p>	Moderate

Source: Authors’ compilation based on analysis described in text.

Fundamental to these recommendations is the notion that behavior is learned— children’s behaviors are shaped by the expectations and examples provided by important adults in their lives and by their peers.² In the elementary grades, general education classroom teachers are arguably the most important adults at school for the large majority of students. As such, they can play a critical role both in proactively teaching and reinforcing appropriate student behaviors and in reducing the frequency of behaviors that impede learning. Accepting responsibility for the behavioral learning of all students is a natural extension of the responsibility for the academic learning of all students that general education teachers exercise with such purpose every day. The goal of this practice guide is to help teachers carry out their dual responsibility by recommending ways to shape and manage classroom behavior so that teaching and learning can be effective.

Understanding what prompts and reinforces problem behaviors can be a powerful tool for preventing them or reducing their negative impacts when they occur. The first recommendation emphasizes teachers’ gathering information about important aspects of problem behaviors in their classrooms—for example, the specific behavior a student exhibits, its effects on learning, and when, where, and how often it occurs. This information can provide important clues to the underlying purpose of the problem behavior and a foundation for developing effective approaches to mitigate it.

The second recommendation points to classroom conditions or activities that teachers can alter or adapt to influence the frequency or intensity of problem behaviors. When teachers understand the behavioral hot spots in their classroom in terms of timing, setting, and instructional activities, for example, they can proactively develop class wide and individual student strategies (such as a change in instructional groupings, the seating plan, or the order or pace of reading and math instruction) to reduce the contribution of these classroom factors to students’ problem behaviors.

The third recommendation recognizes that, just as poor academic performance can reflect deficits in specific academic skills, some students’ failure to meet behavioral expectations reflects deficits in specific social or behavioral skills. And just as explicit instruction can help students overcome some academic deficits; explicit instruction can help students learn the positive behaviors and skills they are expected to exhibit at school. Showing students how they can use appropriate behaviors to replace problem behaviors and consistently providing positive reinforcement when they do so can increase students’ chances of experiencing social and behavioral success.

Recognizing the collective wisdom and problem-solving abilities of school staff, the fourth recommendation encourages teachers to reach out to colleagues in the school—other classroom teachers, special educators, the school psychologist, or administrators—to help meet the behavioral needs of their students. Similarly, by engaging family members, teachers can better understand their students’ behavior issues and develop allies in intervening both at school and at home to help students succeed. When behavior problems warrant the services of behavioral or mental health professionals, teachers are encouraged to play an active role in ensuring that services address classroom behavior issues directly.

The fifth recommendation reflects an understanding that a teacher may be more successful in creating a positive behavioral environment in the classroom when there also are schoolwide efforts to create such an environment. Just as teachers can document and analyze the nature and contexts of behavior problems in the classroom, school leadership teams can map the behavioral territory of the school and use the information to develop prevention strategies and select and implement schoolwide programs for behavior intervention and support when warranted.

Several principles run throughout these recommendations. One relates to the importance of relationships in any focus on student behavior. Schooling is “an intrinsically social enterprise.”³ Student behavior is shaped by

and exhibited and interpreted in a social context that involves multiple actors (teachers, students, support personnel, specialists), multiple settings (classrooms, hallways, lunch room, playground), and multiple goals (enhancing academic performance, encouraging development of the whole child). Positive behavior is more likely to thrive when relationships at all levels are trusting and supportive and reflect a shared commitment to establish a healthy school and community.

In the classroom, for example, positive teacher-student interactions are at the heart of the recommendation regarding modifying classroom environment and instructional factors to improve student behavior. Associations have been found between positive interactions with teachers and increases in students' social skills, emotional regulation, motivation, engagement, cooperation with classroom rules and expectations,⁴ and academic performance. Associations also have been noted between negative interactions with teachers and increases in students' risk for school failure.⁵ Teachers show the warmth, respect, and sensitivity they feel for their students through small gestures, such as welcoming students by name as they enter the class each day, calling or sending positive notes home to acknowledge good behavior, and learning about their students' interests, families, and accomplishments outside of school. Teachers also can help students develop peer friendships by having them work together, thereby learning to share materials, follow directions, be polite, listen, show empathy, and work out disagreements. Fostering students' social and emotional development can improve their interactions and attitudes toward school, thereby reducing problem behaviors.⁶

Enabling the development of strong teacher-teacher relationships in support of collaborative problem-solving regarding student behavior is central to the fourth recommendation. Schools with strong, trusting staff relationships are more likely to have teachers who are willing to engage in new practices and, consequently, who can help to produce gains in student outcomes.⁷ The fifth recommendation also reflects the importance of relationships in seeking to establish "a schoolwide culture of social competence."⁸ Changes in practices, structures, or programs within schools are unlikely to be implemented, sustained, or effective in the long term without concerted attention to enhancing the fundamental relationships within schools.

Another principle that underlies the panel's recommendations is the critical need for increased cultural competence in developing positive relationships in school and community contexts. As our school and community populations become increasingly diverse, all school staff are challenged to learn about, become sensitive to, and broaden their perspectives regarding what may be unfamiliar ways of learning, behaving, and relating. Teachers can establish an inclusive classroom environment through practices such as using and reinforcing language that is gender neutral and free of stereotypes, selecting curricular materials that reflect and honor the cultures and life experiences of students in the class, encouraging and respecting the participation of all students in classroom activities, and holding high expectations for all learners.⁹ School leaders can be proactive in supporting opportunities for expanding the cultural competence of school staff through "a vigorous, ongoing, and systemic process of professional development"¹⁰ that involves building trusting relationships among school staff, taking on issues of personal culture and social disparities, and engaging the entire school community in creating a welcoming environment for all students and their families.

Additionally, the panel recognizes the need for and ability of school staff to translate the recommendations into actions that are appropriate to their specific contexts. One clearly important contextual factor is the age and developmental stage of the students with whom teachers work. The ways that recommendations involving rewards for positive behavior are carried out, for example, will necessarily look different in 1st and 5th grade classrooms, because different forms of motivation are appropriate to students' developmental stages. Schools in large urban districts often encounter different kinds and intensities of behavior issues than schools in affluent suburbs and have different forms and levels of resources in and outside the school to address them. The panel honors the insights of school staff in understanding what will work in their schools, classrooms, and communities. Thus, recommendations emphasize processes and procedures that can be adapted to a wide range of contexts rather than providing specific recipes that may have limited applicability.

Finally, the recommendations emphasize the importance of being data driven. This means having current, timely information about behavior problems and successes at the school, classroom, and student levels, such as where and when the behavioral hot spots occur in the school and during the school day, which classroom instructional periods or transitions are associated with increased behavioral disruptions, which students exhibit the most challenging behaviors and when they are most likely to occur, and what strategies teachers have found to be effective in improving classroom behavior. Without a solid foundation in these kinds of data, interventions might not just be ineffective, but might even exacerbate the problems they are meant to solve. Observation and documentation of student, classroom, and school behavior challenges can be invaluable in targeting resources and changing strategies to improve behavior at school. Monitoring the effectiveness of strategies by continuing to collect and review data also can support continuous improvement to achieve maximum results. Challenging behaviors are learned over a long period of time; acquiring positive behaviors also takes time. Monitoring progress and celebrating small achievements along the way can help sustain the efforts needed to bring success.

Checklist for carrying out the recommendation

Recommendation 1: Identify the specifics of the problem behavior and the conditions that prompt and reinforce it

- ✓ Concretely describe the behavior problem and its effect on learning.
- ✓ Observe and record the frequency and context of the problem behavior.
- ✓ Identify what prompts and reinforces the problem behavior.

Recommendation 2: Modify the classroom learning environment to decrease problem behavior

- ✓ Revisit, re-practice, and reinforce classroom behavior expectations.
- ✓ Modify the classroom environment to encourage instructional momentum.
- ✓ Adapt or vary instructional strategies to increase opportunities for academic success and engagement.

Recommendation 3: Teach and reinforce new skills to increase appropriate behavior and preserve a positive classroom climate

- ✓ Identify where the student needs explicit instruction for appropriate behavior.
- ✓ Teach skills by providing examples, practice, and feedback.
- ✓ Manage consequences so that reinforcers are provided for appropriate behavior and withheld for inappropriate behavior.

Recommendation 4: Draw on relationships with professional colleagues and students' families for continued guidance and support

- ✓ Collaborate with other teachers for continued guidance and support.
- ✓ Build collaborative partnerships with school, district, and community behavior experts who can consult with teachers when problems are serious enough to warrant help from outside the classroom.
- ✓ Encourage parents and other family members to participate as active partners in teaching and reinforcing appropriate behavior.

Recommendation 5: Assess whether schoolwide behavior problems warrant adopting schoolwide strategies or programs and, if so, implement ones shown to reduce negative and foster positive interactions

- ✓ Address schoolwide behavior issues by involving a school improvement team.
- ✓ Collect information on the hot spots throughout the school, such as the frequency of particular schoolwide behavior problems and when and where they occur.
- ✓ Monitor implementation and outcomes using an efficient method of data collection and allow ample time for the program to work.
- ✓ If warranted, adopt a packaged intervention program that fits well with identified behavior problem(s) and the school context.

Recommendation 1: *Identify the specifics of the problem behavior and the conditions that prompt and reinforce it.*

Every teacher experiences difficulty at one time or another in trying to remedy an individual student's behavior problem that is not responsive to preventative efforts. Because research suggests that the success of a behavior intervention hinges on identifying the specific conditions that prompt and reinforce the problem behavior (that is, the behavior's "antecedents" and "consequences"), we recommend that teachers carefully observe the conditions in which the problem behavior of an individual student is likely to occur and not occur. Teachers then can use that information to tailor effective and efficient intervention strategies that respond to the needs of the individual student within the classroom context.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Concretely describe the behavior problem and its effect on learning.

When a student repeatedly displays off task behavior, it is important to define the specific behavior and pinpoint the setting (or settings) in which it occurs. We recommend that teachers describe the behavior problem in concrete terms that are easy to communicate to the student and simple to measure. If descriptions of behaviors are vague (for example, "Jacob is always disruptive"), it is difficult to assess the extent of the problem, when and where it most often occurs, and how to intervene appropriately. Examples of concrete descriptions of problem behaviors are:

- Abraham blurts out answers without raising his hand during whole-class instruction.
- Thanh is physically aggressive toward his peers (hits, kicks, punches) during recess.
- Silvia frequently leaves her seat without permission during small-group instruction.

It is equally important to assess the behavior's impact on student learning. Misbehavior that is brief and does not seriously interfere with learning (such as short instances of daydreaming, talking during transitions, or momentary inattention) should be addressed without interrupting instruction through eye contact or physical proximity, for example.¹¹ Behavior warrants immediate and additional attention if it:

- Persists, escalates, or spreads to other students.
- Lessens the student's or other students' ability to successfully engage in learning.
- Detracts from a positive classroom climate.
- Deviates significantly from the developmentally appropriate behavior of other students.
- Causes other students or adults to avoid interacting with the student.
- Threatens the safety of students or the teacher.¹²

Teachers also should weigh other important factors as they try to understand a student's behavior:

- Could the behavior reflect a cultural difference? Some behaviors, such as a student's persistent lack of eye contact or unwillingness to compete against peers, may be indicative of a student's cultural background.¹³ Teachers should account for differences in cultural background when assessing the severity of students' behavior problems.
- Does the student • have the academic or behavioral skills necessary to meet expectations? Students with skill deficits may exhibit behavior problems to help them avoid or escape tasks that are difficult for them. Teachers should frequently assess students' abilities and help them build requisite skills for appropriate behavior (see recommendation3).

- Could the behavior reflect episodic stress or trauma? A student’s behavior may be a temporary reaction to a difficult event, such as the death or illness of a family member. Regular communication with students’ families helps teachers be understanding and supportive when events in students’ lives affect them in school.

2. Observe and record the frequency and context of the problem behavior.

Teachers should carefully observe and record key information about a student’s persistent problem behavior in different settings and during different activities (for example, during solitary time, group assignments, unstructured peer interactions) to understand better the contexts in which it does and does not occur. Depending on the frequency of the behavior problem, teachers should make note of its occurrence over the course of a few days to a week until clear patterns emerge between the behavior and environmental conditions.¹⁴ Key information to note about each instance of the behavior includes:

- Time of day.
- Classroom location (for example, computer center, reading area).
- Subject matter being taught.
- Type of learning activity.
- Difficulty of the task.
- Presence of particular peers or adults.

Teachers might also consult with parents about whether they see similar behavior at home and, if so, the specific context of its occurrence (for example, with adults or peers). Once these data are collected, teachers may decide to discuss the findings with colleagues or local school or district behavior experts (see recommendation 4). Patterns revealed by this information will provide important clues as to what prompts the problem behavior, when it is most likely to happen, and what reinforces it.

3. Identify what prompts and reinforces the problem behavior.

Because students learn to behave in ways that satisfy a need or result in a desired outcome, we recommend that teachers examine the frequency and context data they have collected to figure out the prompts and payoffs for a particular student’s misbehavior.

Teachers should carefully examine triggers that may prompt a student’s misbehavior by asking themselves when, where, and with whom problem behaviors are most likely to occur. Common environmental triggers usually cluster in three general categories:

- Curricular variables (tasks that are too hard, easy, boring, or unstructured for the student).
- Social variables • (small or large group settings or the presence of particular individuals).
- Setting variables (for example, time of the day or week; distractions at home or in class; or the student’s physical states, such as fatigued, ill, or hungry).¹⁵

We recommend that teachers also carefully reflect on what usually happens after the behavior occurs, including how they react, how other students react, and the consequences that may be reinforcing the behavior. Reinforces of a student’s persistent problem behavior usually derive from two common outcomes—the student’s attempt either to get something, such as attention or access to a preferred activity, or to escape something, such as demands, reprimands, or difficult tasks.

Potential Road Blocks for Teachers

Roadblock 1.1: “I don’t know how to collect all this information about behavior problems when I’m trying to teach a room full of students.”

Roadblock 1.2: “This class has so many behavior problems; I don’t know where to start.”

Roadblock 1.3: “I identified the trigger for the problem behavior and applied an intervention, but the student is still misbehaving.”

Roadblock 1.4: “The problem isn’t in my classroom—it travels into my classroom from the playground.”

Recommendation 2: *Modify the classroom learning environment to decrease problem behavior*

Many effective classroom-focused interventions to decrease students' problematic behavior alter or remove factors that trigger them. These triggers can result from a mismatch between the classroom setting or academic demands and students' strengths, preferences, or skills.¹⁶ Teachers can reduce the occurrence of inappropriate behavior by revisiting and reinforcing classroom behavior expectations; rearranging the classroom environment, schedule, or learning activities to meet students' needs; and/or individually adapting instruction to promote high rates of student engagement and on-task behavior.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Revisit, re-practice, and reinforce classroom behavioral expectations.

Teachers should actively teach expectations for appropriate student behavior and corresponding classroom routines to students at the beginning of the year and revisit them regularly, showing students clearly what to do and what not to do. A key assumption underlying the panel's recommendation is that consistently implementing and reinforcing well defined classroom rules and expectations will result in positive student behavior in both the classroom and in other key school settings, such as the playground and hallways.¹⁷ Expectations should be conveyed daily through explicit teaching strategies, modeling positive behavior, and building positive relationships among students and adults. Students need concrete, positively-stated guidelines on how to conduct themselves in a variety of situations, including:

- Arriving at and leaving the classroom.
- Distributing materials and turning in assignments.
- Requesting help from the teacher.
- Transitioning to new activities or settings.
- Experiencing interruptions in routines, such as fire drills or substitute teachers.
- Working independently and in groups.
- Returning from recess or another class (art, music, or P.E.).

We recommend that teachers provide students with ample time to learn each step in the desired routine and to practice them, with more time and practice provided to younger elementary students who are new to learning how to behave in a school environment and among peers. In fact, for students in the primary grades teachers should consider practicing behavioral expectations daily for the first few weeks of school, and then reserving at least brief (about 10 minutes) instructional and practice periods in their weekly class schedule or as needed, such as when new expectations arise or students lapse into inappropriate behaviors. Younger elementary students also can benefit from constant visual reminders, such as pictures that are enlarged and posted in the classroom of students exhibiting expected behaviors (for example, sitting at their desk, cleaning a learning center, or lining up for recess). Older elementary school students might also need reminders about behavioral expectations, particularly after vacations. Taking time at the beginning of the school year and revisiting expectations regularly will develop students' ownership of a positive classroom environment. Teachers who start the school year with well-ordered classrooms might still find occasions when students need behavioral expectations to be reestablished.

2. Modify the classroom environment to encourage instructional momentum.

For persistent behavior problems we recommend that teachers identify and modify specific environmental variables that precede problem behavior, such as the classroom layout, agenda, procedures and routines, and teaching strategies, so that the classroom environment no longer contributes to problem behaviors.

We recommend that teachers revisit their daily lesson plans and schedule and ask themselves, for example:

- *Do I schedule the most academically demanding activities during the times of day when most students' engagement is high?* Teachers also should consider scheduling preferred activities after rigorous reasons to increase students' incentive to participate (for example, conducting math lessons before recess).
- *Is my teaching strategy appropriate for the lesson?* Teachers should consider using multiple strategies (for example, whole-class, small-group, and individual- work formats) in various locations in the classroom (for example, at desks, on the floor, in group settings, and in learning centers) to keep students engaged in learning tasks.
- *Is the length and pacing of my lesson suited to my students' developmental abilities?* Many experienced teachers have observed that younger elementary students have a limited attention span—perhaps no more than 10 or 15 minutes, depending on their developmental level—and so they frequently switch activities and incorporate movement into their lessons to keep younger students engaged in learning tasks.
- *Do I offer my students choices in how they participate in learning activities?* Because students' engagement often increases and disruption decreases when they are offered choices in their lessons,¹⁸ we recommend that teachers occasionally provide students with options in how they participate in learning tasks. This does not mean students get to choose everything they want to do, but teachers can incorporate some choice when options are negotiable, such as the order or number of activities, the choice of materials to use, alternative ways to demonstrate mastery (for example, writing a poem or story), or the structure of the task (such as working with a partner or independently).
- *Do I manage transitions quickly and efficiently?* In many classrooms a significant proportion of class time (about 25 percent, on average) is spent on transitional activities such as gathering and putting away materials, listening to nonacademic directions, and waiting for help or for the next activity to begin, resulting in a large loss to academic engaged time.¹⁹ To minimize this loss of instructional momentum, we recommend that teachers prepare carefully for transitions by warning students about the close of one activity and the opening of another, providing brief but clear directions, having materials immediately available, actively monitoring and reinforcing appropriate student behavior, and beginning the new activity quickly and with a high degree of enthusiasm.

We recommend that teachers also reconsider the arrangement of the classroom to promote a smooth rhythm and traffic flow that avoids areas getting congested or going unsupervised. For primary elementary classrooms teachers might need to define the appointed activity spaces in the classroom, such as by putting carpet squares or signs in places where the children are expected to sit during group activities. In all grades teachers may need to designate certain shelf areas for putting away specific materials or for turning in work. Seating plans can be designed to support different student interactions (such as small groups and whole-class) and access to instructional materials, while providing the teacher with enough room to move freely about the classroom and monitor student engagement. The desks of students with frequent problem behaviors can be positioned where there is less traffic and distraction and greater access to the teacher and work materials.

3. Adapt or vary instructional strategies to increase opportunities for academic success and engagement.

Research shows that when there is a mismatch between a student's ability level and the difficulty or length of an academic task, inappropriate behavior is more frequent.²⁰ If teachers observe that a recurring problem behavior is exhibited primarily during academic activities, we recommend that teachers identify the specific aspects of the task that challenge or frustrate the student and accommodate their instruction to the student's abilities and rate of learning.

Most teachers understand that to tailor instruction to students' needs, they must provide students with academic tasks that are neither too difficult nor too easy. To gauge students' level of learning and increase their academic engagement, teachers can pose frequent questions at a level most students can succeed in answering and intersperse more complex tasks.²¹ Guidelines for teaching students with behavioral difficulties recommend that teachers elicit four to six responses per minute from students during the presentation of new material, with a target of 80 percent accuracy in the students' answers; the number of responses doubles, with a target of 90 percent accuracy, during practice drills.²² Students' on-task behaviors increase when they experience more opportunities for academic success, for example answering questions correctly. In contrast, their disruptive behaviors increase when they are faced with queries that are too difficult.²³

Potential Road Blocks for Teachers

Roadblock 2.1: *"I just don't have the time to rethink my classroom practices."*

Roadblock 2.2: *"Making changes now to my schedule or classroom routines will just make things worse."*

Recommendation 3: Teach and reinforce new skills to increase appropriate behavior and preserve a positive classroom climate.

We recommend that teachers actively teach students socially- and behaviorally-appropriate skills to replace problem behaviors using strategies focused on both individual students and the whole classroom. In doing so, teachers help students with behavior problems learn how, when, and where to use these new skills; increase the opportunities that the students have to exhibit appropriate behaviors; preserve a positive classroom climate; and manage consequences to reinforce students' display of positive "replacement" behaviors and adaptive skills.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Identify where the student needs explicit instruction for appropriate behavior.

Behavior problems may indicate that students do not know what behavior is expected (see recommendation 2 for a discussion about setting explicit behavioral expectations) or that they lack the skills needed to exhibit the desired behavior. Teachers often assume that students can perform a particular behavior, but research shows that many children with behavior problems have poor social skills, especially the ability to read social situations and conform to group norms for appropriate behavior. This inability to respond appropriately in social situations can lead to further disruptive and aggressive behaviors.

Before assuming that a student is knowingly misbehaving, a teacher should discern whether the student has the skills and the knowledge to behave appropriately. To assess whether a student has the requisite skills for proper behavior, we recommend that teachers observe carefully whether there are any circumstances where the student can perform the behavioral skill at a level of success commensurate with his peers, and whether the student knows when and where the behavior is appropriate.

Another efficient way to assess a student's ability to perform academic or social skills adequately is to employ a self-monitoring strategy. Self-monitoring is a process in which students assess and record their own behavior to help them become more aware of and able to maintain appropriate behavior.²⁴ Teachers can use a checklist of questions to guide students in the assessment of their social and academic behaviors (Did I get started on time? Am I following directions? Am I working quietly on my assignment? Did I ask for help the right way? Did I turn in my completed work?). With this information teachers can discuss with students when and where the appropriate behaviors are expected, whether they know how to perform the behaviors, and to what extent they are successfully meeting those expectations on a regular basis.

2. Teach skills by providing examples, practice, and feedback.

If students lack the skills to behave appropriately, teachers can help them acquire the skills by providing instruction and reinforcement of new, appropriate replacement behaviors. The replacement behaviors should be just as likely to produce the same consequences sought by the student, such as teacher or peer attention, but less effortful and more socially acceptable than the problem behavior.²⁵ For example, teachers can help students acquire new skills by teaching them how and when to:

- Gain attention from the teacher or their peers appropriately and respectfully.
- Share, communicate, cooperate, and problem solve in group settings.
- Self-manage their social behavior and completion of academic tasks.
- Develop emotional awareness, responsibility, and self regulation (for example, how to cool down in an anger provoking situation, or how to tolerate delays in getting help).

Instructional strategies that can help students apply and maintain their new behavioral skills in different environments and settings are similar to effective academic instructional strategies, and include:

- Explaining the appropriate behavior so that students develop a thorough understanding of school norms.
- Breaking each behavioral skill down into concrete, teachable steps.
- Modeling the skill and providing a variety of examples of its appropriate use (for example, observing other students demonstrating the behavior or reading books with messages about the target behavior).
- Offering opportunities for guided and independent practice and role playing.
- Prompting and cuing the student about the use of the behavioral skill.
- Giving specific feedback about the student's skill performance, being sure to praise successful approximations of the skill and to encourage complete mastery.
- Diminishing gradually the external prompts and rewards for displaying the skill.
- Reinforcing the use of the behavioral skills over time.

3. *Manage consequences so that reinforcers are provided for appropriate behavior and withheld for inappropriate behavior.*

Research has long demonstrated that a behavior will increase if it is followed by positive reinforcers, and it will decrease if it is followed by negative consequences or removal of rewarding consequences.²⁶ optimally, we recommend that teachers apply this principle by redirecting inappropriate behaviors toward more appropriate behaviors. Unfortunately, it is easy to inadvertently reward inappropriate behavior by attending to it—even a reprimand can be rewarding for students who act out to gain the teacher's attention.

Provide positive reinforcers for appropriate behavior.

Many of the practices underlying the panel's recommendation are based on the principle that positive interactions between teachers and students increase students' social skills, emotional regulation, motivation, engagement, and abidance to classroom rules and expectations. Negative interactions between teachers and students, however, increase students' risk for school failure.²⁷ Teachers can foster positive relationships by engaging in socially positive and academically productive interactions with all students, especially those who exhibit problematic behavior.

One way to foster positive interactions is to increase the frequency with which students are recognized and reinforced for appropriate behavior. The amount of praise that students receive for appropriate behavior should substantially exceed the amount that they are reprimanded. In fact, a review of research shows that a ratio of about four positive statements for every one corrective statement can improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes.²⁸ Therefore; we recommend that teachers monitor the amount and consistency of their praise and acknowledgement of appropriate behavior in the classroom. If teachers' reprimands outweigh their praise, they should consider altering their classroom management practices, such as providing students with more opportunities to learn, practice, and internalize classroom rules and routines (see recommendation 2).

Research shows that rewards (such as approval, praise, recognition, special privileges, points, or other reinforcers built into the classroom management plan) are most effective in encouraging students' appropriate behavior. However it is suggested that one gradually begin to reduce and then eliminate rewards.

Withhold reinforcers for inappropriate behavior.

Instead of drawing attention to misbehavior, we recommend that teachers try to make problem behaviors ineffective for the student by systematically withholding or preventing access to reinforcing consequences. For example, if the student's problem behavior is reinforced by avoiding a task, the teacher should not dismiss the student from the activity but rather make adjustments to the setting or curricular variables to help the student achieve success. Similarly, if a student's disruptive behavior is reinforced by attention, then attention from peers and the teacher—even negative attention, such as reprimands—should be withheld when the behavior occurs again.

This is not to say that negative consequences for serious misbehavior are never warranted. Teachers should respond swiftly to serious problem behaviors, such as defiance, with appropriate consequences that are clearly understood by the students involved. We recommend that teachers adopt an overall positive and problem-solving approach, however, because harsh or punitive discipline is not effective in increasing the likelihood of appropriate behavior and tends to elicit student resentment and resistance.

Potential Road Blocks for Teachers

Roadblock 3.1: *“Teaching appropriate behavior is beyond my responsibilities as a teacher.”*

Roadblock 3.2: *“Too much praise and attention is harmful to students.”*

Recommendation 4: Draw on relationships with professional colleagues and students' families for continued guidance and support

Social relationships and collaborative opportunities can play a critical role in supporting teachers in managing disruptive behavior in their classrooms. We recommend that teachers draw on these relationships in finding ways to address the behavior problems of individual students and consider parents, school personnel, and behavioral experts as allies who can provide new insights, strategies, and support.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Collaborate with other teachers for continued guidance and support.

The current structure and organization of most elementary schools often are not conducive to collaborative teacher interactions, with separate classrooms that physically isolate teachers from their peers and with demanding daily responsibilities that allow for little discretionary time.²⁹ As a result teachers can feel isolated, as if they are “going it alone professionally,”³⁰ and there might be few, if any, opportunities for experienced teachers to help their peers grow professionally.

To enhance teachers' effectiveness in addressing behavioral challenges, school administrators should provide time and structures for collaborative learning teams to meet. Effective teams are relatively small, interdisciplinary groups comprised of grade-level general education teachers and when needed administrators, special educators, or other specialists that meet weekly or bi-weekly. An action oriented agenda and facilitation by team leaders who skillfully guide the discussions without assuming an authoritative role promote productive meetings. The goal of these team meetings should be for teachers to generate concrete strategies that can be incorporated into their instruction and classroom management.

2. Build collaborative partnerships with school, district, and community behavior experts who can consult with teachers when problems are serious enough to warrant help from outside the classroom.

Behavioral consultants, who may be school personnel such as school psychologists, counselors, and resource teachers, or other behavioral specialists, can offer expertise in behavioral practices along with technical support in implementing evidence based, packaged intervention programs. However, teachers have the most knowledge of a student's daily behavior and can give a consultant the context necessary to identify a student's particular needs. Teachers can provide valuable input regarding the feasibility of implementing a behavioral intervention in the classroom, such as how well a particular intervention would fit, and what might be some potential problems with the intervention. Once the intervention is initiated, teachers can help promote its success by consistently implementing classroom practices or tasks entailed in the intervention, reporting any progress or setbacks in the student's behavior throughout the school day, and responding promptly to the consultant's queries to help the consultant determine the intervention's effectiveness and revise accordingly. The panel recommends that teachers, with the support of the consultant, use the interventions for 4–6 weeks before determining whether or not the intervention is working.

In turn, teachers should expect behavioral consultants to show respect for their partnership by scheduling meetings at times and locations that are convenient for the teacher and other members of the student's behavior team, providing regular updates on the intervention's progress, and making sure that all communication is clearly articulated and avoids the use of jargon or unfamiliar terminology. Additionally, there may be times when behavioral consultants will benefit from observing the child's behavior in the classroom. In such cases teachers should provide them access to the classroom, along with guidelines for minimizing any classroom disruption. Such guidelines may include expectations that consultants will establish a predetermined day and time when observations will occur, enter the classroom during breaks in the class

schedule so as not to interrupt an ongoing lesson, and maintain a low profile in the classroom by sitting in an unobtrusive area and allowing the teacher to instruct without interruptions.

3. *Encourage parents and other family members to participate as active partners in teaching and reinforcing appropriate behavior.*

Building a strong, trusting relationship with the parent of a student who is disrupting the learning process can be challenging, particularly when there are racial and cultural differences. Some parents distrust school personnel as a result of their own negative memories and experiences with schools. Other parents have limited English language and educational experiences. Still other parents must spend all of their efforts in meeting basic economic needs. Teachers who are proactive in reaching out to parents to make connections and asking for parents' input and help in mitigating behavior problems will demonstrate a belief in the importance of involving parents in reshaping the student's behavior and school experiences.

By communicating encouraging messages to students about the value of education and ways to succeed in school, parents and teachers together can support students' motivation, engagement, positive behavior, and persistence.³¹ Ideally; teachers should make a concerted effort to build positive relationships with their students' families before any identification of behavior problems. Some suggestions for engaging parents in working together to help promote school success and positive behavior include sending positive emails or notes home, providing a parent signature log with the child's homework assignments, communicating regularly by phone, and inviting parents to participate in school functions, celebrations, and parent conferences.

When a student's behavior problem has emerged, teachers can approach parents as partners by encouraging them to apply the classroom's behavioral rules and expectations at home and by asking for their ideas on ways to correct their child's behavior. For behavior issues that are generally mild and confined (such as refusing to follow directions, talking out of turn, or book slamming), parents should be contacted if the behavior problem persists (for example, if it occurs during math lesson for several days in a row). If the behavior is more severe or dramatic (such as stealing, throwing objects, or hitting other students), parents should be contacted immediately to discuss the behavior problem with the teacher and, in severe cases, with an administrator over the phone or in person.

In addition, many behavioral interventions are founded on the principle that family involvement can be critical to an intervention's success.³² In some cases, a student's behavioral goals can best be achieved through evidence-based programs that involve family members directly in addition to student-centered interventions. Such family-focused interventions seek to enhance the parenting skills and supportive role of family members to address a child's emotional and behavioral challenges successfully

Potential Road Blocks for Teachers

Roadblock 4.1: *"Meeting with other teachers will just be a waste of time, like all our faculty meetings."*

Roadblock 4.2: *"Behavior consultants expect too much from me; I don't have time to meet with them regularly or to implement everything they suggest."*

Roadblock 4.3: *"Parents won't participate."*

Recommendation 5: Assess whether schoolwide behavior problems warrant adopting schoolwide strategies or programs and, if so, implement ones shown to reduce negative and foster positive interactions

Classroom teachers, in coordination with other school personnel (such as administrators, grade-level teams, and special educators), can benefit from adopting a schoolwide approach to preventing problem behaviors and increasing positive social interactions among students and with school staff. This type of systemic approach requires a shared responsibility on the part of all school personnel, particularly the administrators who establish and support consistent schoolwide practices and the teachers who implement these practices both in their individual classrooms and beyond.

How to carry out the recommendation

1. Address schoolwide behavior issues by involving a school improvement team.

Building-level steering or advisory committees can provide valuable input on the design and implementation of schoolwide behavior practices.³³ Accordingly, we recommend that school principals charge a newly-formed or existing school improvement team with considering prevention and intervention strategies to address schoolwide behavior issues. A typical team should be comprised of an administrator, a teacher from each grade level, and a representative of the school support staff. It also could benefit from a behavioral expert, such as a school psychologist or counselor, and representation from a parent group.

The school improvement team has several responsibilities. Initially, its role is to assess the existing schoolwide discipline program or, if one does not exist, conduct a needs assessment that addresses specific behavior problems experienced throughout the school. Next, the team should develop an action plan involving schoolwide discipline policies and procedures that are positively stated and based on high behavioral expectations and present their plan in an effort to garner the support and commitment of the entire school staff. When the practices have been implemented throughout the school, the team will play an important role in monitoring the progress of the schoolwide approach by meeting regularly to review and update the action plan as needed, in an effort to ensure the sustainability of these practices in the school.

Although school principals must allocate time and support for this team, teachers also play a key role in the success of a schoolwide approach. They have knowledge of and influence on their students' behaviors, which enables them to provide information necessary to develop and implement schoolwide behavior practices, making their active participation on the team essential.

2. Collect information on the hot spots throughout the school—namely, the frequency of particular schoolwide behavior problems and when and where they occur.

To determine the most effective approach to address schoolwide behavior concerns, the school improvement team needs to assess systematically where and when behavioral hot spots are apparent in the school. Hot spots often are areas where large groups of students gather with little supervision and no structured activities, such as hallways, bathrooms, the cafeteria, and the playground. Similarly, behavior problems are most likely to arise before or after school, during lunch, or at recess, when students congregate without structured activities or much adult supervision. These hot spots can be identified in a number of ways:

- Completing teacher surveys that provide general impressions of hot spots around teachers' classrooms and in other areas of the school (for example, the bathrooms closest to their classrooms).

- Allotting time during staff meetings to discuss schoolwide behavior problems and identify specific times and locations when those behavior problems most often occur.
- Organizing teachers and other school personnel in charge of common areas, such as cafeteria and school yard staff, to observe and document behavior problems throughout the school.
- Collecting and analyzing office referral data.

Understanding when and where these hot spots arise is essential when developing and implementing a schoolwide approach. However, even if schoolwide systems are not in place, teachers can identify and monitor hot spots outside their classrooms and develop and implement strategies to overcome behavior problems in these areas (for example, revisit classroom behavioral expectations or use positive and negative consequences to reinforce positive behavior). Disruptions outside the classroom often can carry over and disrupt learning within it. Additionally, successful classroom management can rapidly deteriorate when students exit the classroom and encounter these hot spots, making it difficult to reestablish positive behavior when they return to the classroom. Thus, teachers can increase their ability to maintain positive behaviors in the classroom by recognizing and reacting effectively to behavior problems that ensue throughout the school.

3. Monitor implementation and outcomes using an efficient method of data collection and allow ample time for the program to work.

Changes made schoolwide might initially result in seemingly imperceptible changes to student behavior, seen only through patterns that emerge from data. Thus, we believe that ongoing documentation of student behavior is fundamental to this recommendation. School improvement teams need behavior-related data to establish baseline behavior characteristics that help them appropriately identify and address the major behavior concerns within the school. Regular monitoring is then necessary to determine whether the programs and strategies implemented are successfully reducing the targeted behavior problems and maintaining positive behaviors. If not, the data can determine what elements of the program need to be revisited or revised.³⁴

There are numerous sources of information that can inform school personnel about patterns of schoolwide student behavior. For instance, office discipline referrals can be a useful source of data, as studies have shown that they are both sensitive to the general behavioral climate of the school and an accurate index of the effectiveness of behavioral interventions.³⁵ To ensure that an effort to collect office discipline referral and other data is sustainable over time, data collection methods should follow several core principles. Namely, data collection systems should be:

- **Efficient:** For data collection techniques to be implemented widely and continuously they should be easily learned and quickly administered. Efficient data collection techniques can range from simple procedures, such as tally marks for observed behavior problems on notepads carried by teachers, to more complex procedures, such as computerized data collection systems that automatically record office discipline referrals.
- **Timely:** A response to a reported behavior problem is most effective when it is administered soon after the behavior has occurred. Thus, data collection systems should incorporate strategies to promptly relay relevant information to all appropriate people (teachers, support staff, or parents) in order to provide a swift response to the child's actions. For example, if a student exhibits aggressive behavior during recess, a system should be in place to report this behavior to the student's teacher before the students reenter the classroom and to the student's family on the day the behavior problem occurs.
- **Meaningful:** A "less is more" approach to data collection often is more effective than attempting to collect a large amount of information that may become frustrating to digest and difficult to interpret. Data collection systems should focus on the few elements that are most valuable to the school (such as the frequency of occurrence of a behavior that is the focus of a schoolwide intervention program), and consistently monitor those elements throughout the school year.

To augment information generated through a schoolwide data collection system, teachers have an ideal vantage point to witness specific behavior incidents as they arise and provide informal, yet essential, data on students' behavior. By situating themselves in areas where problem behaviors are readily observed, teachers can document information about the specific behavior problems witnessed and report on the immediate results of any actions administered.³⁶

4. If warranted, adopt a packaged intervention program that fits well with identified behavior problem(s) and the school context.

As the school improvement team develops its action plan for a schoolwide behavior program, it might find that the best approach to address the school's behavior issues is through one or more packaged intervention programs implemented schoolwide. Many such programs contain the fundamental components needed to respond to a variety of behavior problems. For example, evidence-based interventions, such as Second Step³⁷ and Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, provide classroom-based curricula consisting of specific lessons aimed at increasing pro-social behaviors in students. However, to ensure that these programs will be implemented with fidelity and work effectively, the school improvement team should consider the appropriateness of a program, given the unique characteristics and capacities of the school.³⁸ Some questions that may assist the team when selecting an intervention program are:

- What are the types of behaviors we want to promote in our school and what are some specific behaviors we want to reduce or eliminate? For example, do we want our students to develop social skills with peers and adults? Is bullying a problem that needs to be addressed?
- Is our school willing and able to spend money and other resources, such as time for training all teachers on the intervention procedures, to implement a packaged intervention program to address particular problem behaviors?
- Are we looking for an intervention that is administered by outside consultants or do we prefer to train existing school personnel?
- What are the unique features of our school (such as, size, geographic location, culture, and composition of staff and students), and how will the intervention fit these features? For example, if a school has a large percentage of bilingual students, can an English language intervention be modified to accommodate all students?
- What do our observations tell us? For instance, are there certain student populations, such as older students, that are particularly prone to behavior problems and that could benefit from specific interventions?
- How will an intervention fit into our current school schedule and curriculum? For example, are we willing to take time away from academic instruction to invest in a rigorous, year-long behavior curriculum or would a less intensive intervention that can be easily incorporated into our existing schedule better fit our school's needs?

To respond to these queries, the principal should be either a member of the school improvement team or readily available to meet and discuss these issues as the team develops its action plan. In addition, the school improvement team would benefit from broader input of other teachers and other school personnel, either through surveys or discussions during staff meetings. By addressing these types of questions, the team can tailor packaged intervention programs to fit within the school context, thereby increasing the chances that they will be readily implemented and sustained.

Potential Road Blocks for Teachers

Roadblock 5.1: “There’s no schoolwide system at my school, and it doesn’t seem possible for me to change behavior problems outside my classroom.”

Roadblock 5.2: “It’s too costly and burdensome to purchase and implement an intervention program or to maintain a data collection system.”

Roadblock 5.3: “Nothing will work in our school. Our demographics and setting are too unique and challenging.”

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Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom. The What Works Clearinghouse standards and their relevance to this guide. Overview. Scope of the practice guide. Recommendation 1. Identify the specifics of the problem behavior and the conditions that prompt and reinforce it. Recommendation 2. Modify the classroom learning environment to decrease problem behavior. Recommendation 3. Teach and reinforce new skills to increase appropriate behavior and preserve a positive classroom climate. Recommendation 4. Draw on relationships with professional colleagues and students' families for