

Targeted supports for students at-risk

10

“While most students in schools will respond positively to well-organized classrooms, clear behaviour expectations, and rich, positive reinforcement, we also need to add specialized supports for those who do not improve with the school-wide program alone.”

– Jeff Sprague and Annemieke Golly, *Best Behavior: Building Positive Behavior Support in Schools*

Targeted supports are needed for the 5 to 15 percent of students who chronically do not meet expectations and are at risk of developing increasingly challenging behaviour. These students will benefit from targeted interventions designed to increase specific positive behaviours and/or reduce specific negative behaviours.

The types of targeted interventions that these students often respond to include:

- individual or small group social skills coaching
- adapted instruction that facilitates individual success
- mentoring relationships that create feelings of connectedness and caring, and offer positive role modelling.

Another type of intervention that is often successful with this group of students is goal setting. Setting goals and developing action plans helps students begin to:

- identify and reduce or eliminate specific behaviours that interfere with their learning and/or social relationships
- identify and learn new replacement behaviours that will make a positive difference in their learning and relationships.

This can be done through a targeted goal-setting process that takes place over several weeks or several months, depending on the needs of the individual student.

Individual goal setting

To begin the process, clearly describe the specific behaviours that need to be increased or decreased to achieve success and the new behaviours the student needs

to learn to replace inappropriate behaviours. Prioritize these behaviours. Consider factors such as:

- What current behaviours are interfering most with learning?
- What behaviours would be the easiest to change?
- What new behaviours would make the most difference to the student's learning?

Make a plan that addresses a manageable number of goals, one at a time.

A goal-setting plan helps to identify, monitor and improve a student's classroom behaviour and provides a way for parents and school staff to communicate regularly. This approach can be highly motivating to students if parents select the right reinforcement to use at home after the child reaches his or her daily goals.

Use the following six steps to develop and implement an individual goal-setting process.

1. Select the area for improvement

Involve all school staff who work with the student, as well as the student and his or her parents. Identify the behaviours that are likely to have long-term negative consequences if there is no change, and the key behaviour changes that would improve the student's learning and social relationships. For example:

- academic work (e.g., task completion and accuracy)
- peer relations (particularly decreasing aggression and other negative interactions)
- independence (e.g., following class routines, working independently, managing transitions)
- relationships with adults (e.g., cooperating with requests, accepting consequences, disagreeing in an appropriate way, asking for help).

As much as possible, involve students in identifying the areas they need to work on. Ask them questions such as, "What kinds of things would you have to do to have a better day in school?" "What kinds of behaviours get in the way of having a good day?" or "What could you do instead?"

2. Define the goals

Identify specific academic or social behaviours that need to be changed to help the student be more successful in the classroom. These new positive behaviours, or "goal behaviours" must be observable and measurable by the teacher and the student. They must be clearly defined in a way that students, parents and school staff all understand. Depending on the age and ability of

the student, consider between two and five goal behaviours. As much as possible, use student-friendly language and state the goals in positive terms.

Goal behaviours might include:

- moving from one activity to another cooperatively
- using a polite voice when speaking to classmates
- keeping hands and feet away from other students
- having books and supplies ready
- completing assignments on time
- starting to work right away
- playing a game of soccer without incident.

3. Decide on criteria for goals

Review recent classroom observations and records to determine how often a student is demonstrating the problem behaviour. Use this information to determine which behaviours need to be included and to prepare the initial criteria for determining success.

Set reasonable criteria for defining success; that is, one that students can achieve between 75 and 90 percent of the time. To encourage improvement, set initial criteria at a rate slightly better than what the student is doing now. For example, if a student currently interrupts an average of 10 times per class, the initial criteria might be “interrupts fewer than five times per class,” and a few weeks later the goal might be “interrupts fewer than two times per class.” Set criteria to be met for each part of the day, not the whole day. Keep the scoring manageable but within reach of the student’s current ability. Reinforcements can be awarded on a graduated scale (partial rewards for partial success).

Provide frequent feedback by evaluating goal behaviours at several intervals throughout the day. Only include goals that are significant to the student’s improvement. An example of a daily checklist developed for a student in Grade 2 can be found on the next page.

A checklist format is preferable to anecdotal notes because it focuses on specific behaviours, has a less-subjective tone and reduces the opportunity to make random comments that may be misconstrued or may place unnecessary emphasis on problem behaviours that, within the big picture, are insignificant.

My School Day

Date: February 4, 200X

| | Polite voice | | Hands and feet to myself | | Following teacher's requests | |
|---|--------------|------------|--------------------------|------------|------------------------------|------------|
| | Me | My teacher | Me | My teacher | Me | My teacher |
| Language Arts 9:00 to 10:30 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Math 10:45 to 12:00 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 4 |
| | | | | | | |
| Science Phys Ed 1:00 to 2:15 | 3 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 3 |
| Social Studies Wrap-up 2:30 to 3:30 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 2 |

4-great!

3-okay

2-needs work

1-not acceptable

What went well today

You took turns in math group and shared the materials.

What we need to work on

You need to choose free reading book in three minutes.

Following teacher's requests at the end of activities.

Encouraging words from parents

4. Discuss the daily goal-setting checklist with students and parents

Explain that the daily checklist helps everyone to focus on the goal behaviours and that the ultimate goal is for the student to have a happier and more successful school day.

As much as possible, involve the student in setting the goals and developing the criteria. Use language that is meaningful to the student. A self-monitoring component encourages students to reflect on their own behaviour more thoughtfully and more accurately. Some students have a limited or skewed perception of how their behaviour appears to others and need structured situations that help them learn how to more accurately gauge others' perceptions.

Sending the checklist back and forth between home and school each day can be challenging for some students. Look for strategies to make this routine easier on everyone, including parents and school staff. A student is more likely to take a checklist home if it contains positive comments.

If the student is having difficulty remembering to take the checklist home or to school, or seems to be resisting, use alternative strategies. For example:

- Designate a special plastic labelled envelope for this purpose and attach it to the student's homework agenda.
- Add the daily checklist to a list of items the student checks off before leaving school at the end of each day.
- Fax or e-mail the completed checklist directly to the student's home.

5. Establish a system of reinforcement

Encourage parents to reward their child for positive performance as reflected in the daily checklist. Natural rewards are more effective than objects or activities that are artificially added, and short-term rewards that students receive on the same day or within a week of the positive behaviour are preferable. For example, a parent might make a child's access to television or computer games, which was previously "free," contingent on receiving a positive daily checklist. Rewards need to be motivating for the child, but not so elaborate or expensive that they cause stress for either the child or parent. The focus should not be on the reward, but on changing behaviour.

Another effective technique is to establish a menu of reinforcements that the child can choose from.

For example, the at-home reinforcement menu could include:

- computer games for X minutes

- choosing family television show or video
- television time for X minutes
- video games for X minutes
- listening to music for X minutes
- a special snack
- talking on the phone to a friend or relative
- participating in a special activity with a parent (e.g., hot chocolate, conversations, playing a board game, going on a bike ride)
- other rewards suggested by the child.

If a student is not responding to reinforcements at home, the school may have to become involved. This can be particularly effective for younger children, who need more immediate reinforcement.

An at-school menu of rewards could include (if these things are not already part of the regular classroom routine):

- free time for X minutes
- visiting with a friend
- listening to recorded music or stories
- using felt markers or other art supplies
- choosing a book for the teacher to read to the class
- caring for the class pet
- using specific computer software programs
- choosing stickers
- choosing a seat
- playing cards or board games
- taking digital pictures
- drawing a prize from a grab bag
- other rewards suggested by the student.

The menu of reinforcements might need to be changed regularly to maintain the student's interest and motivation.

6. Monitor and modify interventions

When completing the daily checklist, describe positive behaviour and note improvements and benefits. Respond matter-of-factly to missed targets with an encouraging statement about what can happen the next day.

Keep daily records of how often the student meets each goal. Gradually increase appropriate behaviour by increasing the criteria once the student consistently meets the goal. If the student regularly fails to meet the goal, make it easier for a week or two. Building on success is easier than building on failure.

Once the student has met the criterion for a goal at an acceptable level and you are confident the student is able to consistently demonstrate it, announce that the goal behaviour has been achieved. Simply tell students that they are now doing so well that they don't need that goal anymore. Periodic review may be necessary for some students.

If necessary, move on to another goal. If the student is doing so well that daily checklists are unnecessary, move to a weekly checklist and reinforcement system. Work with students to determine what is meaningful and motivating to them.

If this individual goal-setting approach is not working after several weeks, meet with the student's parents to discuss possible new strategies, which may include a more intensive behavioural intervention. For additional information on intensive interventions, including functional behavioural analysis and individual behaviour support plans, see *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools: An intensive, individualized approach*.

For more information



To better understand how students' disabilities can affect their learning and behaviour, refer to the following Alberta Education resources.

- *Medical/Disability Information for Classroom Teachers*: <http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/inmdict/html/index.html>
- *Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (2003) (free PDF version available at <https://education.alberta.ca/media/385138/teaching-students-with-asd-2003.pdf>)
- *Teaching Students with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD): Building Strengths, Creating Hope* (2004) (free PDF version available at <https://education.alberta.ca/media/385139/teaching-students-with-fasd-2004.pdf> and <https://education.alberta.ca/media/385140/re-defining-success-supporting-students-with-fasd-2009.pdf>)

- *Focusing on Success: Teaching Students with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder* (2006) (free PDF version available at <https://education.alberta.ca/media/385137/focus-on-success-teaching-students-with-adhd-2006.pdf>)
- *Supporting Positive Behaviors in Alberta Schools - A classroom approach* (2008)(Free PDF version available at https://education.alberta.ca/media/464617/supporting_positive_behaviour_classroom.pdf)
- *Essential Components of Educational Programming for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (2006) (free PDF version available at https://education.alberta.ca/media/1477208/ecep_autism_spectrum_disorder.pdf).