

# Positive Behavior Strategies:

An Approach for Engaging and Motivating Students



## What Are Positive Behavior Strategies?

Positive behavior strategies are evidence-based approaches for promoting behavior that is conducive to learning. We start with the understanding that behavior is a form of communication. In other words, behavior is a message about what a student needs. Our goal as teachers is to receive these messages and set our students up for success.

Effective instructional practices that engage students in academic success are an essential component of any positive behavior support system. **A strong relationship exists between effective instruction and students' social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. It might seem counterintuitive to focus on instruction over traditional classroom management methods like stop lights or consequence charts.** However, positive behavior strategies such as teaching positive behavior, intervening early, and creating a positive classroom climate are most effective when implemented with engaging academic instruction. By integrating behavior supports (e.g., instructional choice, preteaching, opportunity to respond) into our instruction, we strengthen proactive behaviors and reduce the probability that challenging behaviors will occur. That makes it less likely that we'll need to rely on rewards or consequences to encourage positive behavior.

Positive behavior strategies will be a key classroom practice when you return to in-person learning. We can imagine the excitement of our students to see their peers and re-engage in friendships. We can also predict the varied needs – social-emotional, behavioral, and academic – with which students will return to in-person learning. **We need to provide students with a safe and supportive environment and we need to maximize learning time.** Positive behavior strategies can help us accomplish these goals.

Positive behavior strategies support all students – including the 1 in 5 with learning and attention issues. Research shows that the 1 in 5 often face emotional, social, and behavioral challenges that can have serious, life-altering consequences.<sup>1</sup> Students with disabilities face higher rates of discipline in school, including higher rates of suspension. They also have higher rates of absenteeism.<sup>2,3</sup> Practices and situations that remove students from classrooms result in the loss of instructional time, putting the 1 in 5 farther behind their peers. This can start a cycle that is hard to exit. Positive behavior strategies promote engaging, effective instruction, something we want all students to experience, and which especially benefits the 1 in 5. And by maximizing instructional time, positive behavior strategies can ensure that the 1 in 5 have all of their academic needs met. This approach helps put all students on the path to graduation.

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- 1 Horowitz, S. H., Rawe, J., & Whittaker, M. C. (2017). *The state of learning disabilities: Understanding the 1 in 5*. National Center for Learning Disabilities.
  - 2 U.S. Department of Education (2016, October 27). Chronic absenteeism in the nation's schools: A hidden educational crisis (interactive website). U.S. Department of Education.
  - 3 Balfanz, R., Byrnes, V., & Fox, J. (2013). Sent home and put off-track: The antecedents, disproportionalities, and consequences of being suspended in the ninth grade. Prepared for the National Conference on Race and Gender Disparities in Discipline, Dec. 21, 2012; Losen, D., Hodson, C., Keith, M. A. II, Morrison, K., & Belway, S. (2015). Are we closing the school discipline gap? Civil Rights Project.



## Why Positive Behavior Strategies Meet the Needs of the Post-COVID-19 Classroom

This spring, NCLD and Boston University's CERES Institute surveyed over 2,400 teachers. We asked about their perceptions and feelings on the school year and how their students handled learning during the pandemic, particularly those with learning and attention challenges. We heard feedback on lessons learned throughout the pandemic, including what teachers want to keep for next year and what they hope would change.

One key finding was that nearly half of respondents said that their students with learning and attention challenges demonstrated lower levels of engagement. Related to this, teachers said they would benefit from strategies to keep their students engaged and motivated. Respondents also identified needing strategies to bring students up to grade-level expectations. **Since positive behavior strategies support effective and engaging instruction — and have demonstrated success with the 1 in 5 — we're confident that it addresses teachers' — and students' — immediate needs.**

# How to Implement Positive Behavior Strategies

Try these moves to implement positive behavior strategies in your classroom. Recall that we're integrating these behavior supports into effective and engaging instruction.



## Go-To Teacher Moves in Any Setting



## Additional Considerations for Hybrid Settings

Provide frequent opportunities to respond along with appropriate wait time.<sup>4</sup> When students are responding frequently, they are engaged and less likely to be off-task. Vary opportunities to respond individually or chorally. Use different methods of response like white boards, gestures, or verbal. Be sure to provide verbal reinforcement for the specific behaviors that the students demonstrate.

### *Example:*

“On your whiteboards, I want you to solve  $72 + 19$ . You have 30 seconds.”

“Now, hold up your whiteboards.”

“I see that almost everyone found the correct sum. Juan, great job finding the correct sum. Can you share the correct response?”

Leverage student engagement platforms like Classkick, Nearpod, or Kahoot to build in frequent opportunities to respond.

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<p>Use <a href="#">behavior-specific praise</a>.<sup>5</sup> Provide positive feedback to recognize and affirm specific, desired student behaviors. Clearly tell students what they did correctly. Be authentic in your delivery and use culturally responsive language, as appropriate.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> “Carlos, I really like how you immediately hung up your coat and backpack and got started on your Do Now.”</p>	<p>Prepare behavior-specific praise for common challenges during hybrid learning, like transitioning to breakout rooms quickly or having all materials ready.</p>
<p>Actively supervise.<sup>6</sup> Circulate in your classroom so students know that you clearly see every student. A key part of active supervision is teaching routines and procedures so you can couple your supervision with feedback.</p>	<p>Create multiple breakout room links so you can easily move from room to room to supervise students’ work.</p> <p>Use a master document of students’ individual Google Docs to monitor work completion and progress.</p>
<p>Give immediate feedback.<sup>7</sup> Students need affirmative and corrective feedback to know if they are on track to meet a learning outcome. Feedback can be verbal or written.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> “Yes, Maria! The product of <math>6 \times 7</math> is 42.”</p>	<p>Use verbal feedback methods to provide efficient and accessible feedback to students. Provide links to supplemental resources (e.g., a review video) as an additional corrective feedback support.</p>

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Implement high-probability request sequences.<sup>8</sup> Give simple and short requests just before asking a student to do something they typically avoid.

*Example:*

“Destiny, take out your notebook.” (High-probability request)

“And now take out your completed outline.” (High-probability request)

“Thank you. Take out your pencil.” (High-probability request)

“Great. Put your name and date at the top of the page.” (High-probability request)

“Excellent, Destiny. Can you read the learning objective for today?” (High-probability request)

“Thank you, Destiny. You can start on your independent writing now.” (Low-probability request)

“Great job getting started immediately on your independent writing, Destiny!”

Create a checklist of steps students need to complete before engaging in individual or group work. Include high-probability steps like opening up relevant browser tabs, creating a duplicate interactive handout, plugging in headphones, and so forth.

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## Additional Considerations for Hybrid Settings

Try [pre-correction](#).<sup>9</sup> Use action-oriented language to explicitly teach appropriate responses and behaviors. These prompt students with the behaviors that meet your expectations.

Pre-corrections can be delivered verbally, visually, with a gesture, and with direct modeling.

*Example:*

“Today is our first fire drill. A fire drill is when our school practices what to do in the event of an actual fire. We’re going to show safe behavior by being quiet, walking quickly in a line, and actively listening.”

Use pre-correction to teach students expectations during online or blended learning. Follow-up with praise when students are successful.

Consider using visuals to prompt students (e.g., use a chat icon on slides that require discussion).

Give students choices.<sup>10</sup> Present information in different ways. Give students more than one way to demonstrate their learning. Offer different types of materials or locations for completing work.

*Example:*

“Today you’re going to have the option of meeting the learning objective by completing a written passage or recording an oral reflection.”

Incorporate explicit instruction into your routines so that students can effectively use the variety of accessibility options available to digital learners (e.g., text-to-speech, speech-to-text).

Prompt students to take meaningful movement breaks during extended periods of online learning and during transitions.

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## How will I integrate positive behavior strategies into my daily practice?

# Progress Monitoring Is the Key to Effective Positive Behavior Strategies

Progress monitoring is an important component of positive behavior strategies. Positive behavior strategies are inclusive and support all learners, but it's likely that some of your students will require additional support. To know which students require more support, you'll need to collect and analyze data. Data such as percentage of directions followed, assignments completed, and responses given will help you determine whether your positive behavior strategies are working. And collecting and sharing data with your students provides opportunities to set mutual goals and give positive feedback about behavior.

Remember that behavior is a [form of communication](#). If a challenging behavior occurs frequently, you'll want to determine the reason for it. We can generally categorize behavior functions using the acronym EATS. EATS stands for Escape, Attention, Tangible gains, and Sensory needs. ([Learning for Justice](#), an organization that provides resources to create inclusive school communities, has additional information on EATS.) Knowing the reason, or function, of a particular behavior can help you identify additional strategies to support your students. And if you're unsuccessful in reducing the frequency or intensity of behavior on your own, this data can be helpful to a collaborative team of school professionals.

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# Learn More

## [Positive Behavior Strategies: What You Need to Know \(Understood\)](#)

Gives information on positive behavior strategies, including additional guidance on implementing this approach in the classroom.

## [Distance Learning Toolkit: Key Practices to Support Students Who Learn Differently \(Understood\)](#)

A toolkit to help educators meet the needs of all students during distance learning. It includes additional ideas for implementing positive behavior strategies.

## [Evidence-Based Behavior Strategy: Nonverbal Signals \(Understood\)](#)

Gives a detailed explanation of how teachers can foster communication while limiting interruptions during instruction (and allowing students to communicate their needs without drawing attention to themselves) by using nonverbal signals.

## [Evidence-Based Behavior Strategy: Pre-correcting and Prompting \(Understood\)](#)

Gives a detailed explanation of how teachers can use pre-correcting and prompting to tell and remind students of behavior expectations before potential behavior problems occur.

## [PBIS.org](#)

Website of the Technical Assistance Center on PBIS, funded by the U.S. Department of Education to support schools, districts, and states in building systems capacity for implementing a multi-tiered approach to social, emotional, and behavior support. The website includes detailed information and resources.

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# A Note to School, District, and State Leaders

Teachers need a supportive school environment to effectively implement positive behavior supports. That means implementing a schoolwide approach to behavior using Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS is an evidence-based tiered framework for improving student social and academic outcomes by integrating data, systems, and day-to-day practices. PBIS lends itself to effectively supporting students' [return to schools post-pandemic](#), too.

For more ideas on implementing positive behavior strategies, check out [Forward Together: A School Leader's Guide to Creating Inclusive Schools](#) for a comprehensive guide on implementing this strategy, as well as other strategies that will meet the needs of the 1 in 5, and all students. Additional school, district, and state-level policy recommendations to support educators can be found in [this resource](#).

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[NCLD](#) works to improve the lives of the 1 in 5 children and adults nationwide with learning and attention issues – by empowering parents and young adults, transforming schools, and advocating for equal rights and opportunities. We’re working to create a society in which every individual possesses the academic, social, and emotional skills needed to succeed in school, at work, and in life.



[Understood](#) is dedicated to growing and shaping a world where everyone who learns and thinks differently feels supported at home, at school, and at work; a world where people with all types of disabilities have the opportunity to enjoy meaningful careers; a world where more communities embrace differences. Because differences make the world worth exploring. Differences define who we are. Differences are our greatest strength.

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