

# Best Behavior

## *Special education faculty examine classroom practices*

Consider a classroom's "problem child." If we have not experienced them ourselves, we have certainly heard of them. The student doesn't listen, doesn't follow the rules, or do what the teacher tells them to do. Perhaps they disrupt or distract the class verbally. They may even be physically aggressive toward the teacher or their classmates. It's a classroom nightmare that subverts learning for everyone.

Our instinctive reaction may be to blame the student. Joseph Wehby, associate professor of special education, thinks the question is worth a closer look. With his co-principal investigator, Craig Kennedy, professor of special education, Wehby is currently in the third year of a \$4.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, "Reducing Severe Problem Behavior in Schools," that is examining the complex dynamic of problem behavior in classrooms. The goal is to create more supportive environments for children with problem behavior as well as for their peers who may be showing risk for developing these problems.

The multi-site project is being run in 25 public elementary schools in three cities. "Approximately half the sample is in the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools," says Wehby. "One quarter of the sample is in Richmond, Va., and the other quarter is in Minneapolis." The intervention is

being tested in classrooms grades K-4, though the majority is in first through third grade, says Wehby.

Each of the schools has at least one self-contained classroom for students receiving special education services for behavior problems and one or more general education classrooms in which the intervention is also being tested. Half the students are typical students in the general education curriculum and half have already been identified as having severe behavioral disorders or showing early signs of them. "We have worked with about 400 students to date," Wehby says, "and 100-plus teachers."

In keeping with the emphasis on rigorous experimental design under the Department of Education's "gold standard" for research, schools participating in the project were randomly assigned to either the treatment group or a control group also being tracked. Teachers participating in the study have a variety of educational backgrounds and levels of experience.

One trait the teachers probably all share is a desire to create classroom environments conducive to learning. "Managing behavior is always rated highly as a top concern of teachers," says Wehby. In some cases this can mean that a teacher develops a low tolerance for children who act out. "We know from the literature that adults are impacted by child behavior. The natural reaction is to want them out." Once placed in a special education classroom, however, it can be difficult for a child to return to a general education class. And special education classes tend to require more economic resources.

Wehby emphasizes, however, that he does not want simply to shift the blame from the child to his or her teacher. The factors that lead to such behaviors are not entirely clear and are probably multifaceted, though economic backgrounds do appear to play a role. "We do know that a significant portion of students with these behaviors receive free or reduced price lunch," Wehby says. "Generally speaking, these students come ill prepared for school, and schools are ill equipped to deal with them."



Joseph Wehby



In looking for school-based solutions, Wehby wants to emphasize best practices and to educate teachers about how to create better functioning classrooms. “Our suspicion is that a lot of it has to do with teacher preparation—that teachers have not been exposed to methods or techniques that would help them manage these children’s behavior. Or teachers are inadvertently shaped out of quality instruction with these children. It becomes such a chore to interact with them that they sometimes ignore or overreact to their behavior,” he says. “Our intervention shifts the focus. We’re focusing on teachers and giving teachers tools. We’ve taken a number of components that we have either demonstrated or have evidence for and put together a package of behavior supports.”

Among the elements of the intervention being tested:

**TRAINING.** Training teachers on basic classic management skills using the Classroom Organization and Management Program (COMP) developed by Peabody Professor Emerita Carolyn Evertson.

**THE GOOD BEHAVIOR GAME.** A behavior contingency game where children are placed in teams and compete to have the fewest behavioral infractions. Rewards are kept simple: acknowledgment by the teachers, a free period, going to the lunchroom first, or a token prize.

**SELF MONITORING.** Perhaps the most critical element of the intervention, Wehby believes the dynamic between the teacher and the child often shapes the nature of the problem and perhaps furthers it. Teachers may give the child with problem behavior fewer opportunities to respond, or may offer the child less than optimal praise for behaving correctly. To better understand how they might create a more positive relationship, teachers participating in the intervention are asked to audiotape themselves once a week for 15 minutes. They then listen to a sample of that tape and count the number of positive interactions and opportunities they’ve given problem students. They also graph the results and measure them against previously established goals.

**CONSULTING.** Members of the project team, typically doctoral or master’s degree students, visit classrooms once each week to monitor interactions and provide ongoing support. “They are there to support the teachers. Many teachers who deal with these children feel isolated,” Wehby notes. “Ongoing support is key to behavior change.”

**TUTORING.** “We know there is a strong relationship between academic achievement and behavior problems, and this shows up particularly in reading,” Wehby says.

### Getting a Tune-up

As Joseph Wehby, associate professor of special education, considers the implications and future direction of his research on severe problem behavior, he says two issues are important. “First, can we get teachers to continue these new techniques without ongoing support? We’re going to be testing that this year. And second, are there certain types of children who respond better to this classroom-based approach than others?”

Since the majority of research on reducing problem behavior has been very child-directed, Wehby says, it almost assumes that the child is the problem. “Our research has suggested that the environment may be part of the issue,” he says. Wehby sees the intervention currently being tested as a necessary precursor to exploring deeper questions about the origins of problem behavior.

Wehby uses an automotive analogy to explain his point. “Focusing primarily on the child is like fixing one small part when the whole engine really needs a tune up. Once you eliminate the basics, then you can look specifically at certain components. Questions like is it genetic? Is it cognitive? I don’t want to ask those questions until I’m sure that everything I can control in the environment is geared toward these children being successful.”

As for the current grant, Wehby says, “My vision of an ideal outcome is that I could walk into a classroom that may be serving these children and see that these good practices are ongoing—that teachers are being adequately positive and giving students the opportunity to be engaged, that the academic support they need is present, that the classrooms are well managed, and that the expectations of the students are clear. If those things are not happening, then it doesn’t make a lot of sense to do a child-directed intervention until we get that environment organized.”

Students, either master’s-level or undergraduates, are recruited to tutor students in reading three times each week. “We’re using a direct instruction program called Horizons. It’s very scripted and very engaging and requires lots of responding by children,” says Wehby.

In fact, engagement is critical. As Wehby says, students can’t be actively engaged and behaving inappropriately at the same time. The combination of more praise from the teacher, more opportunities for interactions, and hands-on tutoring are all geared toward keeping these students actively engaged with learning. “If you don’t keep them engaged, school becomes very difficult for these children as they get older.”

Although the project has another year and half to run, Wehby and his team have been analyzing preliminary data collected during the first year of behavioral observations. While he cautions that they are operating under the assumption that results won’t be immediate, he says “We’re seeing significantly higher levels of praise, more opportunities to respond, lower levels of reprimands, and higher levels of child engagement.”

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