

Positive Behavior Support: A Proposal for Updating and Refining the Definition

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Abstract

Positive behavior support (PBS) has been a dynamic and growing enterprise for more than 25 years. During this period, PBS has expanded applications across a wide range of populations and multiple levels of implementation. As a result, there have been understandable inconsistencies and confusion regarding the definition of PBS. In this essay, we offer an updated and unified definition. We provide a brief historical perspective and describe a process for developing a proposed definition. We also discuss the rationale for key elements of the definition.

Keywords

professional practice/standards and ethics, positive behavior support

Positive behavior support (PBS) is an approach for enhancing quality of life and reducing problem behaviors that detract from adaptive and preferred lifestyles. In the past three decades, PBS has experienced considerable growth as the approach has been applied with an expanding number of populations and, more importantly, at multiple levels of implementation (Dunlap, Sailor, Horner, & Sugai, 2009; Lucyshyn, Dunlap, & Freeman, 2015). PBS began as a focused approach for resolving serious problem behaviors of individuals with severe developmental disabilities, but it grew into an approach that included implementation of strategies aimed at groups of children in classrooms and schools, as well as children and adults in a variety of early education and service programs. This rapid growth brought confusion regarding the definition of PBS. Some adherents viewed PBS as a framework for resolving problem behaviors through individualized functional assessments and multi-component, assessment-based behavior support plans, and others viewed PBS as the application of school-wide universal systems designed largely to improve school climate and reduce office discipline referrals. But PBS includes both of these perspectives, and many more. In our opinion, there are features and characteristics of PBS that bridge the perspectives and constitute a general, unified approach. This article is intended to discuss sources of confusion and propose a single definition that represents the current, expanded reality of PBS.

Historical Summary

The approach that came to be known as PBS emerged in the mid-1980s as an alternative to the prevailing behavior management practices that emphasized the manipulation of consequences to produce behavior change. This over-reliance on contingency management led to the use of highly aversive and stigmatizing punishment procedures, up to and including contingent electric shock (Repp & Singh, 1990) for the most severe and persistent problem behaviors. The application of these aversive interventions was almost always seen among individuals with severe disabilities who were unable to communicate their protests and who were served in highly restricted, segregated, and isolated residential and educational settings. Eventually, advocates brought

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these circumstances to light and initiated steps to promote inclusion, prohibit the use of painful and humiliating interventions, and encourage the development of new strategies for reducing problem behavior and building more adaptive behavioral repertoires (Bambara, 2005; Dunlap et al., 2009; Guess, Helmstetter, Turnbull, & Knowlton, 1987; Lucyshyn et al., 2015). These objectives were facilitated by the appearance of important research findings, primarily involving the functional (and communicative) properties of problem behaviors (Carr & Durand, 1985; Iwata, Dorsey, Slifer, Bauman, & Richman, 1981/1994). Initially, the new, positive approach to behavior management was referred to as “nonaversive behavior management” (Horner et al., 1990; LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986; Meyer & Evans, 1989).

An initial iteration of nonaversive behavior management was defined as “an integration of technology and values” (Horner et al., 1990, p. 125) and was further described in terms of nine themes or characteristics, which included emphases on lifestyle change, functional analysis, antecedent and setting variables, teaching of adaptive behavior, minimizing the use of punishment procedures, and using multi-component interventions. In the early 1990s, the label “positive behavioral support” began to be used (Horner et al., 1990) and it was increasingly adopted as the preferred approach for addressing severe problem behaviors. In 2002, Carr et al. provided an updated definition of “positive behavior support”:

PBS is an applied science that uses educational methods to expand an individual’s behavior repertoire and systems change methods to redesign an individual’s living environment to first enhance the individual’s quality of life and, second, to minimize his or her problem behavior. (p. 4)

The Association for Positive Behavior Support (APBS) further developed a set of standards of practice for PBS at the individual level that were approved by the APBS Board in 2007 (J. Anderson, Brown, & Scheuermann, 2007). At this time, clearly, the emphasis of PBS was on the behavior of an individual with an appreciation of the role of the context in which the individual lives and the essential influences of environmental design.

PBS had been expanding rapidly. On one hand, many additional populations were demonstrated to receive benefits from applications of PBS. These populations included young children, children and adults with a broad array of diagnoses and challenges, children and adults without diagnostic labels, and youth involved with the juvenile justice system (Sailor, Doolittle, Bradley, & Danielson, 2009). In addition, PBS interventions began to be applied with groups, at levels larger than the individual, to affect systems-level practices. The logic of multi-tiered systems was embraced by PBS researchers and program developers as a framework for promoting desirable behavior among entire populations and perhaps preventing the emergence of

problems that might later require individualized and more intensive PBS interventions (Sugai et al., 2000). Over the first decade of the 21st century, PBS became a major influence in school restructuring. The 1997 amendments to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) introduced the term “positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS),” and the federally funded Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports began a program of systematically disseminating a multi-tiered framework of effective interventions for entire schools, classrooms, and, where needed, individuals. Many thousands of educators and related professionals became aligned with school-wide PBIS (SWPBIS), including many who had never encountered an individual with severe disabilities and many who had never been involved with functional behavioral assessment and assessment-based intervention plans. As PBS expanded, the universality of the approach’s prevailing definitions came into question, at least by many who were focused on applications at larger levels of implementation.

On Terms

The growth of PBS has presented challenges for the definition and also for terminology. A great variety of terms have been used to refer to PBS including the original “nonaversive behavior management,” “positive behavioral support,” “positive behavior supports,” and “positive behavior(al) interventions and supports (PBIS).” A recent essay published in the *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions* discussed the origins of these terms and the relative advantages that each brought to the field (Dunlap, Kincaid, Horner, Knoster, & Bradshaw, 2014). The authors endorsed “positive behavior support” as the best term to refer to the entire enterprise of PBS, and acknowledged that PBIS would continue to be appropriate for school-based applications and that other terms would also be beneficial as designations for categories or settings of PBS applications. For instance, *program-wide positive behavior support* (PWPBS) is used to refer to PBS in early childhood programs; *school-wide positive behavior support* (SWPBS) pertains to PBS in schools serving students in kindergarten through Grade 12 and is used interchangeably with PBIS. The authors acknowledged that the definition of PBS remained an important issue for the field.

Definition of PBS

A large number of definitions of PBS have been posited over the last 20 years in articles, books, manuals, and websites (e.g., C. M. Anderson & Freeman, 2000; Bambara, 2005; Carr et al., 2002; Dunlap, Carr, Horner, Zarcone, & Schwartz, 2008; Horner et al., 1990). The definitions vary in referring to PBS as an application, an applied science, a technology, a collection of procedures,

a process of assessment and intervention, an approach, or a framework. Many refer specifically to functional behavioral assessment, many refer to quality of life as the goal, and many explicitly focus on outcomes for a target individual. Others emphasize an integration of science and values, the design of constructive environments, and systems change. All of the definitions include features that are clearly relevant to applications of PBS, but the stress and prioritization of characteristics differ from definition to definition. As suggested by Dunlap et al. (2014), communication within and outside of the field could be enhanced if an updated and unified definition were developed and adopted.

A session at the 2014 Annual Conference of the APBS (Dunlap & Kincaid, 2014) addressed the issue, provided some historical context, and put forth a draft of an updated definition of PBS that the presenters had developed with email and telephone input from approximately 15 leading authors and program developers in the PBS arena. A set of criteria was advanced for consideration. These asserted that a definition of PBS should have the following attributes:

1. *Face validity*: Does the definition accurately describe the field? Are practitioners comfortable with the use of the definition as being inclusive of their endeavors?
2. *Distinguishes PBS from Not-PBS*: Can the definition be used to identify approaches that are or are not PBS? Does it draw a clear line between PBS and other endeavors that may share some but not all of the PBS characteristics?
3. *Pertinent for all levels of PBS applications*: Is the definition broad enough to represent all current PBS activities within different systems and settings and populations? Is it also broad enough to cover applications with future systems, settings, and populations?
4. *Useful for consumers*: Can a wide range of consumers use it? Is it a definition that researchers and practitioners, parents and professionals, policy makers, administrators, and direct support staff can understand and find useful for describing their philosophies, values, and activities?
5. *Parsimonious*: Is it sufficiently clear and succinct? Is the definition clearly explained in relatively few terms and sentences?

The majority of the 2014 APBS session consisted of discussion regarding the criteria and the particulars of the proposed definition. Following the conference, an electronically distributed questionnaire was shared with more than 800 APBS members to gather further input regarding the criteria, essential elements to be included in a definition, and the adequacy of the proposed definition. More than 200 APBS members responded to the survey within the first 2 weeks and provided overwhelming support for the five identified

criteria as well as numerous suggestions for features to emphasize in the definition. Important feedback from the survey included the following:

1. The majority of respondents expressed a preference for labeling PBS as a *framework* (57.8%) or *approach* (22%). Although several alternatives were listed (e.g., *science*, *technology*, *process*), none received endorsement from more than 10% of the respondents.
2. In response to a question about the features that must be reflected in the definition of PBS, six features (positive/respectful, preventative, data-based, evidence-based, educative, and comprehensive) were identified by more than half of all respondents (range = 58.4%–86.2%) as essential.
3. In response to an open solicitation for feedback regarding the definition, nearly 25% of the respondents indicated that a defining feature of PBS is that it is a school-based framework and that it is equivalent to PBIS. This implies that a sizable proportion of the APBS membership perceives PBS in strictly school-based terms and, therefore, fails to understand the breadth, as well as the origins, of the approach. This may also underscore the importance of clear definitions and terminology so that PBS can be understood and disseminated as the multi-faceted approach that it is.

Based upon feedback from respondents, the prior draft definition was revised and presented for discussion at the 2015 Annual Conference of APBS (Kincaid & Dunlap, 2015). The definition presented met with general approval. The proposed, updated, and unified definition is presented below, followed by a discussion and rationale for its specific composition.

Definition of PBS

PBS is an approach to behavior support that includes an ongoing process of research-based assessment, intervention, and data-based decision making focused on building social and other functional competencies, creating supportive contexts, and preventing the occurrence of problem behaviors. PBS relies on strategies that are respectful of a person's dignity and overall well-being and that are drawn primarily from behavioral, educational, and social sciences, although other evidence-based procedures may be incorporated. PBS may be applied within a multi-tiered framework at the level of the individual and at the level of larger systems (e.g., families, classrooms, schools, social service programs, and facilities).

We believe that this definition may meet the five criteria that we described as necessary for a functional definition. This definition has face validity and can more effectively

address the broadening areas of application of PBS while drawing a clearer line between PBS and other endeavors. This definition was also developed to be clear and relatively succinct, which should promote a greater understanding and use by a wide range of consumers. A review of some critical words and phrases within the definition might clarify the utility of this proposed PBS definition.

This definition of PBS includes both of the preferred labels for PBS: approach and framework. Furthermore, the use of the modifier *an* indicates that PBS is not inclusive of all approaches to behavioral support, but rather is restricted to only those approaches that share the qualities contained in the definition. However, the definition extends the field of PBS to be inclusive of strategies and approaches from an array of disciplines (education, social sciences, etc.) and from evidence-based procedures that may currently exist in other fields or may emerge in the future. This aspect of the definition is critical in that it defines a PBS approach as dynamic and continually evaluating and incorporating relevant technology and knowledge. It also promotes the critical analysis of strategies that are evidence-based or have emerging evidence.

The phrase *a process of research-based assessment, intervention, and data-based decision making* stipulates that PBS includes a progression of assessment, intervention, and decision-making activities that may vary based upon the target of the activities (system, agency, school, family, child, etc.) but is not restricted to one type of assessment, intervention, or problem-solving process. This distinction is essential as it clarifies that the PBS umbrella is inclusive of multiple individual strategies, but that no one assessment, intervention, or problem-solving approach is a PBS approach. For instance, a functional behavioral assessment is not “PBS” but is a component of a PBS process. The process of bringing together those evidence-based assessment, intervention, and problem-solving strategies is the critical defining aspect of PBS.

The phrase *building social and other functional competencies, creating supportive contexts, and preventing the occurrence of problem behaviors* communicates the vision that PBS is committed to not only decreasing problem behaviors but also increasing functional and adaptive repertoires that include the broad spectrum of social, emotional, behavioral, academic, and daily living skills. Although it is probable that this concept is universally accepted among PBS practitioners, the definition allows for the extension of this concept beyond the focus of increasing or decreasing behaviors of a targeted individual. The recipient of the increased competencies and reduced or prevented behaviors may not only be the targeted individual but also the entire system or components of that system (agency, school district, team, family, etc.). Thus, system-change issues, such as those involved in district or school-wide PBS planning, are considered to be appropriate PBS activities. This perspective effectively broadens the focus of PBS from an

individual with behavioral challenges and extends it to the behavior of larger systems (e.g., teams, families, schools, agencies, communities).

This proposed definition also maintains a commitment to nonaversive and positive approaches with inclusion of language emphasizing *strategies that are respectful of a person's dignity*. Given the historical foundation of PBS emerging from the aversive/nonaversive debate in the early 1990s and the initial label for the field (nonaversive behavior management), the philosophy of positive and nonaversive approaches has been a critical component of many PBS definitions and should be reflected in any current or future definition. The commitment to respectful and positive strategies is not just reflected in PBS practices as applied at the individual level but also at the systems level. Thus, PBS practitioners should examine, at all levels of the system (a) whether practices directly or indirectly support the system (school, agency, family, community) to deliver respectful practices to its target population (student, clients, children, etc.) in a manner that supports the end recipients' dignity, and (b) whether the strategies utilized to impact those larger systems are also respectful. PBS advocates that strategies need to be respectful of the individual with behavioral needs as well as the systems and participants that support that individual.

The same imperative that was applied to a call for strategies that are respectful of a person's dignity can also be applied to the PBS definition's commitment to the *overall well-being* of the person. If the target of PBS practices is a school-age student, then there should be concern about the overall well-being or quality of life of that student and his family. This commitment goes beyond simply increasing functional and social behaviors and reducing or preventing problem behaviors to address issues of educational inclusion, relationships, and presence and participation in the community. Likewise, work at the systems level has to be committed to improving the overall quality of life or well-being of the system, whether that system is as large as a state educational agency or as small as an individual family. It is assumed that improving the quality of life (effectiveness, efficiency, passion for outcomes, etc.) of the system will also translate, perhaps indirectly, to an enhanced capacity to improve the well-being of the “client” or end-consumer of the system's supports. Practitioners should always expand their vision to insure that all partners in a PBS approach (from systems-level personnel to the individual consumer) are treated with respect and dignity and function in healthy environments that improve quality of life outcomes.

Finally, the inclusion of PBS being applied within a *multi-tiered framework* is a critical extension of prior definitions. Although PBS applied within the context of schools has generally operated from a multi-tiered perspective, there may not be universal realization that the PBS approach also operates at the individual level in addition to the level of larger systems (e.g., families, classrooms, schools, social service programs and facilities). Although the roots of PBS lay in the

provision of support to individual children, students, and adults in a variety of settings, in the past 20 years, the applications of PBS to address larger systems issues has been significant and should be recognized within a contemporary PBS definition. This recognition of a multi-tiered framework within an array of larger systems also opens the PBS approach to consideration of other evidence-based approaches applied within different systems, making this PBS definition flexible and inclusive for future growth in the field.

Summary

The purpose of a new definition for PBS is to both broaden and clarify the critical domains of what is included under the “umbrella” of PBS. We sought to advance a definition that is accurate, representative, and useful, and that offers a clear starting point for a further discussion within the field regarding the essential and definitional characteristics of the PBS approach. Although no single definition of PBS will satisfy all practitioners, the authors present a starting point for consideration that will be shaped by feedback, debate, and discussion in the future. This definition will be further shaped by PBS practitioners as the field’s values and practices grow and adapt to include new assessment, intervention, and problem-solving approaches applied within existing environments and systems. But for now, this definition is offered as a starting point for discussions about PBS and as a possible anchor point for future examination of the progress of PBS.

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