Positive Programming...
teaching appropriate behavior

This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and was authored by Kareen Smith of the Institute.

Introduction

All behaviors that people exhibit are learned. When working with students who exhibit inappropriate behavior, the most vital component of any intervention is to teach appropriate behavior skills–skills which may not yet be possessed by the students. This process is referred to as *positive programming.* You will find here a detailed description of positive programming, its advantages, requirements, and a list of interventions which fall into the category of positive programming.

What is positive programming and how is it different from other behavioral interventions?

Positive programming is a "gradual educational process for behavior change involving systematic instruction in more effective ways of behaving. Positive programming teaches new behavior over time and is based on full functional analysis" (LaVigna & Donnellan, 1986, p.29). Although it does serve to change a student's behavior, it is different from traditional behavior modification procedures in several ways. First, it is very gradual in bringing about a change in behavior. Secondly, it is mandatory that instruction be systematically planned. For example, if you are trying to teach a student how to state his opinions during class discussion without his inciting verbal abuse, you may first need to teach the student to raise his hand, then not to interrupt, and finally teach him that everyone is entitled to their own opinion. Thirdly, unlike many other behavioral interventions, positive programming is continuous. It is not "on" at some times and "off" during others. Contingent use of rewards is an example of an intervention which is "on/off." It applies only to certain behaviors and is not active if appropriate behavior is not being exhibited. The example of the student learning to appropriately state opinions is not "on/off" as it applies to many different situations, is always desirable, and will always help the student to more effectively meet his or her needs.

For clarity, LaVigna and Donnellan (1986) provide a framework of four variations of the basic positive programming themes:

1) Teaching a new behavior or class of behaviors, for example, social skills.

2) Substitute the means of communication, for example, a student might be exhibiting an inappropriate behavior to communicate and needs to be taught an appropriate behavior which will more effectively communicate his or her needs and will substitute the inappropriate behavior.

3) Substitute a more socially appropriate behavior, for example teaching a substitute behavior when an inappropriate behavior is not necessarily serving a communicative purpose (i.e., self-stimulatory behavior);

4) Assign meaning, for example, when a student displays appropriate behavior but not necessarily in the correct situation (such as continuously asking questions), you want to bring the behavior under stimulus control so that it will be predictably displayed only in the appropriate situation.

What are the advantages of positive programming?

LaVigna and Donnellan (1986) outline the advantages of this intervention. Positive programming is an approach which increases the learner's repertoire of appropriate behavior. It is generalizable because it teaches skills that will serve the learner in many situations. Secondly, research shows its effects are long-lasting. Thirdly, it prevents future problems for the learner by increasing the amount of time spent in positive social interaction and teaching how to effectively have needs met. Fourthly, it is more efficient than interventions aimed at reducing behavior because it replaces undesirable behavior with desirable behavior as the student becomes proficient in and has a larger repertoire of appropriate behaviors. Finally, it is ethical, socially valid, and enhances the learner's human dignity.

What are the prerequisites to implementation of positive programming interventions?

First and foremost, a thorough functional analysis must be carried out to establish the purpose of undesirable behavior or to establish appropriate behaviors which are deficient in the student.

You must also be careful to identify appropriate instructional goals. This involves prioritizing which behaviors are most necessary and would be most beneficial to the student socially and academically, and choosing behaviors which are age-appropriate. For example, while it might be beneficial to the student, teaching a five-year-old to take detailed phone messages is a behavior which would not be age-appropriate. This is a behavior which would be more suitably targeted at an 11- or 12-year-old.

Finally, your intervention must be carefully and systematically designed and the instructional sequence must be longitudinal. This involves breaking the target behavior into steps which can be achieved one at a time and which build on each other. It also involves viewing the intervention as a long-term program–part of the student's general educational program–and not as something which will be terminated after a month or two. For example, when a student masters the behavior of taking a self-directed "time-out" when angry, you can then go on to teach him or her other techniques of handling anger: writing down his or her feelings, talking to an adult, telling the person how they feel, etc. This way, the student will learn many appropriate options for dealing with a given situation. If the learner continues to be taught appropriate behavior, as in this example, change in that student (like the nature of the intervention) will be gradual and longitudinal in nature.

What specific interventions are included in the category of positive programming?

Positive programming techniques include; shaping, chaining, fading, and modeling (see accompanying tip sheets on each). Teaching coping skills like relaxation training is beneficial with students who have low frustration or anger thresholds.

Final words on positive programming...

Positive programming as an intervention can vary in degree of structure. You are probably already using it in attempting to teach students skills such as sharing, taking turns, and communicating effectively.

It is often overlooked as a useful intervention with more bothersome behaviors, such as name-calling or fighting, usually because no functional analysis has been done. Performing a thorough functional analysis creates many more opportunities for positive programming to be effective and can preclude the need for implementation of more intrusive interventions.

References
LaVigna, G.W., & Donnellan, A.M. (1986). *Alternative to Punishment: Solving Behavior Problems with Non-aversive Strategies.* Irvington Publishers.