Common Threads
for Inclusive Education

Understanding Challenging Behaviours

PLANNING YOUR LEARNING JOURNEY

What universal and targeted strategies and supports can be used to address the learning needs of students with challenging behaviours in an inclusive learning environment?

INTRODUCTION

The fundamental goal of education in Alberta is to inspire and support all students to achieve success.

Research on student engagement and learning indicates that student achievement is directly related to positive engagement and, conversely, disengagement is associated with behaviour and learning problems that can eventually lead to dropping out of school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris 2004). A sense of belonging gives students feelings of security, identity and community which positively contributes to their academic, psychological and social development.[1]

A positive behaviour support approach supports inclusion by creating environments where all students have the skills and attitudes they need to be engaged and successful learners.

—Alberta Education 2008

Assume the best about your students because they want to do better, don't want to act out but need your help.

—Webster 2018

The Alberta Teachers' Association

iStock

Teachers who reach out to students with behaviour challenges can change a child's life trajectory.

The *Education Act* requires every school authority and school to ensure a welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environment that respects diversity and nurtures a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self.[2] This learning environment is characterized as one in which

- healthy and respectful relationships are built and fostered;
- students and school staff model positive social-emotional skills, including empathy and compassion;
- students feel that the school staff care for them as individuals;
- positive mental health is promoted and students are provided with support as required;
- school values, rights and responsibilities are respected;
- individual and cultural diversity is respected, celebrated and understood as a strength;
- expectations are clear, consistent and regularly communicated;
- consequences for unacceptable behaviour are appropriate for the student's age, maturity and individual circumstances; and
- support is provided for those impacted by inappropriate behaviour as well as those who engage in inappropriate behaviours.[3]

The Teaching Quality Standard (Alberta Education 2018) requires that teachers establish an inclusive learning environment and build positive, productive working relationships with students, parents or guardians, peers, and others in the school and local community to support student learning. Often students will say, years later, that it was a teacher who reached out to them or with whom they had a personal relationship that got them on the right track to succeed.

UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Encountering students who appear to argue and show defiance is inevitable. The underlying reason for or cause of this challenging behaviour is not always apparent. Establishing a positive relationship with the student is highly beneficial to managing and understanding challenging behaviours. Building a positive relationship with parents/guardians at the beginning of the school year can open lines of communication. A short, personal introductory phone call inviting them to call you when something is positively or negatively affecting the students at home and then later communicating about positive experiences can contribute to effective relationships.

A small percentage of students who exhibit problem behaviour in the classroom have a diagnosed conduct or behavioural disorder. A functional behaviour assessment will assist in clarifying a student's specific behaviour and determine if there are other medical or psychological disabilities that may be causing the behaviour. A qualified professional will diagnose conduct and behaviour disorders based on established criteria, including documented symptoms over at least six months. Teachers may be asked to provide information checklists and anecdotal notes.

> More information is available in *BOATS: Behaviour, Observation, Assessment, Teaching Strategies*, at https://4d82330e-c615-44c1-9718-ce9c54fec706.files usr.com/ugd/747229_d465e00039c34a5f913d39 feda329c2f.pdf (ATA Council for Inclusive Education 2017, 79–93).

When our little people are overwhelmed by big emotions it is our job to share our calm, not join their chaos.

—L R Knost, *Two Thousand Kisses a Day*

PLANNING FOR INSTRUCTION

If you are aware that a student has a behavioural disability, it is proactive to meet with the parents and the student, if appropriate, early in the school year. In this meeting identify and review

- the student's strengths, interests and areas of need;
- the student's specific antecedents;
- if the student has any other associated disorders that need to be considered at school;
- de-escalation strategies that work well, and
- the successful strategies used at home or in the community that also could be used at school.

Meeting with parents and students early in the school year helps to address a student's behavioural disability and determine strategies to mitigate class interruption.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES AND SUPPORTS

Response to Intervention (RTI) Framework

The response to intervention (RTI) framework is a three-tiered approach in which schools and teachers use data to monitor student learning needs and to select evidence-based strategies, interventions and behavioural supports that are most likely to lead to student success.[4] Using the RTI approach, teachers monitor and support all students and effectively target interventions and strategies for struggling students who require those resources. This process is revisited many times throughout the school year.
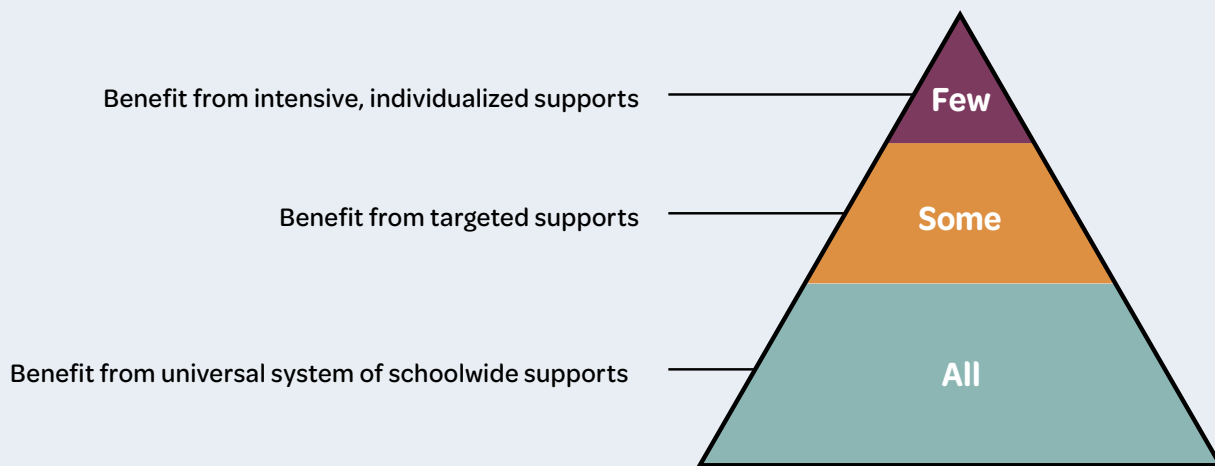
Universal supports (Tier 1) are provided to establish a welcoming, respectful and safe learning environment to support success for all students. Teachers establish classroom management procedures that ensure an orderly learning environment and they develop a classroom curriculum that addresses the diverse learning needs of the students in the class.

Classroom management. This refers to how teachers proactively structure the classroom and work with students to create a respectful, safe and focused learning environment. This includes developing and communicating classroom procedures and behaviour standards that support learning, promote respect and effectively manage resources. Classroom management

considers how to sustain engagement and re-engage students in the classroom learning, which is key to enhancing and sustaining positive behaviour (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA 2015, 3). Classroom management strategies include the following:

- Maintain established classroom rules and routines for all students.
- Have clear expectations, firm rules and boundaries.
- Post a weekly and daily schedule so students know what to expect.
- Acknowledge appropriate classroom behaviour.
- Work hard to establish trust by being consistent and fair.
- Remain calm and respectful, do not raise your voice and do not use sarcasm.
- Speak to students privately about their behaviour instead of in front of others, to prevent loss of face and avoid escalation.
- Integrate age-appropriate social skills lessons to teach positive social interactions, anger management and conflict resolution strategies.
- Model the behaviour you want the students to have. Remember that students who have behaviour disabilities can be argumentative. Avoid power struggles and remain neutral.

More information on managing behaviours in the classroom is available at https://eric.ed .gov/?id=ED392230 (*Teaching for Student Differences. Programming for Special Needs Book 1*, Alberta 2004 [accessed March 5, 2020]).

Benefit from intensive, individualized supports —————— **Few**

Benefit from targeted supports —————— **Some**

Benefit from universal system of schoolwide supports —————— **All**

Response to Intervention (RTI) or Pyramid of Intervention   *www.alberta.ca/response-to-intervention.aspx*

Differentiated instruction. Students who have learning difficulties are sometimes motivated to avoid or protest situations in which they feel they cannot be successful. This may present in the form of arguing, refusing to participate, or misbehaviour to gain attention from their peers. Some students may be absent from instruction, psychologically withdraw or engage in diversionary tactics. Teachers should reflect on the situation and student learning data to determine if the student may have an underlying learning difficulty. Teachers use differentiated instruction to address diverse learning needs and to provide a variety of instruction and learning activities. Make sure academic work is at the appropriate level. Allow the student to redo assignments to improve their score or final grade. When work is too hard, students become frustrated. When it is too easy, they become bored. Both reactions can lead to behaviour problems in the classroom.

> For more information on differentiated instruction teaching and learning strategies, consult *Making a Difference: Meeting Diverse Learning Needs with Differentiated Instruction* (Alberta Education 2010).

Targeted interventions (Tier 2) are to support students who are exhibiting problem behaviour or who are at risk of developing serious behaviour issues in the future. Students who have mild or moderate conduct and behaviour disabilities want to gain and maintain control by testing authority to the limit, breaking rules, and provoking and prolonging arguments. These students may frequently engage in power struggles.

Targeted interventions focus on the cause of the behaviour and include the following:

- Speak to the student privately about their behaviour instead of in front of others, to prevent loss of face and avoid escalation.
- Be caring and calm as you discuss the behaviour. Listen to the student without interrupting.
- Provide clear, specific expectations for behaviour that the student can follow. Be clear on what behaviours are not negotiable and what consequences will follow.
- Consider developing a written "contract" when working with students—this demonstrates that the plan is serious and that there was agreement on the approach.
- Establish a private signal to remind the student to stop and think before they might do something impulsive.

- When appropriate, offer a choice (for example, "Do you want to work at your desk or at the table?").
- Structure activities to build positive peer relationships and provide cooperative learning opportunities.
- Consider arranging for a student mentor who can be a positive role model for the student.
- Try to provide positive ways for the student to get attention and gain appropriate status.
- Acknowledge small steps toward improvement by whispering a positive comment such as, "This is excellent work."
- When necessary, meet with the parents or guardians to develop a behaviour support plan for the child to be successful at school.

Positive behaviour supports is a process to gather and use data to determine the function of the student's behaviour and then to determine appropriate strategies for an individualized behaviour support plan. The ABC approach to gather data will determine the *antecedents* (what happened before the problem behaviour), the *behaviour* and the resulting *consequences* of the behaviour. The foundational ideas for the positive behaviour supports process are below:

- Proactively changing the learning environment and how adults respond to student behaviour can make students successful.
- There is a reason behind most challenging behaviour, such as communication or meeting an unmet need, and it is helpful to identify and understand the root causes in order to provide the most appropriate interventions.
- All learners should be treated with compassion and respect regardless of their behaviour.
- Positive responses to problem behaviours will be more effective than coercion and punishment.[5]

> More information about positive behaviour supports is available in *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Alberta Schools: An Intensive Individualized Approach* (Alberta Education 2008), available at www.learnalberta.ca/content/inspb1/html/pdf/supporting_positive_behaviour_red.pdf.
>
> Additional information about dealing with behaviour disabilities in the classroom is available in *BOATS: Behaviour, Observation, Assessment, Teaching Strategies*, at https://4d82330e-c615-44c1-9718-ce9c54fec706.filesusr.com/ugd/747229_d465e00039c34a5f913d39feda329c2f.pdf (ATA Council for Inclusive Education 2017).

It is important to remember that we need to be fair to all students. Fair means to support them with what they need … not to treat them all the same.[6]

Individualized interventions (Tier 3) are necessary for a few students who present behaviour problems even when universal and targeted supports are in place. When dealing with students who have conduct and behaviour disabilities, it is important to remember that behaviour management techniques that work well for some students may be ineffective for others. An individualized behaviour support plan will ensure that the right supports are provided consistently and over time. The overall goal is, with proper interventions, for the frequency and intensity of problem behaviours to significantly decrease.[7]

Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) is a behaviour disorder.[8] It is diagnosed mostly in children after the age of eight and usually not later than early adolescence. Children who have ODD are uncooperative, defiant, and hostile toward their peers, parents, teachers and other authority figures. Common behaviours include frequent temper tantrums, frequently arguing with both peers and adults, intentionally blaming others, blaming others for their own mistakes, and appearing angry and vindictive. ODD may develop as a way of dealing with depression, inconsistent rules and standards, or a traumatic event or situation such as divorce, trauma or conflict. The number of symptoms tends to increase with age and, if not recognized early, behaviour patterns can become well established and more resistant to change. ODD may be combined with other disorders and difficulties, including attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities or depression. ODD can vary in severity from mild or moderate to severe. If there is no intervention, students who have ODD may develop more serious conduct disorders later in life.[9]

> More information on ODD is available in "What Teachers Need to Know About Students with ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder)," at www .weareteachers.com/students-with-ODD/.

Conduct Disorder

Conduct disorder is a condition characterized by a persistent pattern of behaviour in which the basic rights of others are ignored.[10] Children and teens who have conduct disorder tend to be impulsive and behave in ways that are socially unacceptable and often dangerous. Conduct disorder exhibits four main types of chronic and persistent behaviours:

- Aggressive conduct toward people and animals (such as bullying and fighting)
- Property damage or theft
- Lying
- Serious violation of the rules

Mild forms of conduct disorder tend to improve as children grow older; however, without intervention, conduct disorder can lead to dropping out of school, injuries, mental health issues and conflict with the law. Adults with similar symptoms may be diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder.[11]

It is important to recognize that not all students who are acting out or behaving in an oppositional manner will be diagnosed with ODD or conduct disorder. In fact, it is extremely important that students who act out in negative ways be given the opportunity to talk about what is bothering them. There can be many reasons that students exhibit these behaviours. Some students who have moderate or severe behaviour disabilities have also experienced trauma and/or have medical conditions/ disabilities or mental health concerns that need to be considered. Working collaboratively with team members at your school can ensure that informed decisions are made to support students.

Individualized behaviour support plans (IBSPs) are developed in collaboration with school leadership, school and jurisdiction behaviour specialists, and the parents/guardians of the student with moderate or severe behaviour disabilities; this may occur at the beginning of the school year or as soon as it is determined that the student needs a support plan. When appropriate, the student is involved in the development of this plan. The goal of the plan is

that all staff working with the student are aware of and committed to using positive behaviour support strategies to create and maintain a safe learning environment for the student, other students and the school staff. The individual behaviour support plan

- outlines the student's strengths, needs and triggers, and an intervention plan;
- identifies the inappropriate behaviours that will be replaced with appropriate ones;
- focuses on only a few problem behaviours at a time by determining what behaviours will be ignored and what are not acceptable; and
- outlines the consequences for inappropriate behaviours.

Alberta Education has a number of valuable resources for developing individual behaviour support plans, including the following:

- "Behaviour and Social Participation" (www.learnalberta .ca/content/ieptLibrary/lib05 .html [accessed March 5, 2020])
- "Supporting Behaviour and Social Participation" (www.learnalberta .ca/content/insp/html/index .html [accessed March 5, 2020]) offers strategies for supporting students' positive behaviour and social participation in schoolwide activities, classroom activities, interactions with others and self-management tasks.

NEXT STEPS

Managing a student who has behaviour disabilities is challenging for the school and the parents. A positive outcome is more likely to occur if assistance is provided early in the child's life. This requires a team effort of school professionals and parental involvement; positive relationships are key to developing trust and opening the lines of communication. The goal everyone shares is to support the student to reach their learning goals and experience success. The student needs to know that you care for them as a person, believe in them and want them to succeed.

CONTINUING YOUR LEARNING

Learning to Know: How has the information in this publication enhanced your understanding of students who have challenging behaviours?

Learning to Do: What universal and target behaviour supports and strategies have you implemented to establish an inclusive learning environment? What individualized behaviour supports and strategies have you developed for students who require additional resources? If these strategies are not working, what can you do differently?

Learning to Be: How do you manage your emotions when dealing with challenging behaviours in the classroom?

Learning to Live Together: How do you ensure universal acceptance and respect for all students in an inclusive learning community?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

"Positive Behaviour Support for Children." www.pbsc.info/ (Mount Royal University 2016. Accessed March 5, 2020.)

"Behaviour Management." www.sess.ie/resources/behaviour -management (National Council for Special Education, County Meath, Ireland. Accessed March 5, 2020.)

Teacher/counsellor articles by Leah Davis. http://kellybear.com/ TeacherTips.html (accessed March 5, 2020).

"Teachers' Gateway to Special Education." www.teachspeced.ca/ oppositional-defiant-disorder. (Ontario Teachers' Federation. Accessed March 5, 2020.)

NOTES

1. Government of Alberta. "Safe and Caring Schools." Available at www.alberta.ca/safe-and-caring-schools.aspx (accessed December 9, 2019).

2. Government of Alberta. 2019. *Education Act*. RSA 2012, c E-0.3.

3. Government of Alberta. "Safe and Caring Schools." Available at www.alberta.ca/safe-and-caring-schools.aspx (accessed December 9, 2019).

4. Alberta Education. "Positive Behaviour Supports." Available at www.alberta.ca/positive-behaviour-supports.aspx (accessed May 7, 2020).

5. Alberta Education. "Positive Behaviour Supports." Available at www.alberta.ca/positive-behaviour-supports.aspx (accessed May 7, 2020).

6. https://oppositionaldefiantintheclass.weebly.com/effective-teaching-resources-and-strategies.html (accessed March 5, 2020).

7. Alberta Education. "Positive Behaviour Supports." Available at www.alberta.ca/positive-behaviour-supports.aspx (accessed May 7, 2020).

8. For more information, consult "Oppositional Defiant Disorder." Available at www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/oppositional-defiant-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20375831 (accessed March 4, 2020).

9. Alberta Education. *Medical/Disability Information for Classroom Teachers: Oppositional Defiant Disorder*. Available at www.learnalberta.ca/content/inmdict/html/pdf/OppostitionalDefiantDisorder_E.pdf (accessed December 9, 2019).

10. For more information, consult "Antisocial Personality Disorder." Available at www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/antisocial-personality-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20353928 (accessed March 4, 2020).

11. Alberta Education. *Medical/Disability Information for Classroom Teachers, Conduct Disorder*. Available at www.learnalberta.ca/content/inmdict/html/pdf/ConductDisorder_E.pdf (accessed December 9, 2019).

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Fredricks, J A, P C Blumenfeld and A H Paris. 2004. "School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence." *Review of Education Research* 74, no 1: 59–109.