WHOLE CHILD
Fueling Development for Learning and Life

January 2026

BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS

Evidence-Informed Practice Brief

This brief is part of our series of evidence-informed practices supporting the whole child. We organize the series using the ten domains of the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model. In this brief, we introduce the **Behavioral Supports** domain.

WHAT DO WE MEAN?

Behavioral Supports (also referred to as *Counseling, Psychological, and Social Services*) consist of school-based prevention and response services that address students' behavioral health.[1] Behavioral health encompasses social (how we relate), emotional (how we feel), and behavioral (how we act) domains of well-being. In schools, these providers include school counselors, psychologists, social workers, Board Certified Behavior Analysts (BCBA), and family liaisons. These professionals work to provide individual and systems-level services that support student well-being and readiness to learn in the classroom.[1] Behavioral support services include conducting psychosocial assessments, providing evidence-based trauma-informed interventions, and initiating crisis response. Another important role includes consultation with other school personnel, families, and community mental health providers to address student social, emotional, and/or behavioral (SEB) needs.

Individualized behavioral support services form a central focus in this domain. These individualized services often begin with school mental health professionals completing psychoeducational and psychosocial assessments to inform intervention direction. Using the results of these assessments, school personnel collaborate to develop behavior support plans and targeted interventions to address challenges that may present barriers to student learning.[1] For students in need of the most intensive support that extends beyond the school's resources, school mental health professionals can also consult with and refer students to community providers.

In addition to services that address more intensive individual student needs, behavioral support services also include systems-level work that addresses the entire school community. Integrating systems-level behavioral supports acknowledges limits to a perspective focused on remediating deficits within an individual and the need to concurrently implement systemic solutions to adversities.[2,3] For example, school-based mental health providers can implement

systems-level needs assessments as part of early identification efforts and collaborate with other personnel in monitoring multiple data sources related to student well-being.[4,5] Using data-based decision making, school mental health professionals can assist in planning and implementing school-wide interventions. Systems-level interventions can include multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavioral supports, trauma-informed interventions, and positive school climate initiatives.

WHY IS IT RELEVANT TO CHILD OUTCOMES?

Prevalence of social, emotional, and behavioral needs in school-aged youth

Approximately 1 in 4 children in the United States experience symptoms of social, emotional, and/or behavioral (SEB) disorders or difficulties.[6,7] Among adolescents, nearly 50 percent have experienced symptoms of a mental health disorder.[8] Symptoms associated with mental health disorders can significantly impair a student's development, functioning, and, in more severe situations, can lead to suicidal or self-harming behaviors. Alarming trends in suicidality have noted increased rates, particularly among certain subpopulations. [7,9] Despite the high prevalence and consequences of mental health problems, prior research has documented that many children and adolescents identified as having a mental health concern do not receive treatment.[10,11,12] Additionally, racial and ethnic disparities in psychiatric and behavioral health care have been found.[13,14]

Benefits of providing behavioral support services in the school environment

Students and families often face barriers to accessing community mental health services—these include time, cost, transportation, and stigma attached to accessing care. Schools, however, are unique in their accessibility and centrality in students' lives. Many of the barriers to accessing treatment are removed when supports are provided at school. Therefore, schools are an ideal setting for supporting the SEB needs of students.[15,16,17,18] These school-based behavioral support services can help students attain a variety of skills (e.g., coping strategies and social skills), as well as decrease problematic behaviors, including externalizing symptoms (e.g., aggression and disruptive behavior) and overall behavioral symptomatology.[19,20]

Connection between SEB challenges and long-term outcomes

Addressing student SEB needs is imperative given the links between mental health difficulties, academic achievement, and long-term health outcomes. In the classroom, symptoms may be portrayed as disruptive, inattentive, inappropriate social behavior, or emotional dysregulation which are associated with poor academic performance.[21] Symptoms of depression, anxiety, or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in particular, have been associated with academic impairments, including difficulties with attention, memory, and organizational skills, as well as increased absenteeism, grade retention, and school dropout compared to their peers. [22,23] Targeted interventions can substantially improve a student's symptoms, behavior, and both short and long-term academic achievement.[24] Without access to high-quality interventions delivered in feasible settings such as schools, students may face ongoing challenges that can impact their SEB health, academic achievement, and overall well-being throughout the life course.

BEHAVIORAL SUPPORTS: EVIDENCE IN ACTION

The strategies provided here summarize a review of available evidence and best practice recommendations in this domain. Strategies are grouped by anticipated resource demand (e.g., funding, time, space, training, materials).*

Level 1 Strategies: Low resource demand

Promote use of positive behavior support practices

- School leaders can support use of evidence-based positive behavior support strategies, such as clear and positively stated classroom expectations, explicit teaching of expectations, reinforcement of appropriate student behavior, and consistent responses to inappropriate behavior.
- School teams also should evaluate use of current behavioral support practices to ensure that evidence-based practices are implemented with fidelity.[25] Examples of evaluation tools include the Tiered Fidelity Inventory,[26] the School-Wide Evaluation Tool,[27] and Benchmarks of Quality.[28]

Strengthen universal school-based mental health promotion

- Universal school-based mental health promotion can address a variety of risk factors including anxiety,[29] depression,[29] suicidal ideation,[30] violence,[31] and aggression,[31] while also enhancing student personal development through lessons and curriculum.[32]
- Schools can increase mental health promotion by implementing school-wide interventions (e.g., social and emotional learning programs, psychoeducation, mindfulness) for all students.[28,33]

Level 2 Strategies: Moderate resource demand

Establish a process for identifying need and matching to appropriate behavioral supports

- School teams should establish an internal process for identifying student need and matching to supports. This process should fit the unique school context, be understood by all school personnel, and accessible to every student. For example, school-based universal screenings of all students (i.e., "casting a wide net") can help identify students needing more targeted support; these students can then be referred for group or individual evidence-based interventions to prevent a cascade of negative outcomes.[34,35]
- Schools can administer brief screenings to assess academic and social emotional needs[36] using information from parent and/or teacher ratings, grades, or daily behavior reports.[37] Organizations such as the National Center on Intensive Intervention provide a review of available screening tools (see page 4).

Implement targeted behavioral interventions

- Targeted behavioral interventions provide secondary prevention and supports for students demonstrating SEB concerns (e.g., disruptive behavior, refusal, off-task behavior).[38,39] School mental health personnel can collaborate with students, teachers, and families to provide evidence-based behavioral interventions (e.g., self-monitoring skill development, group contingencies, social skills instruction, check in/check out, behavior contracts) that address student SEB needs.[40,41,42,43]
- When choosing among evidence-based options, school teams should consider issues of intervention usability (resource availability, ease of use, satisfaction) and relevance to their student population. In addition, communication and care coordination with families and community-based providers may strengthen the intervention.

Level 3 Strategies: High resource demand

Offer cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) based interventions

- CBT is an effective intervention that can be used in schools for addressing student responses to trauma,[44] anxiety,[36] depression,[45] and anger management.[46] CBT-based intervention can be efficiently delivered in a modular format, as well as with successful adaptations and components to engage families across varied contexts.[47,48]
- School mental health professionals can utilize CBT-based approaches (addressing how students interpret their experiences and helping students recognize the relationship between their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors)[49] to respond to student behavioral needs.

Utilize function-based interventions

- A functional behavioral assessment (FBA), completed by a trained behavioral support professional, uses multiple methods (e.g., teacher interview, review of permanent products, direct observation) to identify aspects of the environment that relate to the occurrence of student problem behaviors. Research suggests that FBA-based interventions are associated with greater reductions in problem behavior than non-FBA-based interventions.[50]
- Schools can use FBA data to inform strategies and interventions that can effectively reduce a student's problem behavior.[50]

For more information about the systematic review process we used to identify evidence-based practices, please refer to our **overview brief.*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Note: The WellSAT WSCC allows users to evaluate district policy alignment with 'best practices' in policy associated with Behavioral Supports and other WSCC model domains.

American Institutes for Research

Center on Multi-tiered Systems of Supports

This website provides descriptions and resources for work within the MTSS framework, including resources related to multi-level prevention systems and sustainable implementation.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Adolescent and School Health

The CDC website has many resources, tools, fact sheets, and information about programs that support student behavioral health.

Ci3T

Professional Learning Lab: Tiered Supports

The Ci3T website lists professional learning opportunities related to Tier 1, 2, and 3 strategies and interventions.

Council for Exceptional Children

High-Leverage Practices for Students with Disabilities

This website provides an overview of best practices for working with students with disabilities as well as resources for implementation.

IRIS Center

High-Leverage Practices

The Social/Emotional/Behavioral dropdown on this webpage provides high-leverage practices to support student behavior.

National Center on Intensive Intervention

Behavior Strategies to Support Intensifying Interventions

This website provides evidence-based strategies to support students with challenging behaviors that align with the function of those behaviors.

National Center on School Mental Health

Resources

The Resources tab on this webpage includes resources related to the foundations of school mental health, screening, universal mental health supports, and targeted/selected mental health supports.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Evidence-Based Practices Resource Center

This website provides a review of interventions supported by available literature for the treatment of substance use and mental health disorders. Resources can be sorted by topic area, population, and target audiences.

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