

# Challenges to Implementing a Positive Behaviour Support Approach

## Introduction

Positive Behaviour Support [PBS] is not new. Since the 1980s people have been aware of a move away from traditional approaches - often focused on punishment and reactive strategies - to more supportive, proactive methods. A growing body of literature reflects the evolution toward non-aversive practices and a model which "...can be defended on empirical, legal and ethical grounds." [Durand, 1990]. In view of this, it seems curious that more than a decade later, a punishment oriented paradigm still appears to take precedence over PBS.

When trying to implement a PBS approach, staff often grapple with a familiar set of queries and challenges. One purpose of this paper is to identify and address frequently asked questions, employing both relevant literature and more personal responses.

## What is PBS?

The origins of PBS can be found in three major sources in the field of disability: the movement toward inclusion, applied behaviour analysis, and person-centred values. (Carr, Dunlap et al., 2002). A fundamental understanding about PBS which is often overlooked, relates to its primary goal of enhancing quality of life. This applies to the person at the centre of a support plan as well as the family, friends, support workers and school staff: it aims to increase the quality of life of everyone involved.

*An important, but secondary goal, of PBS is to render problem behaviour irrelevant, inefficient, and ineffective by helping an individual to achieve his/her goals in a socially acceptable manner, thus reducing or eliminating altogether, episodes of problem behaviour.*

(Carr, Dunlap et al., 2002)

PBS is a multi-element framework which provides a clear values base, a defined process and a sense of 'what to do.' While there are many similarities between PBS and other approaches, PBS is distinguished by its synthesis of nine key features:

- *comprehensive lifestyle change;*
- *a lifespan perspective;*
- *ecological validity;*
- *stakeholder participation;*
- *social validity;*
- *systems change/multi-component intervention;*
- *emphasis on prevention;*
- *flexibility in scientific practices; and*
- *multiple theoretical perspectives.*

(Carr, Dunlap et al., 2002)

PBS is not a simple answer to the complex problem of difficult behaviours. What it does offer is a structure, a values base and a range of practical suggestions. It is able to provide strategies to promote durable change in behaviour, change which is effective across contexts [i.e. the learnings are able to be generalised], and practices which minimise negative side effects. It utilises strategies that are acceptable "...to the individual receiving the treatment, to his or her family, to support staff, and to the community, and clinical/educational validity." (LaVigna & Willis, 1995).

A PBS process includes systematic gathering of information, goal setting, functional behaviour assessment, support plan design, implementation and ongoing evaluation. Reactive strategies for crisis management are also addressed, but there is a belief that the best behaviour intervention happens when the behaviour is not happening: hence the strong emphasis on proactive strategies. LaVigna & Donnellan (1986) describe proactive strategies as including: ecological change, positive programming and focused support.

Ecological change can be thought of as an attempt to 'smooth the fit' between an individual and his/her environment. It acknowledges that "...behaviours occur within a context and are often a function of the person's physical, interpersonal and programmatic environment." (LaVigna & Willis, 1995).

Positive programming is about teaching an individual a repertoire of skills to meet his or her needs. This might include increasing general skills, teaching functionally equivalent skills, functionally related skills, or broad coping/tolerance skills. (LaVigna & Willis, 1995).

Focused support strategies are often necessary while new skills are learnt and environmental changes made. They are used to create a more immediate impact on the problem behaviour and therefore reduce the need for reactive strategies. Focused support strategies may include: various forms of differential reinforcement, antecedent management or medication adjustment.

### **How is PBS different from traditional behaviour management?**

The differences between PBS and traditional approaches are vast and have been discussed in detail over many years (Porter, 2000; LaVigna & Willis, 1995; Carr, Dunlap et al., 2002; LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986; McLean & Walsh, 1995). Here follows a paraphrase of some of the underlying assumptions and potential consequences of PBS and traditional approaches, as identified by Radler & Cook (2002):

#### *Traditional approaches*

##### *Assumptions:*

- Adults are responsible for children learning to control their feelings and behaviours, to conform to the world of adults, to become well behaved.
- That adults need to teach children what they should not do.
- That adults will need to control some children until they develop self-control themselves.

##### *Strategies:*

Historically, the following rewards and punishments have been used:

- Positive and negative consequences.
- Token economies, charts e.g. tick charts, sticker charts.
- Withdrawal of attention, which may include, time out, warning systems.
- Avoiding opportunities for recognition and acknowledgment.

##### *Possible Consequences:*

- Children are taught to do whatever an adult tells them.
- Children learn that those with difficult behaviours are 'less worthy.'
- Development of a self-concept as being good at being 'bad.'
- Teaches some children that they can gain more power and influence with inappropriate behaviour.
- Some children may use similar ignoring/excluding/punishment/reward approaches with others.

## Positive Behaviour Support

### *Assumptions:*

- Some children require different levels of support as they learn to self-regulate their feelings and behaviour. Some children by nature are likely to feel more anxious or stressed than others.
- Children can rely on teachers to acknowledge their feelings and the message of their behaviour. They will provide personal support and affirmation for the student, and give specific acknowledgment for behavioural learnings.
- Teachers help children develop understandings of 'what to do' and provide feedback on what has been done well. Teachers support and lead children towards more appropriate ways of interacting.

### *Strategies:*

PBS emphasises the need for responsiveness to children's feelings and needs by:

- Acknowledging and trying to interpret what the child may be communicating through his/her behaviour.
- Gently supporting and leading the child to a calmer state.
- Attending to the messages and analysing the functions of behaviour.
- Teaching the child other ways to meet a need or communicate a feeling.
- Providing encouragement and feedback about personal successes along with aspects of difficult situations the child may have handled well.
- Deliberately building a sense of self worth, valuing the person and acknowledging all attempts at positive interaction.
- Creating situations where the child is at 'best advantage.'

### *Possible Consequences of PBS:*

- Children learn that their feelings will be noticed, acknowledged, and not be directly escalated by adults.
- Children learn where and when behaviours are appropriate and valued, how to manage situations and emotions that have previously led to difficult behaviours.
- Children learn that *considerate and cooperative behaviour is acknowledged gets things achieved and leads to good feelings.*
- *Teaches children that they can make a difference, influence others in ways that are mutually pleasing, potent and positive.*

## **Frequently asked questions which challenge the implementation of PBS**

The following questions [and/or statements] are frequently raised or alluded to by staff when grappling with a change to PBS. While these are based on personal experience, it is hoped that they might also reflect the experiences of others.

*Won't that teach her that if she gets angry enough she can have whatever she wants?*

In PBS, behavioural change is created from ecological change, positive programming and focused support. LaVigna & Willis (1995) describe how PBS's

*... liberation of reactive strategies from the need to produce further effects allows more options for the rapid resolution of an episode of behaviour than more traditional approaches have provided. This is because the reactive strategy is planned within the context of a powerful proactive plan that does focus on the future.*

As stated previously, the emphasis in PBS is on acknowledging children's feelings and needs, and gently guiding them to a calmer state. This may involve providing a student with preferred activities as part of a 'cool down' strategy. Through this process the student is gaining understandings about things she can do to help her self-regulate stress levels. Enhancing quality of life is the primary goal.

*If the behaviour is allowing the child to avoid or get something then we have to teach her that it won't work.*

The comment above is perhaps indicative of a personal emotional response which seeks to blame the person exhibiting the behaviour, rather than see it as an expression of need. An assumption of PBS is that problem behaviour is purposeful: that it is an expression of need in some form. This may include a need to express something, to escape something or to get something. Or it may be as the result of a lack of understanding or skills. Ignoring the purposefulness of behaviour denies the person engaging in it, the opportunity of learning a more appropriate way of meeting her needs. If unattended to, such behaviour will impact negatively on quality of life.

*Doesn't that reward bad behaviour?  
The rest of the school will think that we've gone soft.  
Are you saying give her what she wants?*

So often it seems that students with difficult behaviour experience an increasing number of restrictions on the environments and experiences they can access. An implicit view is therefore that some students – those with aggressive behaviour, for instance - do not deserve nice things happening in their lives. From a traditional model, access to preferred activities would be *contingent* upon good behaviour. From a PBS perspective the focus is on providing an individual *greater access* to the situations (or things) which put the student at best advantage. The aim is to provide an environment or situation where the student will have a greater number of positive interactions, experience a greater sense of personal success and well being. If a student sometimes hits or kicks her teacher and peers when feeling distressed, but is a considerate, caring peer mentor with kindergarten students, this is an environment that her program would ensure she had greater access to. It would not be used as a reward for a good day, but would be considered an essential part of her educational program. The primary goal of PBS is to increase quality of life. Withholding preferred activities and experiences would be actively working against that goal.

Analysis of the data collected in regard to the difficult behaviour will clarify the maintaining consequence(s) of the behaviour. It would then be possible to demonstrate that for the problem behaviour to be reduced, the student must be taught a new way of meeting her needs in a more socially appropriate manner. This will involve giving the student a more efficient means of achieving her goal.

My most powerful personal experience, along similar lines, was of a student with autism who repeatedly ran away. Staff were understandably concerned about duty of care and the significant safety risk of busy roads nearby. As a result, they resorted to putting bolts on the classroom doors. The student would then bang on the doors or windows or hit out at staff when feeling trapped in the room. Up until this time, when the student was able to escape the classroom, he ran away quickly and was extremely difficult, if not impossible to stop. After a functional behaviour assessment process the student was taught how to ask to leave the room [without needing to resort to difficult behaviours]. The moment he approached the door staff would acknowledge his wish to leave and ask him to indicate [pointing at photos] which of the available areas he wished to go. Once this level of increased choice was provided and the

bolts were removed from the doors, staff observed that he no longer ran, but walked away, that he generally didn't leave the school grounds, and that if he was heading off in an unsafe direction it was now possible to guide and bring him back. The student no longer needed to resort to the difficult behaviour to be able to leave the room, so it could not be said that 'bad behaviour' was being rewarded. He was taught instead, that asking for something in a socially acceptable way will meet his needs more efficiently than using difficult behaviours; that feelings will be acknowledged and people will listen to him without him having to get angry to get their attention.

*As if he's going to do any work when he's got a bean bag where he can play with his favourite toys all day! He might use it when he's angry but we'll never get him away from there.*

Perhaps this is just personal experience, but this problem has never arisen. The motivation to be part of the class and feel a sense of connectedness with others seems – in the longer term - stronger. Another factor may be that when a student is able to access preferred activities as he feels a need for them, the novelty wears off. For example, a person whose favourite food is chocolate, is not likely to feel like eating chocolate after an excursion to Cadbury's factory where samples are provided throughout the tour. Perhaps another factor is that at times a student's difficult behaviour might appear to be to gain a particular thing, but its motivation may actually be the interaction provided during the situation.

If the goal of PBS, of enhancing quality of life is accepted, then providing a strategy for stress reduction is consistent with this aim. Conditioning from a traditional approach seems to have little empathy for students who are more stressed or anxious than others. As noted earlier, PBS assumes that some students will need greater support in learning to manage their feelings.

*Yes we have a safe spot for him. We send him there when we think he needs to calm down.*

While this might be a successful approach from a staff point of view, at times it can lead to an escalation in behaviour if an already stressed student feels like he is being 'told,' or sometimes even physically moved to the cool down spot. In a PBS framework, the aim is to gently lead that student toward being able to *self-regulate* his own stress levels. While staff are still telling him when and how to do this, a valuable learning opportunity which would support the development of these skills, is being prevented.

*But isn't that protecting him from the real world. If we want him to be resilient shouldn't he have to learn to deal with that?*

Would school staff suggest that a student who has a broken leg and is on crutches, or one who uses a wheel chair for mobility, or a person who wears glasses, have these supports removed so they learn greater resilience and face reality?

*Similarly a person who is behaviourally challenged may need a behavioural prosthesis... to gain temporary control over behaviour and to enjoy full community presence and participation, as more permanent solutions are being sought. (LaVigna & Willis, 1995).*

*He's got to be punished if he does the wrong thing. And he's got to be seen to be punished by other students and the school community.*

*Punishment by definition is an after-the-fact procedure. The behaviour occurs and then the punishing consequence is provided. In contrast, stimulus satiation and antecedent control may, conceptually and procedurally, preclude the occurrence of the challenging behaviour altogether. (LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986)*

Conditioning from a traditional model dictates that punishment is necessary for children to learn how to behave differently. As stated earlier, PBS is about deliberately building a sense of self-worth and most particularly about increasing quality of life. Punishment is by definition, contrary to the values of PBS. And as Durand & Carr (1989) note, "...degree of restrictiveness is not related to effectiveness."

*There isn't any pattern or trigger. It's completely unpredictable and we don't feel safe any more.*

McLean & Walsh (1995) suggest that it is easy to  
*underestimate the importance of ecological factors and situational contingencies and to overestimate the contribution of dispositional factors, whether wilful or not.*

Unless there is time to observe and collect data it can often be difficult to gain an understanding about a particular behaviour. PBS moves beyond intuitive responses [as above] and provides a process for gathering information in a systematic manner. Through the PBS process, setting events and antecedents are identified.

A belief that there isn't any pattern or trigger indicates a values system which is inconsistent with a PBS approach, as it sees the person as out of control, rather than engaging in purposeful behaviour to meet needs.

*He doesn't get anything out of the behaviour. We don't give in.*

A key assumption of PBS is that all behaviour is purposeful, that is the role of adults to unravel these messages and, to assist the individual to meet these needs in more appropriate ways. If the student gained nothing from the behaviour, one would wonder why the student engaged in it. A simple ABC chart (which records the antecedent, behaviour and consequence of target behaviour) can provide helpful insights based on direct observation and data.

Gordon, Arthur & Butterfield (1996) highlight a reality of human nature, that  
*when a child misbehaves we feel something – annoyed, bothered, threatened, or another negative emotion. This emotion creates a need within us to correct the imbalance. When a child behaves well we generally feel comfortable. Few people are driven into action from an overwhelming feeling of comfort. For this reason, we are more likely to react (and thus make the child feel significant) when the child misbehaves.*

*He knows what he's doing. This is deliberate, manipulative behaviour.*

Central to PBS is a belief that all behaviour is purposeful, and that if *individual's needs are met, then quality of life will improve and problem behaviour will be reduced or eliminated altogether.*

(Carr, Dunlap, et al., 2002)

It is therefore the role of adults to unravel the message and to lead the child towards more socially acceptable ways of meeting this need.

It is interesting to note the difference between conditioning in regard to academic and social learning. It seems incomprehensible that a student would 'deliberately' spell a word incorrectly or make a mathematical error. A traditional mindset allows us to blame students for their behaviour, rather than take on the responsible challenge of designing supportive and effective interventions.

*We just need more one- to-one time for someone to work with him.*

In some situations it may be that additional support time is required to teach new skills. It is worth noting that used in isolation of ecological change, positive programming and focussed support, this may also achieve nothing. Anecdotal evidence indicates that altering only one factor in a situation – namely the amount of one-to-one support time – and ignoring other issues may lead to further isolation of an individual from her peers and real life settings for generalising skills. Focusing only on a *mode of delivery*, rather than complex situational variables, the content and structure of a support plan, appears simplistic. Willis, LaVigna & Donnellan (1989) state that

*Behaviours occur within a context and are often the function of the person's physical and interpersonal environment.*

*He's got ADHD, an aggressive parent, and a dysfunctional family. We can't change that. You're wasting your time.*

Too often, diagnosis leads not to the development of effective intervention, but to a perception of behaviour within a medical model. That is, rather than attending to the support elements of PBS [ecological change, positive programming and focused support], which puts the responsibility on adults supporting the student, the temptation is to see the behaviour as inevitable. Another familiar example of this is when people say "I just want to know how much is autism and how much is behaviour?" What difference would it make? The goal would still be the same: increasing the person's quality of life, and secondly reducing the problem behaviour, through teaching him/her more effective ways to meet needs. The PBS *process* is consistent. To this extent, a medical label is not helpful.

It is possible for medical diagnoses to

*...make it easy for students to 'become' their behaviour in the eyes of some teachers. For example, a student who repeatedly engages in aggressive behaviour may eventually be viewed as an aggressive student. This process, which dehumanises the student, would never be used for physical problems. Imagine a student with a broken arm being called a 'broken-arm student' by a teacher. Yet teachers routinely 'turn' students into their behaviour.*  
(Maag, 2004)

Again, making a comparison between judgements about academic and behavioural learning, a student's family circumstances are not considered relevant when teaching numeracy skills, nor should they be used as a reason to deny a student access to behavioural learning.

If time is taken to get to know families, it is always possible to find their strengths and work with these. In particular, the insight parents/carers can provide in regard to behavioural triggers and calming techniques can be invaluable. Maintaining positive relationships with families who are already under significant pressure is one indicator of a supportive school community.

*Things are going really well, but when I call for back up the person who comes escalates the behaviour.*

*As a senior staff member, teachers expect me to show the child that the teacher is to be obeyed. Or else they say I sided with the student.*

For PBS to work effectively the whole staff needs to be working from a consistent values base. While some staff are still operating within a traditional, punitive model of behaviour management, students who lack the skills to meet their needs in more socially acceptable ways will continue to be punished for their lack of ability. It is possible, even through one meeting, to discuss with all staff, what their roles are, and how they need to respond to the student in various situations. Ideally, this would become part of an ongoing dialogue about positive approaches to behaviour.

*I don't think it's fair that other students should be forced to play with him. They've put up with him for years.*

*Those students deserve a break from him.*

*No, the other students are really good with him. They're so tolerant.*

Central to PBS is a commitment to O'Brien's five essential valued life outcomes for person-centred planning:

- *presence and participation in community life*
- *developing and maintaining relationships with friends and family*
- *making choices and expressing preferences*
- *gaining personal dignity and being afforded respect*
- *developing and exercising personal competence.*

[Kincaid in Koegel, Koegel & Dunlap, 1996]

The quality of a school community may be measured not only in terms of academic achievement but also according to the degree to which dignity and respect are afforded to its more vulnerable members. Schools play a vital role in challenging the view that some students need less of a sense of acceptance and belonging than others. This can be done in small ways such as staff modelling attitudes, sensitive class placements and providing structured opportunities for peer interaction.

*What do you want to know about literacy and numeracy for? They aren't the problem, it's the behaviour.*

When gathering information about any student it is helpful to get a full background. The most prominent example of this from personal experience was of a secondary student who walked out of maths classes on a regular basis. While this may have been due to a complex range of factors including being teased, unequipped for class, or unable understand the instructions, it was an important first step to find out what degree of success the student was able to experience in that class. School records indicated this particular student was in the first percentile of a standardised maths assessment. Increasing his mathematical competency was therefore a crucial component of any support plan. An accurate understanding of a student's current abilities can change staff perceptions from "he won't" to "he can't." And it is therefore necessary to teach him how.

*We've got a folder full of information.*

Sometimes information gathered is very helpful, but has not been looked at from a perspective which will facilitate ecological change, positive programming and focused support. This can be where a person new to the situation, or with the time and expertise to observe, can be crucial. At times it might be that an adult is so immersed in a school culture, its way of doing things, and its experiences of a student with challenging behaviour that it is hard to see beyond this to the person, with his strengths, needs and interests. Knowing all the details of a situation is certainly helpful, but sometimes a new mindset is also needed. An historical example of the impact perception can have on observation and judgement comes from the field of technological innovation. Hargreaves (2003) remarks that: "the steam engine was used in mines for 75 years before it was adapted to propel boats."

*I don't have time for that.*

*We've tried everything and nothing worked.*

*Maybe this isn't the right place for this student.*

*If the school behaviour management policy works for 400 students why should we have to change it for 1?*

*How can we justify spending all this time on one student?*

The sense of exhaustion underlying these comments can be understood by anyone who has spent time in a classroom. What needs challenging however, are the attitudes and beliefs behind these frequently heard statements. Can we accept that some children will miss out on opportunities for behavioural learning? It is difficult to imagine hearing any one make a similar comment in regard to literacy, numeracy or other areas of learning. It is standard practice to provide a student with poor gross motor skills, a perceptual motor program; or a student with low literacy with an individualised support program. It would be considered neglectful for a teacher to claim that she did not have time to teach a student to subtract with regrouping. Why is it we accept a different standard for behavioural learning?

At a more practical level Corrie (2002) questions:

- how much time would the teacher currently spend on the student over one week?
- how much negative energy?
- how much stress has the teacher incurred?
- how much teaching and learning time was lost over the course of the week for all the children in the class? How much for the student with the difficult behaviour?

*I've done a Functional Behaviour Assessment but now what?*

Knowledge of PBS theory is not enough. Unless staff actively confront some of the issues listed here, it is unlikely that deeper understandings – which are foundational to the application of ecological change, positive programming and focused support – will develop. Individual experience, knowledge and belief about schooling may act as obstructions to the development of support plans which meet students' needs. To some extent PBS involves dissatisfaction with the status quo and a preparedness to challenge traditional approaches to schooling.

*I got lost in all the scatter plots, schedules of differential reinforcement, it's too complicated.*

*Although the PBS process has a consistent sequence of steps, the precision and thoroughness with which assessments and interventions are done may vary given the nature and severity of behaviour, complexity of the circumstances, and other factors... Teams should be encouraged to approach the process with 'flexible integrity,' making sure that their tools and strategies fit their needs and achieve the goal of designing effective interventions. [Florida Department of Education, 1999]*

Maintaining the integrity of PBS values in a simplified, more accessible process is a difficult juggling act. The reality is that many staff may still not have been exposed to PBS at all. And those who have had an introduction, have not been able to access longitudinal professional development, nor the time or support required to develop confidence with complex assessments. Carr, Dunlap, et al. (2002) state that

*PBS will only reach its full potential when assessment tools are developed that do not depend on the availability of a small group of highly trained, and often, unavailable experts.*

## **Conclusion**

While society's predominant approach to difficult behaviours remains one of punishment and control, there will be an ongoing need to address questions about PBS as they arise. Understanding the PBS model is one thing, but changing the values and attitudes which have been accepted for generations is another. Thinking and reacting in new ways is a process which involves a long term view of change. Ongoing opportunities must be provided for staff to keep questioning, reassessing and openly discussing how traditional approaches can be challenged. Unless a culture of professional dialogue is developed, which acknowledges the sound body of literature in regard to PBS, there is not likely to be any transformation at a school or systems level. Most promising practice and 'gold standards' are discussed in other disciplines, and it is now time for that same professional standard to be applied to behaviour.

Within the context of Tasmanian education, PBS aligns behavioural learning with the values and purposes articulated in the Essential Learnings (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2002). Those values and purposes which are most pertinent to this discussion are listed below.

*Connectedness:*

*which includes developing a sense of community through friendship, care, compassion, cooperation, acceptance, belonging and sharing.*

*Resilience:*

*which includes recognising strengths and maximising potential; developing self-management, self-confidence and self-respect; and nurturing optimism, perseverance and wellbeing.*

*Integrity:*

*which includes acting honestly, ethically, and consistently.*

*Responsibility:*

*which includes accepting both individual and collective responsibility and contributing to sustainable community development.*

*Equity:*

*which includes developing tolerance and a commitment to social justice, acknowledging diversity, respecting difference and encouraging distinctiveness.*

*Purposes (including):*

- learning to relate, participate and care*
- learning to live full, healthy lives*
- learning to create purposeful futures*
- learning to act ethically.*

If PBS sits more comfortably with the Essential Learnings than traditional approaches to behaviour, perhaps it is time for the curriculum reform process to prompt behavioural reform.

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