

# What are Positive Behavioral Supports?

An Interview with George Sugai and Rob Horner by Carl Smith, Ph.D.



**Conference Note**  
Carl Smith will be speaking on Individual Education Plans at CHADD's Annual Conference in Nashville, Tenn., October 28–30, 2004.

READERS OF *Attention!*® may be hearing many references to the concept of positive behavioral supports (PBS) or school-wide positive behavioral supports (SW-PBS) in relation to the educational needs of students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD). A primary source of information on this topic is the Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, established by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, and located at the University of Oregon. George Sugai, Ph.D., and Robert Horner, Ph.D., serve as co-directors of the center, which is entering its sixth year of operation. Below is an interview conducted by Carl Smith, chair of the CHADD Professional Advisory Board, with Drs. Sugai and Horner.

**Carl Smith:** We are all hearing more about the concept of school-wide positive behavioral supports (SW-PBS). What does this term mean?

**Rob Horner:** SW-PBS is the design of school environments to foster both successful social behavior and academic gains for all students. SW-PBS emphasizes the following key themes:

- Prevention of problem behavior through proactive intervention
- Active teaching of the social behavior needed to establish a positive social culture in the school
- Ongoing recognition, such as rewards, of appropriate student behavior
- Clear, consistent consequences for inappropriate student behavior
- Function-based support for students with the most extreme support needs
- Team-based implementation of the systems needed to support effective practices
- Rigorous focus on the gathering and use of data for decision making by teams, administrators and faculty

**CS:** Is this approach important for all students in schools or just students with significant behavioral needs?

**George Sugai:** SW-PBS is a system of support for all students and is organized around three tiers of prevention. The first tier, primary prevention, is proactive programming for all students and staff across the whole school. The programming focuses on teaching and encouraging a small set of positively stated school-wide behavioral expectations. Secondary prevention is comprised of more intensive interventions—usually more regular and frequent practice and feedback—for students who are at risk and exhibiting difficulties who need a bit more than primary prevention. The third tier, tertiary prevention, is highly individualized for students who need intensive behavior support and consists of instruction on social skills focused on factors that trigger and maintain interfering problem behaviors. If schools do a good job with primary prevention, organizing secondary and tertiary prevention strategies can be easier.



**Rob Horner:** One of the major messages from SW-PBS is that providing behavior support only for children with behavior problems is insufficient. Behavior support should be provided to every child in the school. The difference is the level of support needed. As George has noted, all children deserve a basic, primary level of support (identification of behavioral expectations, active instruction on behavioral expectations and ongoing reward for appropriate behavior).

Primary prevention of problem behavior will not only reduce the overall amount of problem behavior in the school, but will also make the more rigorous interventions (secondary and tertiary) more effective.

**CS:** In what ways are positive behavioral supports important for students with AD/HD?

**George Sugai:** Classroom and school-wide environments that are positive, predictable, effective and efficient are good for all students. In particular, students with AD/HD do better at school if their supports are individualized and consistently provided. SW-PBS provides these larger effective learning and teaching environments and enables the accurate and sustained implementation of individualized instruction.

**Rob Horner:** Our understanding of AD/HD is improving, and the causes and origins of the disorder and supports needed are becoming more complex. There is now substantial literature documenting that PBS is effective for high-functioning students as well as those students with autism and other developmental disabilities. The important reason why PBS fits the needs of children with AD/HD is the commitment within the PBS approach to (a) person-centered planning, (b) medical assessment, (c) functional behavioral assessment, and (d) comprehensive interventions focused not only on reducing problem behaviors but also on enhancing the overall quality of life (and learning) for the child. This means that unlike a static, medical model approach, the PBS approach requires multiple sources of assessment data used to guide multiple intervention options.

It is important to appreciate that within the diagnosis of AD/HD there is great variability. PBS offers something beyond a one-size-fits-all approach.

**CS:** Are there, in your opinion, any unique elements associated with the diagnosis of AD/HD that make PBS particularly important?

**George Sugai:** Admittedly, an intervention plan should be comprehensive by considering medical, mental health, educational, familial, community and other supports. However, one aspect of PBS that I believe is particularly important for students with AD/HD is the adoption of a function-based approach to behavioral programming. This approach focuses on identifying the “function” or factors that trigger and maintain problematic behavior (e.g., gain access to something or to avoid/escape something), and then using this information to build behavior support plans that actually teach alternative social skills that consider what has been learned about the function of a student’s behavior.

For example, a student who talks, moves away from her desk, and shifts back and forth between three different tasks to avoid a difficult or boring activity would be helped by learning alternative ways to let the teacher know that it is difficult for students to attend to the activity. The mistake teachers sometimes make is to punish the student to discourage the interfering behaviors. What the student really needs is a better way of communicating and navigating through the activity and classroom.

**CS:** How widespread is implementation of PBS?

**George Sugai:** SW-PBS is being considered and adopted at a variety of levels in every state across the country with help from universities, technical assistance centers, consultants, and district and state staff developers. Members of our Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports are assisting more than 20 states to implement SW-PBS. In addition, we have seen implementation in over 2,500 schools.

**CS:** What are the purposes of this Center? What is being accomplished? What are the emerging areas of focus for the work of the Center?

**Classroom and school-wide environments that are positive, predictable, effective and efficient are good for all students.**

### Questions to Ask About Your Child's School

Although a list of “standard” or “always-ask” questions is difficult to develop, Drs. Sugai and Horner recommend the following list of questions parents can ask about the school their child attends:

- Does the school have a positively oriented school-wide discipline system that teaches and encourages a small set of positively stated behavioral expectations?
- Does the school have an information system that objectively defines and regularly reviews behavior incidents across the school?
- Is the purpose or function of the student's behavior considered when behavioral intervention plans are being developed?
- Does the school have a school-wide behavior/discipline leadership team in place that coordinates SW-PBS?
- Do the school goals include development of social competence for children?
- Does the school have a specific and clear statement about the behavioral expectations for all children?
- If you, as a parent, walk into a school, can you identify what the behavioral expectations are within five minutes?
- Does the school have a formal process each year for teaching children the behavioral expectations (for example, the social behaviors that will result in success)?
- If you ask your son/daughter what are the behavioral expectations in the school, can they tell you 3–5, positively stated, guidelines for behavior (for example, be respectful of others, be responsible for yourself, be safe)?
- Does the school have a formal and regular system for recognizing appropriate student behavior?
- Does the school have a formal and regular system that teachers can use to prevent problem behavior from destabilizing the school or times of active instruction?
- Does the school have information about student behavior (for example, the number, type and pattern of office discipline referrals) that they use to continually assess how they are doing and adjust to keep the school a positive, predictable and consistent environment?
- Does the school have a team for assessing and addressing the needs of those students with more extreme behavioral needs? ■

**George Sugai:** Our Center is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. Our mission is to provide technical assistance to schools, districts and states on how SW-PBS might be implemented. Although we provide information about best practices and interventions, our main focus is on how information can be used to guide the selection and adoption of these practices and how systems can be established or enhanced to maximize the likelihood that these practices will be implemented accurately and durably. The Center has been operating for six years. We are focused on how schools, districts and states can expand and sustain their SW-PBS efforts, so we are engaged in building local coordination and training capacity and expertise.

**CS:** Does the positive behavioral supports movement relate to No Child Left Behind (NCLB)? If so, in what ways?

**George Sugai:** SW-PBS approaches are related directly to NCLB in a number of ways: (a) pro-social learning and teaching environments maximize opportunities for enhancing academic achievement, (b) school-wide data-based decision making improves the school's ability to adopt, integrate and implement evidence-based instructional and behavioral programs and (c) SW-PBS considers the academic and social behavior success of ALL students.

## School-Wide Positive Behavioral Supports

**Rob Horner:** An additional way that PBS links with NCLB is the commitment to active assessment. Schools should be places where children learn, and it is reasonable that we are expected to assess if learning is occurring. But schools also are settings where kids learn how to interact with each other and with adults. We should also be assessing the social climate of schools. NCLB emphasizes ongoing collection of data to assess how we are doing. This is consistent with the approaches to improvement advocated within SW-PBS, but SW-PBS has a strong focus on social behavior as well as academic achievement.

**CS:** Where can parents turn when they are having significant issues regarding their child and discipline in the schools?

**George Sugai:** In schools where SW-PBS approaches are being practiced, parents have a number of contacts: their child's teacher; the school's student assistance team; the school or district's counselor, special educator, school psychologist or behavior specialist; a school administrator; and the district/regional behavior support leadership team. In addition, a number of

state and national organizations are adopting a SW-PBS approach and can be useful resources (e.g., CHADD, Council for Exceptional Children, local colleges and universities).

**CS:** Where can I learn more about PBS?

**George Sugai:** To learn more about what SW-PBS is and looks like, visit [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org). To find out what might be available in a specific area, parents and school personnel should contact their school district office and/or state department of education.

**Rob Horner:** Also consider contacting schools or state coordinators who are implementing SW-PBS. Several of these states, districts or schools have written about their experience in peer-reviewed publications. These are cited on the Web site (referenced above). Other states, districts and schools may be nearby and very willing to share the process they have used to establish an effective school-wide PBS implementation. ■

Carl Smith, Ph.D., is an associate professor at Iowa State University, co-director of the Iowa Behavioral Alliance and chair of the CHADD Professional Advisory Board. His primary research interests relate to policy issues in assessing and providing services for youth with significant emotional or behavioral disorders.



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