



Research Brief

A Research Synthesis on PBS

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Why was it conducted?

This comprehensive literature review was completed in response to a request from the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs. This type of analysis had not been completed before and would inform policy, program development, and funding initiatives. The synthesis includes a definition of positive behavior support, analysis of the existing database, delineation of gaps in current knowledge, and suggestions for future directions for research, policy, and practice.

How was it implemented?

The study involved a comprehensive search of peer-reviewed articles published between 1985 and 1996 in which the participants were individuals with developmental disabilities and challenging behavior. It was conducted through databases, professional organizations, and recommendations of leading researchers. A total of 219 articles were identified; of these 109 met the study's requirements for design and data characteristics. For each article, the researchers recorded demographic characteristics of the participants, assessment practices, intervention strategies, and outcomes measured. The data from these articles were analyzed to answer five questions: 1) How widely applicable is PBS? 2) In what ways is the field evolving? 3) How effective is PBS? 4) What factors modulate the effectiveness of PBS? and 5) How responsive is PBS to the needs of the consumers?

What were the results?

The information obtained through this study was extensive, however the principal findings included:

- PBS is widely applicable to people with developmental disabilities and severe problem behavior and within typical settings by direct support providers
- The field is growing, but especially as it relates to assessment and intervention on deficient environments
- Using stringent criteria, PBS is effective one-half to two-thirds of the cases; however long-term maintenance and quality of life outcomes are not frequently reported
- Success rates nearly double when intervention is based on functional assessment, and outcomes may be improved when implemented by typical agents
- Consumer needs related to lifestyle support, long-term change, practicality and relevance of interventions, and assistance for direct support providers are not well addressed in the existing database

What are the implications?

This study examines the status positive behavior support and offers suggestions regarding next steps for the field. The results attest to the need for a new applied science that more effectively addresses consumer needs related to the feasibility, applicability, responsiveness, and durability of support strategies. The authors emphasize that the focus on fixing deficient environments and transferring skills direct support providers needs to continue. They recommend mandating standards of best practice to include assessment-based intervention; comprehensive, contextually-relevant approaches; long-term support, and regarding consumers as partners.

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