

How can programs assess program-wide PBIS in early childhood settings?

Meet the Authors

Find out in this Q&A with the co-developers of



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Q: The Preschool-Wide Evaluation Tool (PreSET™) is used to measure an early childhood program's fidelity of implementation of program-wide positive behavior intervention and support (PW-PBIS). What is PW-PBIS?

A: PW-PBIS is a model of tiered interventions and supports designed to improve young children's social and emotional development and reduce challenging behavior. The PW-PBIS model targets three levels of support—1) universal interventions for all children; 2) targeted social skills interventions for children at-risk for social-emotional difficulties; and 3) intensive, individualized interventions for children who demonstrate severe challenging behavior.

The purpose of PW-PBIS is to address the behavioral and social needs of young children in educational contexts, such as preschool classrooms, Head Start programs,

child care centers, or family care homes. When young children's behavioral and social needs are met, they are more likely to develop school readiness skills that assist them throughout their education.

Q: How does the PreSET™ measure PW-PBIS?

A: The PreSET™ measures a program's implementation of universal practices associated with building positive relationships, supporting children's use of positive social and emotional skills, and preventing challenging behaviors in the classroom. The tool measures an early childhood program's implementation by examining the program from many perspectives, in order to provide a complete picture.

The PreSET™ includes a 15–20 minute interview with the program administrator where the evaluator asks

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in-depth questions about systems and procedures in place to prevent, respond to, and document challenging behavior; support teachers; and collaborate with families. Then, classroom observations and interviews with teachers and a sampling of children are conducted.

The interviews and observations are guided by 38 desired skills and supports that are organized into 8 categories—Expectations Defined; Behavioral Expectations Taught; Responses to Appropriate and Challenging Behavior; Organized and Predictable Environment; Monitoring and Decision Making; Family Involvement; Management; and Program Support.

Q: Who administers the PreSET™? How often should programs be evaluated?

A: An outside evaluator such as a positive behavior support coach, behavior consultant, or inclusion specialist administers the PreSET™. This individual should be someone who does not have direct involvement in teaching or leadership responsibilities at the program in order to obtain an objective measure of current PW-PBIS implementation.

To determine how often to administer the PreSET™ in a program, the evaluator must consider whether the program is just beginning PW-PBIS development or whether the program already has an established system of PW-PBIS in place. It is recommended that the PreSET™ be conducted before and after implementation to attain baseline information, establish action planning goals, and measure progress towards goal attainment. A program that is just beginning PW-PBIS development should have the PreSET™ completed twice within the first year. For example, it can be completed once to attain preimplementation data and determine an action plan and then completed again at the end of the program year to measure growth during the course of the year and determine action planning for the following year.

If a program has been implementing PW-PBIS for over a year, the PreSET™ can be administered once yearly (usually at the end of the program year) to monitor for fidelity of implementation and establish goals for the upcoming program year.

Q: The PreSET™ builds upon the framework of the School-Wide Evaluation Tool (SET), which assesses and evaluates school-wide effective behavior support in K–12 settings. Why is it important to have a tool that specifically measures positive behavior interventions and supports in early childhood settings?

A: Because the culture and organization of early childhood settings is much different than K–12 educational settings, an adaptation was needed to accurately assess universal and PW-PBIS in early childhood settings. The language and methods in PreSET™ are early childhood friendly, the items are infused with developmentally appropriate practice, and the tool has a section on family involvement, which is an important component of early childhood programs.

Q: The PW-PBIS model was adapted from the larger PBIS framework, which includes three tiers of support to address the differential needs of all children. The PreSET™ measures only the first level of support—primary-universal prevention. Why is it important to measure whether the first tier of support is provided in an early childhood program?

A: The first tier of support is the most critical layer for focusing PW-PBIS efforts. It is essential that all children attend high quality centers that foster positive relationships amongst teachers, children, families, and amongst the program staff. Without this initial foundation of a nurturing and high-quality learning environment, it is not possible to effectively layer other aspects of PW-PBIS (e.g., social emotional teaching strategies or individualized interventions).

Q: Once results from the PreSET™ observation have been evaluated, in what ways can programs apply this information to improve their implementation of PW-PBIS?

A: The PreSET™ includes a Feedback to Preschools/Programs form, which helps evaluators provide valuable data to early childhood programs. After hearing the results of the PreSET™, teacher teams can discuss priorities, set goals, and develop action plans toward PW-PBIS improvement. Professional development in the form of training, workshops, or coaching for teachers and administrators may be beneficial. It may also be useful for programs to acquire more resources to reach full implementation and maintain use of PW-PBIS. The PW-PBIS Action Plan form will help programs plan.

Q: The percentage of young children who exhibit challenging behaviors has significantly increased over the last few decades. Why is it more important than ever for programs to implement PW-PBIS?

A: When children don’t receive positive behavior supports and interventions early on, their schooling and development may be affected. Challenging behaviors in the preschool years may persist and develop into more dangerous patterns of behavior in later childhood and conduct disorders, substance abuse, and delinquency in adulthood. Implementing PW-PBIS can reduce these early challenging behaviors and prevent later behavior issues.

Q: What are the obstacles to applying PW-PBIS in early learning environments?

A: There are some limitations to applying PW-PBIS in early childhood programs. Early childhood service delivery is more diverse and fragmented than K–12 settings, which can make implementation difficult. Early childhood educators are also less likely to have resources, such as access to mental health consultants, than their K–12 counterparts. And, young children have different and varying developmental needs.

Q: Can you provide a description of an early childhood program that is effectively implementing positive behavior intervention and support?

A: The Gilbert Creek Child Development Program in Oregon has been using PW-PBIS since approximately 2006. They began this process by having a behavior consultant conduct the PreSET™. The behavior consultant already worked in their region and had worked with the center director and teachers on various social-emotional issues in their classrooms. The PBIS leadership team at Gilbert Creek used their initial PreSET™ results to develop an action plan for new activities and strategies that they would use in their program.

For example, they added a “feelings check-in” where parents and children check in with a particular emotion card at the start of the day. Emotions are addressed openly in the program. When negative emotions are expressed (e.g., sadness, frustration), they are acknowledged. Teachers (and often other children) also offer support as appropriate for the child to come up with strategies that might resolve the situation. The teachers also teach the children about Tucker the Turtle who goes into his shell when he has negative emotions. Tucker thinks about the situation and comes out of his shell when he feels ready to problem solve. Teachers use a stuffed turtle, social stories, role-play, and naturally occurring opportunities to allow children to practice how Tucker the Turtle regulates his emotions and deals with problems.

The Gilbert Creek Child Development Program uses data to make decisions about changes to interventions and assess the effectiveness of PW-PBIS in its program. First, the program administers the PreSET™ twice a year to monitor their progress on each of the 8 categories of the universal tier of PBIS. They also collect data using direct observation of specific children during 20-minute intervals (15 minutes of play and 5 minutes of transitions) to evaluate if their challenging behavior is decreasing. Teachers also rate individual children that have the most social-emotional difficulties with a validated measure of social skills and problem behavior, designed for children who are 3–5 years of age. These data further support whether or not children are responding in positive ways to the PW-PBIS that the program is implementing.