

# PBIS: What You Need to Know

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## At a Glance

- Positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) is a way for schools to encourage good behavior.
- With PBIS, schools teach kids about behavior, just as they would teach about other subjects like reading or math.
- The focus of PBIS is prevention, not punishment.

If your child [struggles with behavior](#), you may worry about your child getting in trouble at school. Some schools have tried to be proactive and encourage good behavior through an approach called PBIS. PBIS stands for *positive behavioral interventions and supports*. Here's what you need to know about PBIS.

## What Is PBIS?

PBIS is an approach schools can use to improve school safety and promote positive behavior. It also helps schools decide how to respond to a child who misbehaves.

At its heart, PBIS calls on schools to teach kids about behavior, just as they would teach about any other subject—like reading or math. PBIS recognizes that kids can only meet behavior expectations if they know what the expectations are. A hallmark of a school using PBIS is that everyone knows what’s appropriate behavior. Throughout the school day—in class, at lunch and [on the bus](#)—kids understand what’s expected of them.

PBIS has a few important guiding principles:

- Every child can learn proper behavior.
- Stepping in early can prevent more serious behavior problems.
- Each child is different and schools need to provide many kinds of behavior support.
- How schools teach behavior should be based on research and science.
- Following a child’s behavioral progress is important.
- Schools must gather and use data to make decisions about behavior problems.

Keep in mind that PBIS is not a treatment or therapy. It’s a framework for teachers, administrators and parents to follow. It’s also important to know that when a school uses PBIS, it uses it for all students. That includes kids with [IEPs](#) and [504 plans](#).

According to several studies, PBIS leads to better student behavior. In many schools that use PBIS, students receive fewer detentions and suspensions, and get better grades. There’s also some evidence that PBIS may lead to less [bullying](#).

## How PBIS Works

PBIS sets up three tiers of support for students and staff in a school.

1. Tier 1 is a schoolwide, universal system for everyone in a school. Kids learn basic behavior expectations, like to be respectful and kind. School staff regularly recognize and [praise kids](#) for good behavior. They may also use small rewards, like tokens or prizes, to encourage kids.
2. Tier 2 provides an extra layer of support for kids who continue to struggle with behavior. Kids get a set of evidence-based [interventions](#) and instruction. For example, some kids may interrupt class because they [struggle with social interaction](#). A Tier 2 strategy might be a “social skills club” to help these kids learn how to get along with peers.
3. Tier 3 is the most intensive level. It’s for kids who need individualized supports and services because of behavior issues.

Kids with IEPs or 504 plans can be in any of the tiers. If your child has an IEP or a 504 plan and your school uses PBIS, be sure to ask how the two will impact each other.

## PBIS vs. Traditional Discipline

In a school with a traditional approach to discipline, teachers may try to correct behavior through punishment. Here's an example.

During a class discussion, a student sitting in the back throws a spitball. With a traditional approach, the teacher might scold and send the student to the principal's office. After the student is punished, the student returns to class and is expected to behave. But there's no instruction on how to act appropriately. If there's more bad behavior, they simply increase the punishment.

A school using PBIS would handle this differently. With PBIS, the school looks for minor issues to prevent them from becoming bigger behavior problems.

So before the student throws the spitball, a teacher might notice that the student is craving attention. The teacher might address that need positively before it grows into the urge to throw something. For example, the teacher could give the student a chance to share an opinion in a class discussion and recognize the contribution.

If the student still acts out and throws the spitball, the school would create a strategy to prevent the behavior from happening again. The strategy might include things like break time to cool off or a peer mentor. The school may even provide training for parents.

The school follows the student's progress in managing behavior issues and may change strategy if something's not working. In PBIS, schools still use discipline, but punishment isn't the focus. The focus is on teaching expectations and preventing problems. From the start, all students learn about how to contribute to a class discussion. They may learn through [role-playing](#) or through actual lessons.

## PBIS and Token Rewards

Nearly all experts praise PBIS for changing school discipline for the better. They like its focus on clearly teaching behavior and on prevention.

But a few experts worry that PBIS allows the use of token rewards for good behavior. They say if a school rewards a child for good behavior, the child ends up focusing less on the behavior, and more on getting the reward. This can sap a child's internal motivation.

Another concern is that schoolwide reward systems may exclude kids with behavior issues. If a child who struggles never gets a reward or is rewarded less than other kids, it can feel like punishment. This can discourage kids who are trying their best to behave, but mess up from time to time.

Advocates of PBIS have worked hard to make sure schools don't overuse rewards. They say token rewards are simply one tool to help get kids started on the right path. Rewards also must be applied equitably, advocates say, to recognize kids who are struggling but improving.

Keep in mind that many schools—not just schools that use PBIS—may use token rewards. If you feel your child is being punished by a reward system, it's important to take your concerns directly to the principal. The same is true if you feel rewards are hurting your child's motivation.

The U.S. Department of Education has created [a center](#) to train and offer information on PBIS. You may want to ask your child's school to explain its approach to discipline and behavior. You could even ask the principal or your child's teacher if there's a way to reinforce what the school is doing at home.

If your child is acting out in school, use these [conversation starters to discuss your child's behavior with teachers](#). Learn [how a behavior contract can help](#).

If your child has an IEP, you may also want to learn about [behavior intervention plans](#)(BIPs). And read about [your child's legal rights when it comes to school discipline](#).

## Key Takeaways

- Studies show PBIS can help improve student discipline, behavior and even grades.
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- PBIS is for all students in a school, including kids with IEPs or 504 plans.
  - If the school uses a reward system that excludes your child, it's important to raise your concerns with the principal.

## About the Author



**Andrew M.I. Lee, JD**, is an editor and former attorney who strives to help people understand complex legal, education and parenting issues.

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