



feature

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Positive

An Effective

Behavior Support

Strategy for Behavior Change

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The term “positive behavior support” or PBS refers to a way to address the problem behavior of individuals ranging from young, preschool children to school-age children and even adults. The approach originated in the 1980s as psychologists and other specialists began to question the prevailing use of consequences, mostly punishment, to alter problem behavior. In 2016, Dr. Don Kincaid and colleagues called for a new approach — one focused on reducing problem behavior through teaching and building more adaptive skills.

PBS is an approach to behavior support that emphasizes research-based assessment and interventions intended to reduce problem behavior. Described by Dr. Edward Carr and colleagues in 2002, PBS decreases problem behaviors by teaching or expanding an individual’s competencies and, simultaneously, altering the environment to minimize or prevent problem behavior. The emphasis on teaching new skills is a pivotal strategy in PBS and is based on the understanding that social skill deficits often underlie problem behaviors. Once addressed, the newly learned skill can actually reduce the need for problem behavior. A good example of this approach, and one that is relevant for parents, is teaching a child to use his language to request a needed item rather than crying or engaging in a tantrum.

Since the 1990s, the PBS approach has been successfully used with children in schools and preschool programs, with adults with disabilities in the community and in group homes, and even in families with children ranging in age from toddlerhood through adolescence. Rather than simply relying on

punishment to reduce problem behavior, parents, including foster and treatment foster parents, trained in PBS strategically work to change problem behavior for good by first gaining an understanding of why the behavior is occurring (i.e., what is the child trying to get or avoid), and then implementing a planned approach to prevent the behavior while teaching and strengthening a “replacement” skill or behavior. PBS professionals refer to this approach as “prevent, teach and reinforce.”

PREVENTION

Typically when parents and professionals think about addressing problem behavior, they wait for negative behavior to occur and then put consequence strategies in place to respond to that behavior. PBS, on the other hand, emphasizes prevention strategies. The purpose of prevention is to implement plans to avoid the problem behavior altogether.

One example of a prevention strategy is to design and enforce house rules. House rules are specific guidelines for how members of the home are expected to behave. Although foster parents may think some rules are globally understood, such as knocking before entering a room, it is possible that these rules may not have been in place at a youth’s previous homes. The youth may not know about the rule or how to follow it. Explicitly posting and reviewing house rules with foster youth who are new to your home sets them up to successfully meet expectations. House rules remain important even after the initial transition; new rules can be added as new behaviors develop and old rules can be considered for removal.

Similar to house rules, routines are an additional useful prevention tool because they provide a consistent structure for children. With routines in place, children are able to predict and anticipate the events of their day. Routines provide stability for children that their previous homes may have lacked. Routines help to ensure that things will run more smoothly throughout the day and reduce the likelihood that problems may occur. Other benefits of routines are that they help eliminate power struggles, encourage cooperation and help foster parents maintain consistency in expectations.

Finally, it is important to remember that families need time to relax together and have fun. Another prevention strategy is to create opportunities for families to spend time engaging in enjoyable activities. Foster youth may have exhibited problem behavior in the past, which led to their exclusion from fun activities. Allowing them to participate in fun activities with foster families provides an opportunity to build a warm and supportive relationship and participate effectively in a family.

TEACHING

Foster youth come from different backgrounds with a variety of experiences. When they enter a new home, they are placed into a new situation with new family members, rules and expectations. Youth may have varying degrees of understanding regarding what behaviors are acceptable, when to perform those behaviors (e.g., when to do homework), or even how to perform the behavior. Behaviors can be taught just like any other skill. In fact, if parents want children to do something, it is important to remember that

the child may need to be taught, step by step. One way to teach youth behaviors is by using direct instruction, or an explicit description of how to perform an acceptable behavior. Using direct instruction, foster parents first provide a rationale for using behavior to the youth, followed by teaching and prompting the youth in the moment. For example, if a youth never cleans her room, the foster parent should teach her how to clean her room by showing

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her how and where to put away her clothes and other belongings. Direct instruction is also important for skills that will help a youth become a more independent adult, like keeping a budget or applying for a job.

In addition to directly teaching behavior, modeling is a powerful teaching tool. Youth learn just as much, if not more, from what foster parents do as from what they say. By showing youth exactly what should be done in any given situation, youth are more likely to do the same when the situation occurs again in the future. For example, in a heated argument, parents who maintain a regulated tone of voice model for their youth the skill of using “indoor voices” instead of yelling, even when angry.

Finally, pre-corrections are a teaching tool for foster parents to correct problem behavior before it even happens. Immediately before an event, parents directly explain to the youth what will happen and how to behave, and give a warning for what will happen if the child does not behave. Foster parents who create structure by teaching youth how to act in situations during which problem behavior often happens “catch the problem when it’s small” and make it less likely for problem behavior to happen.

USING REINFORCEMENT

Just as teaching new behavior is important, it is equally imperative that youth experience positive outcomes when performing a new skill or behavior. When the outcomes are positive, it is more likely that youth will perform the behavior again given the same situation. PBS professionals refer to this concept as reinforcement, or “strengthening” behavior.

One way to increase the likelihood of youth’s good behavior is praise. Praise from others feels good for youth and for adults, and it has the effect of motivating us to keep trying our best. Moreover, praise is easy and cost-effective. When used frequently and authentically, it can be effective in strengthening the behaviors foster parents want to see. Praise should be provided as immediately as possible after the youth does something that the foster parent likes. To be most effective, praise should also include a specific description of what the youth did that the foster parent liked. For example, a parent should say, “I like the way you completed your homework before dinner,” instead of just saying, “good job.”

At times, praise is not a sufficient strategy for improving behavior and must be combined with privileges. Privileges may include time with a friend, a special activity with a foster parent, watching television, a later bedtime, or any other activity that the youth enjoys. The important thing for foster parents to remember when using reinforcement is that to be most effective, it must be delivered consistently and immediately following the behavior.

PBS: AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH FOR FOSTER CARE

Children and youth in care bring to the foster

home the culmination of the many and varied experiences of their previous environments. Foster parents are in a unique position to promote the success of these children by utilizing effective strategies to change and shape their behavior. PBS is a behavior-change technology that relies on prevention and teaching as opposed to the traditional method of simply reacting to problem behavior. The approach offers many advantages to foster parents by emphasizing natural, easy-to-implement strategies that help to build the relationship between foster parents and the youth in their care and promote lasting behavior change. Effective parents, foster parents and treatment foster parents utilize PBS on a daily basis to create teachable moments as a means to influence young lives. ❁

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