

# Behavior Intervention Support Team (BIST)

Tiers 1, 2 & 3

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Scott Fluke & Reece L. Peterson, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

## Tier 1, 2 & 3 Intervention



Many schools and school districts seek to provide their staff with guidance in handling challenging student behavior. One method to do so is to adopt a school-wide behavior program. The Behavior Intervention Support Team (BIST) is a school-wide behavior program developed and used in the Midwest, particularly in Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska. As with other school-wide behavior programs, the purpose of BIST is to provide teachers, students, and administrators with consistent tools and strategies to respond to inappropriate student behavior.

### What is BIST?

BIST seeks to emphasize that students should take responsibility for their own behavior (Osterhaus & Lowe, 1997). BIST utilizes the GRACE acronym, which stands for: Giving Responsibility and Accountability to Children in Education ([bist.org](http://bist.org)). The BIST philosophy is that providing this foundation to students will prevent a significant amount of problem behavior, as well as providing structure for intervention when problem behavior occurs (Osterhaus & Lowe, 1997). BIST is designed to be a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS; Boulden, 2010). This means that BIST intervenes at both the universal level (i.e., all students receive services) and the targeted level (i.e., a subset of students receive intensive services). At the universal level, BIST seeks to clarify expectations of staff and student behavior and to provide clear and consistent rules for all students (Boulden, 2010). Students are provided with opportunities to practice rule following behavior and receive reinforcement for behaving appropriately (Boulden, 2010). Overall, the program seeks to foster positive, respectful relationships between students and teachers (Boulden, 2010). It is based on the core conditions of congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Boulden, 2010).

Teachers are taught specific strategies to respond to problem behavior in a way that is intended to prevent escalation and a conflict of power (Boulden, 2010). When a student engages in problem behavior, BIST addresses the behavior through “progressive levels of inclusion/separation from reinforcing elements of the environment” (Boulden, 2010, p. 19). School staff members are taught to place students in the least restrictive environment in which the behavior no longer occurs. This may mean that students who cannot be successful in the classroom are moved to another room. When they are able to demonstrate control of their behavior, they can move to a less restrictive environment. The levels of restriction follow a continuum for misbehavior:

1. **Regular classroom seat.** The teacher may ask the student to do a “rethink,” in which the student is supposed to think about a more appropriate behavior.
2. **“Safe seat”.** This is a seat that is not the student’s regular seat and that is not close to other peers; here the student may be asked to complete a “Think Sheet.”
3. **“Buddy room”** . This is a seat in a different teacher’s classroom. The student should not be permitted to disrupt the classroom, and may complete a “Think Sheet”..
4. **“Recovery room”.** A room with staff trained to work with students who are demonstrating challenging behavior and provide individual problem-solving strategies.
5. **Placement in the office.** The student is sent to the school office.
6. **Sent home.** The student is suspended from school.

As students move through the continuum, they are provided with opportunities to think about their choices and the resulting consequences. Under BIST educators are trained on how these options should be employed, and the circumstances when each level should be used.

In order for the student to examine and think about choices, a “think sheet” may be provided to the student. On it, the student writes down the inappropriate or problem behavior that occurred. The think sheet is a tool then used by teachers to begin processing the behavior with the student. During the process time, the student is asked to accept responsibility for his or her actions and problem-solve how he or she can be successful in the future before returning to the classroom. Some students may receive “triage” – a regular, supportive conversation in which a staff member guides the student through thinking about his or her own behavior. With this strategy, BIST seeks to allow students to separate their feelings from their behavior and ultimately take responsibility for their actions (Osterhaus & Lowe, 1997).



## **Implementing BIST**

Schools interested in implementing BIST can contract with the Ozanam organization to provide training ([www.bist.org](http://www.bist.org)). In addition to initial onsite training to educators, continued support and training beyond the initial implementation stage are also available. Districts may engage coaches or internal trainers to support implementation as well.

## **Research on BIST**

A literature search was conducted to identify and evaluate the research supporting the use of BIST in schools. In April of 2015, a search of the PsycINFO and ERIC databases using the search terms “BIST” or “Behavior Intervention Support Team” was conducted. A total of five articles were identified: three were dissertations and two were peer reviewed journal articles. Additionally, the BIST website ([www.bist.org](http://www.bist.org))

was searched to identify several reports outlining the implementation and results of BIST in particular schools or districts. As of October 2015, no new literature on BIST has been reported.

Collectively, these resources provided mixed results regarding the effectiveness of BIST in reducing problematic student behavior. Both peer reviewed journal articles (Boulden, 2010. Osterhaus & Lowe, 1997) provided a general description of the BIST program; however, neither reported the results of original data collection. The three published dissertation studies presented original data. One found evidence that a school implementing BIST had fewer office referrals than comparison schools, but did not affect suspension or expulsions (Jacoby, 2008). Each of the dissertations found that BIST did not appear to significantly affect academic achievement in middle school (Jacoby, 2008) or elementary school (Price, 1999; Condra, 2000), nor did it affect student self-esteem (Jacoby, 2008).

Reports available on the BIST website demonstrate large decreases in office referrals following the implementation of BIST (Boulden, 2009a; Boulden, 2009b; Boulden & Twillman, 2009). However, these results are not peer-reviewed, and the results reported should be interpreted with caution. Additionally, the selection process for inclusion in the reports was not outlined, and there was no random assignment to groups or inclusion of control groups, making it difficult to determine if the implementation of BIST caused the drop in office referral rates or if a different factor contributed to the observed changes.



Further, the use of office referral data may not accurately reflect changes in student behavior, as one of the purposes of the BIST program is to replace office referrals with other alternative consequences by moving the student to other locations (e.g., the Safe seat, the Buddy room or the Recovery room). It would be logical to expect that data would be kept on each of these three levels of the BIST continuum of intervention, and particularly the number of occasions and the amount of time spent in the safe seat, buddy room, and recovery room since these are the intended alternatives to office referral and possible suspension. Nevertheless, no data about the numbers of students being sent to these alternatives, nor the overall length of time spent in these alternatives, is provided in the reports on the BIST website or any published studies. As such, it is not possible from the available data to determine if the BIST model leads to changes in student behavior or teacher reactions to student behavior.

Moreover, the studies did not address fidelity of implementation. There is little data to support the complete and consistent implementation of the intended actions at each level. For example, Boulden (2010) discussed how the BIST model is based on behavioral theory and training teachers to intervene early, but does not directly examine how it is consistently implemented within a classroom. Further, The BIST 2010 Elementary School Implementation Evaluation Report prepared by Ozanam (2010) reported that fidelity of implementation was recorded, but only provided the fidelity checklist as an appendix and did not report the actual fidelity results.

Collectively, research evaluating the effectiveness of BIST in classrooms is lacking. No peer-reviewed research has been published that supports BIST as an intervention that changes student behavior in the desired direction. Available research and data has indicated that BIST could be successful at reducing office referrals; however, that may or may not reflect significant change in student behavior. There is evidence that much more research is needed, particularly using randomized controlled trials, before BIST can be considered an evidence-based program.



## Discussion

While BIST seeks to provide similar supports compared to well-known, evidence-based school-wide behavior programs (e.g., PBIS), several important differences should be outlined. BIST responds to escalating problematic behavior by a progressive set of consequences – specifically, by placing students in a continuum of more restrictive environments. Students who display consistent problematic behavior in the classroom will often be first sent out of their seats to safe seats, and then to buddy room in a different classroom with different students and teacher (sometimes in a different grade altogether). The to a “recovery room”. This practice most closely reflects a form of exclusionary discipline, which is not considered good practice in responding to challenging behavior.

Students who are misbehaving in class are often doing so because the behavior is serving a purpose (see the Functional Behavior Assessment strategy brief for more details, can be found here: <http://k12engagement.unl.edu/individual-behavior-plans-and-fba>). One very common motivation for student misbehavior is escape from an undesirable activity (e.g., a challenging classroom assignment). Unfortunately, BIST’s use of exclusion from the classroom (e.g., Buddy room) is unlikely to be effective in addressing students where the function of the behavior may be to escape what is happening in the classroom. This is because asking students to leave the classroom is giving them precisely what they want: escape from an undesirable activity. Typically, this leads to an increase in his or her behavior, because the student learns that the problematic behavior results in escaping from the classroom in which unpleasant tasks occur.

Similarly for teachers, the ability to manage annoying or disruptive behavior by sending students to a different location, often outside of the classroom, is potentially negatively reinforcing to the teacher. This creates a potential incentive for teachers to employ these actions. Conversely with students who are sent to alternative environments there may be relatively little incentive for teachers there to follow through on this problem solving activity as this can consume teachers’ instructional time with their own class. The problem solving can sometimes be conducted by teachers not directly teaching the student and as a result may not be able to follow through with the problem solving when the behavior occur again.

Further, when students spend extended time outside the classroom (e.g., Buddy room, Recovery room), they miss critical academic instruction as well as social interaction. This may exacerbate academic problems which so frequently co-occur with behavioral problems. The practice of requiring students to demonstrate success in each consecutive step of the continuum before finally re-entering the classroom may lead to missing a significant amount of academic instruction. Since there is no data to show that the problem solving expected in these environments actually occurs or is effective, it is difficult to expect that these interventions will have the intended effect on behavior.

Additionally, for students with disabilities placed in general education environments, being sent to alternative environments may not be in accord with Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals. If students with disabilities were spending a significant amount of time in these environments, there could be issues raised about whether these environments were alternative placements made outside of the IEP process. This especially becomes an issues if there were not clear data on the time involved in these settings, and on the effectiveness of the removal strategy for that specific student.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, BIST's philosophy of preventing problem behaviors is a positive strength of the model which attempts to build relationships and improve behavior choices for students. However, due to the use of exclusionary discipline and the lack of peer-reviewed evidence supporting its use, educators interested in applying the BIST model should do so with caution. While the BIST model does contain several research-supported elements (e.g., teaching universal school rules, providing supports and training for teachers and school staff, use of a type of check-in/check-out procedures), these elements can be found in other programs and applied independently of the BIST applications. The exclusionary practices of BIST pose some potential for both over use of exclusion, and for increased negative student outcomes. For students with disabilities concerns about maintaining least restrictive placement may also be raised. Unless detailed local data showing the effectiveness of this strategy for each individual student is available, its use may not be justified in comparison to other intervention options. Therefore, schools should be cautious about implementing BIST given these concerns, and particularly due to its use of exclusionary discipline consequences.





## Resource

For more information about Behavior Intervention Support Team (BIST) go to: <http://www.ozanam.org/our-services/educational-services/bist-school-consultation/> or <http://bist.org/>.

## Recommended Citation:

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