

# Lunch and Recess: The “Eye of the Storm” Using Targeted Interventions for Students With Behavioral Problems

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## Using Targeted Interventions for Students With Behavioral Problems

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### Abstract

A group of fifth-grade students who had persistent problems at lunch and recess were identified and provided with direct instruction in pro-social skills. These skills were taught by the authors in a two-week program that they called the “Alternative to Lunch Program for Students” (ALPS). This action research study is an attempt to measure the impact of the intervention on this targeted group of students and their ability to demonstrate skills such as using self-control, avoiding trouble, and accepting consequences. The ALPS was part of a larger school-wide initiative called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Pre- and post-intervention data suggest that for a majority of the students, the ALPS resulted in improved behavior within the cafeteria and at recess.

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### Keywords

social skills, prosocial behavior

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## Introduction

One of the most persistent challenges we face as the student support staff (school psychologist and school social worker) at the school where we work is implementing effective interventions for behavior. While student misbehavior knows no limits in terms of location, the cafeteria and playground seem to be areas of frequent and significant problems. In fact, day after day, we pass through the main office at around noon to see the same children waiting their turn to explain themselves and their poor behavior choices to the principal.

The principal, with us chiming in as chorus, seemed to use the same speech and the same consequences over and over. We talk to the students about “choices,” “demonstrating self-control,” “accepting responsibility,” and “being respectful.” The penalty for the misbehavior is usually lunch detention or, in some cases, suspensions. The students who were frequently referred to the office – the repeat offenders - could restate our behavior “mantras” word for word. Yet before long, the same students would be sitting in the office once again due to the same infractions committed during lunch and recess.

We came to realize that our interventions and the consequences that were imposed were addressing problem behavior only for the short term, by taking the offending students out of circulation for a brief period of time. However, we were not assisting students in making long lasting changes in their behavior. Once the students returned to lunch and recess, the inappropriate behavior resurfaced.

As one of four elementary schools in a small city school district in central New York State, we were not experiencing high-level behavior problems. We knew the problem behaviors were mostly low-level, but frequently recurring. We found that the majority of behavior referrals came from a small percentage

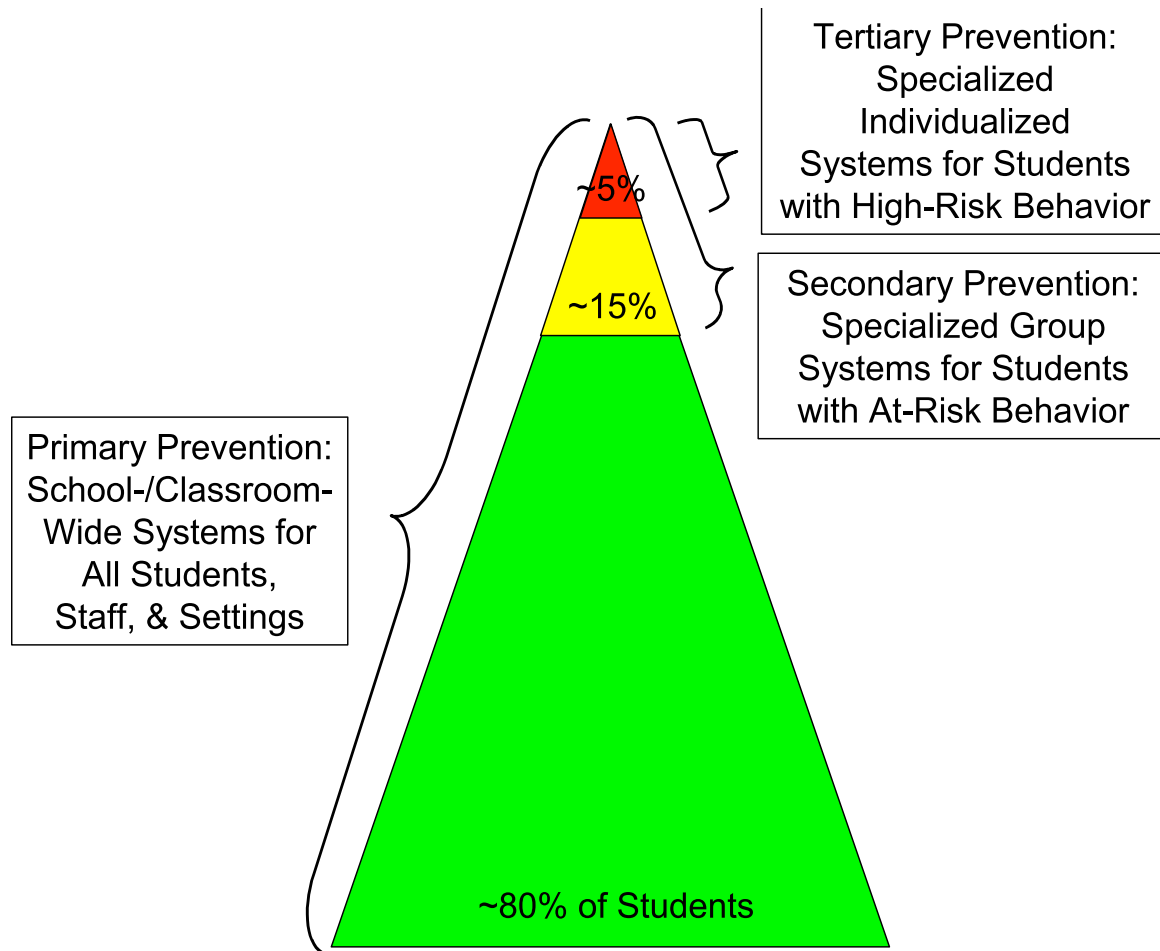
of our student population. Like most schools, we also knew that many of our behavior challenges occurred during lunch and recess. We decided we needed to approach behavior differently and reform our entire school climate.

At the beginning of the 2003-2004 school year, we implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) at our school. PBIS is a system wide approach to teaching and supporting positive behaviors and meeting the needs of all students in a school building. PBIS at Lanigan Elementary School is comprised of five essential components: 1) The four school-wide expectations “Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be a Problem Solver, and Be Safe”; 2) a behavior matrix that explains the behavior expectations for each setting; 3) direct teaching of what those expectations look like across settings; 4) a system to positively and publicly acknowledge and reinforce appropriate behavior; and 5) office discipline referral data on which to base decisions about behavior interventions.

According to Horner, Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, and Todd (2001), PBIS interventions are divided into three tiers (Figure 1). “Universal” interventions are implemented school-wide. At Lanigan, our universal interventions include the direct teaching of behavior expectations and our “green ticket” program to acknowledge appropriate behavior. Students who are observed following the behavior expectations are given green tickets as an immediate acknowledgment. Once a student earns five green tickets, they are allowed to go to our school store to select an item. With these two universal interventions in place, more than 80% of students are successful in meeting behavior expectations.

The next tier of intervention is the “Targeted” level. This level represents approximately 10 to 15% of the student popula-

**Figure 1. Continuum of School-wide Positive Behavior Support**



tion. These students need more specific intervention in order to be successful. Finally, the third tier is the “Intensive” level. At this level we address the behavioral needs of 5% or less of the student population. In order for these students to be successful, they need intensive behavioral support in and out of school.

After examining our discipline data and the number of positive reinforcements being awarded to students, we discovered that there was a relatively small group of students whose behavior was not positively impacted by our universal school-wide program. These students were still being sent to the office more frequently than 85% of their peers who received one discipline referral or less.

Using the PBIS model, we developed a target group intervention to address the specific behaviors of a group of these students. We recognized that these students needed to be re-taught ways of meeting behavior expectations in the situations and with the peers and adults they encountered during lunch and recess. This study documents our targeted group intervention plan and the resulting impact on student behavior.

### **Review of Literature**

Recess is defined as “a break period, typically outdoors, for children” (Pellegrini & Smith, 1993, p.51). Several studies have found that recess can be an integral part of the

social, health, and learning development of students (Kraft, 1989; Pellegrini & Davis, 1993; Pellegrini, Huberty, & Jones, 1995; Etner et al., 1997; Jarrett et al., 1998; Dale, Corbin, & Dale, 2000). This break from the school day coupled with increased physical activity has been correlated with increased student attention, better student health, and improved social skills. (Jarrett, et. al., 1998). In fact, Jambor (1994) describes the school playground as “the practice site that encouraged games of competition, allowed experimentation with new and novel social strategies, and accommodated family-oriented dramatic play” (p. 18).

While many studies laud the benefits of recess, other studies have indicated that recess and the playground can be an especially difficult time and place for students (Colvin & Lowe, 1986). Recess can be an unstructured time that promotes aggressive and rough behaviors (Craig & Pepler, 1997; McNeilly-Choque, Hart, Robinson, Nelson, & Olsen, 1996). Thompson (1991) found that over 170,000 children are injured annually on playgrounds in America. School administrators have indicated that students often lack the social skills and understanding of rules of games necessary in order to initiate and engage in positive activities on the playground (Hall, Anderson, Ovard, & Copeland, as cited in Butcher, 1999). It seems that behavior, both on the playground and within the schools, has changed over the last decade. When educators were asked to describe the changes in student behavior within the last ten years, their responses included less respect toward others; student reluctance to accept personal responsibility; more impulsive behavior; increased noncompliant, oppositional, and defiant student behaviors; more aggression; and more inappropriate language (McMullen, 2000).

While the research suggests that problem behaviors in schools are on the rise, there are promising practices to create safe and respectful schools. Lewis, Powers, Kelk, and Newcomer (2002) found that to assist in the development of prosocial behaviors on the playground and within the cafeteria, direct teaching by school staff was imperative. Teaching school-wide expectations (e.g. Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be Safe) was also found to be critical to the overall improvement of school-wide behavior (Lewis, Powers, Kelk, & Newcomer, 2002). Lewis, Sugai, and Colvin (as cited in Lewis, Powers, Kelk, & Newcomer, 2002) found that playground, cafeteria, and hallway behavior could be improved significantly “through a combination of social skills instruction, active supervision and group contingencies” (p. 182). More specifically, best practices for teaching social skills should include modeling of the appropriate social skill, student opportunity to observe and practice the skill, ongoing assessment of student performance, positive reinforcement for successful demonstration, and lack of reinforcement for inappropriate behavior (Gresham, 1998). Finally, Sprague et al. (2001) found that schools that taught social skills as part of a school-wide behavioral system resulted in improved social skills, as well as fewer acts of aggression on the playground.

### **Methods and Procedures**

This action research study attempted to measure what impact, if any, direct social skills instruction would have on a targeted group of students who experienced significant behavior problems at lunch and recess time. The authors developed an “Alternative to Lunch Program for Students (ALPS),” a two-week program that took place during the students’ 40 minute lunch and recess period.

The focus of the ALPS was for participating students to have a chance to observe and practice social skills in a small group setting with ongoing feedback and reinforcement. Using “Skillstreaming the Elementary School Child: New Strategies and Perspectives for Teaching Prosocial Skills” (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997), we developed a two-week program focusing on 3-4 specific skills including “Accepting Consequences,” “Using Self-Control,” “Making a Complaint,” and “Avoiding Trouble.”

This study was conducted with 11 fifth-grade students in a small-city school in central New York. The students attend a K-6 school with approximately 480 students. The student population is largely Caucasian (>98%) with approximately 37% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. This group of fifth grade students was made up of nine boys and two girls. The students in this study were identified through discipline referrals, teacher recommendation, and lunchroom monitor referral as having persistent and significant difficulties with aggression, disrespect, self-control, and accepting responsibility for their actions. Monthly discipline referrals, received by all fifth graders during lunch and recess, were collected.

Once the students were identified, a letter was sent home to parents indicating that their child had been identified to participate in the ALPS. We then contacted the teachers and relevant school staff (e.g. lunch monitors and secretaries) to describe the ALPS and indicate which of the students would be participating. Finally, we met with lunch monitor staff to solicit their input. During this discussion, each monitor volunteered to attend at least one of the ALPS sessions to observe and provide assistance.

Prior to beginning the “ALPS” program, we developed a simple survey to be

completed by teachers and lunch staff (See Addendum #1). This 10 question survey was a modified and abbreviated version of a 60-item scale developed for the “Skillstreaming” Curriculum by McGinnis & Goldstein (1997). On the survey, the school staff was asked to rate the students on a 1-5 Likert scale in terms of how often they demonstrated certain prosocial skills (e.g. honesty, self-control, and accepting consequences). The feedback from these surveys provided some pre-intervention data regarding the students participating in the program. The results also served to help us decide which social skills to practice and model during the ALPS. Also, the students rated themselves using a student survey on the first day of the ALPS. The student survey was a slightly modified version of the one shown in Addendum 1. The surveys were given to the students, their teachers, and lunch staff one month after the completion of the ALPS in an attempt to measure what impact, if any, the program had on student behavior.

On the first day of the ALPS program, as well as each ensuing day, the fifth grade students were picked up at the cafeteria by one of the authors who accompanied them to the “The ALPS Room” (School Social Worker’s Office). After arrival on the first day, the students were given an overview of the ALPS program and questions were answered. The students were told that each day for two weeks, they would be picked up at the cafeteria and accompanied to the ALPS Room. Once the students arrived, they had 10-15 minutes to eat their lunch and engage in casual conversation with their peers. Afterwards, for the remaining 20-25 minutes, they participated in practice and role-playing of social skills. Each of the 10 sessions followed essentially the same format with 10-15 minutes dedicated to lunch and the remaining time to practicing the social skills. We also

decided that if the group was cooperative and responsive, the last day of the ALPS would be dedicated to game playing (e.g. ping-pong, air-hockey, card games). Finally, after completion of the ALPS, each student received a certificate of acknowledgment.

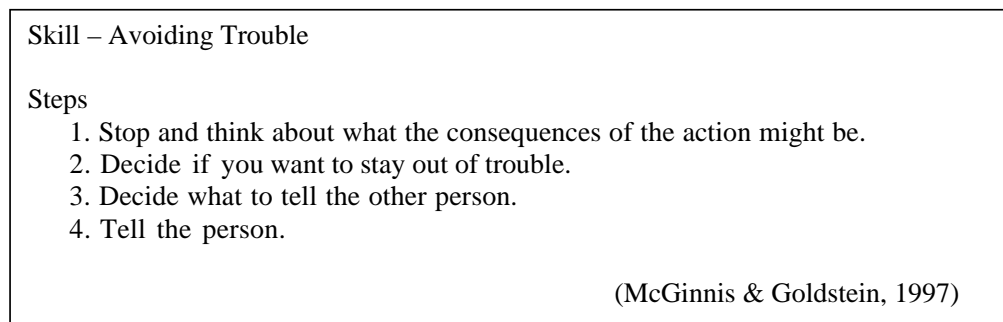
The social skills portion of the ALPS involved seven steps that were presented and discussed with the students. These steps were:

- Step 1 – Define the Skill
- Step 2 – Model the Skill
- Step 3 – Establish Student Skill Need
- Step 4 – Select Role-Player
- Step 5 – Set up the Role Play
- Step 6 – Conduct Role-Play
- Step 7 – Provide Performance Feedback (McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997)

#### Step 1 – Define the Skill

During this step, we led the students in a brief discussion about what skill would be taught (e.g. Self-Control). Using chart paper, we listed behavioral descriptors of what the skill “looked like.” We asked the students to think about how they look when they are “in control.” Finally, we handed out copies of “Skill cards” (Figure 2), which the students used throughout the time that we focused on the skill. These cards became what we called “cheat sheets” that the student could consult when they were involved in their role-plays as well as what they looked at when judging other students’ role-plays.

**Figure 2. Skill Card from Skillstreaming Program**



#### Step 2 – Model the Skill

During this phase, the adults provided at least two examples of role-plays with positive outcomes. Only one skill was focused on at a time. Every attempt was made to make the behaviors modeled both clear and detailed, with enough repetition for overlearning. Also, we made a point of “thinking out loud” as we role played the different steps of the skill.

#### Step 3 – Establish Student Skill Need

This is when we talked to the students about why these skills are important to practice and learn. Real life examples from both the students and adults including some “current events” were used to help kids understand how important it is to be in control, accept consequences, avoid trouble, etc.

#### Step 4 – Select Role Player

Using an easel and chart paper, the names of each student were written down as the “lead actor,” along with the focus of their role-play and the name of a person (e.g.

friend, teacher, lunch monitor) with whom the skill will be used.

#### Step 5 – Set up Role-Play

During this step, the “lead actor” chose a second person to play the role of the other person from the role-play. This information was also recorded on the chart paper. Before beginning, we provided a thorough description of the role-play including setting, events leading up to the situation, mood, and behavior of co-actor. We also told the non-participating members that their roles were that of “observer judges.” They were told that they had to watch the role-play carefully and, using their skill cards, provide feedback to the actors. For initial role-plays, we coached the observers as to what to observe (e.g. posture, tone, facial expressions).

#### Step 6 – Conduct Role Play

One role that developed over time was that of the “Director.” This was a revolving role in which one student had the job of announcing before the beginning of the role-play “Quiet on the set!” When all of the students were settled down, the director shouted “Action” to signal the beginning of the role-play. The main actor was told to follow the steps on the skill card and to “think out loud.” We discouraged students from breaking role, “sleepwalking through” the role-play or becoming too silly. The role-plays were continued until EVERY group member had a chance to be the main actor. If difficulties arose, one of the authors assumed the role of co-actor or talked the role-players through the scenario.

#### Step 7 – Provide Performance Feedback

In this step, we used the following guidelines regarding feedback:

- Provide reinforcement only after role-plays that follow steps.

- Provide reinforcement consistent with quality of role-play.
- Provide positive feedback first.
- Ask co-actor to react first with how well steps were followed, followed by observers, group leaders, and then main actor.
- Point to absence or presence of specific concrete behaviors.
- Re-teach when role-plays do not follow steps.
- Students failing to follow steps are allowed to repeat steps after receiving constructive feedback.

(McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997)

## Results

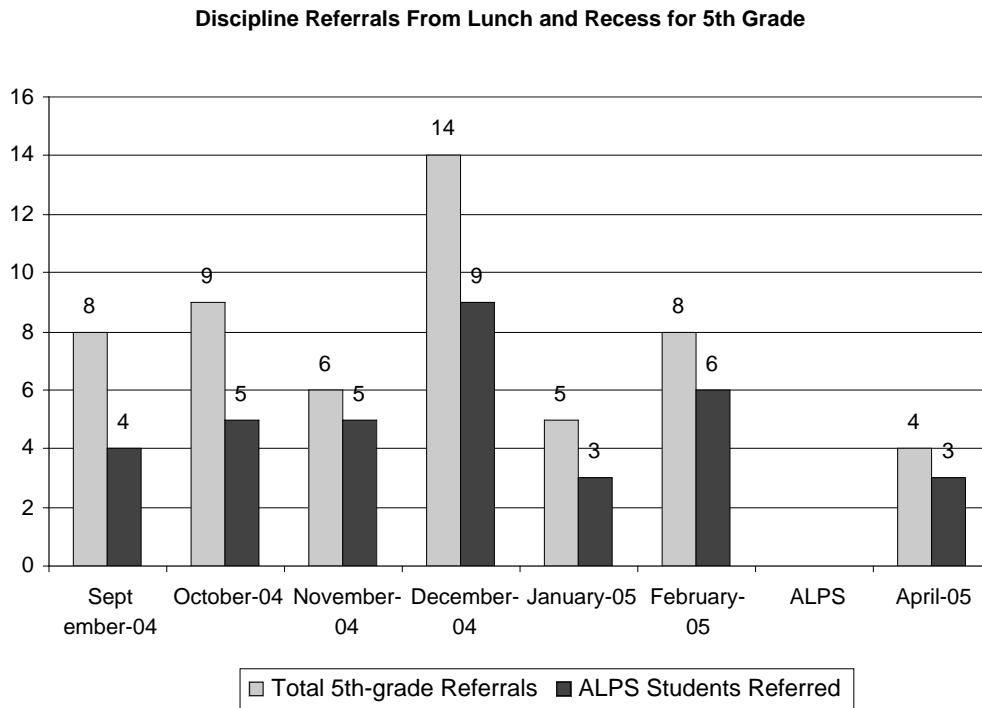
Pre- and post-intervention data were collected in the form of discipline referrals and teacher, lunch monitor, and student surveys.

### *Discipline Referral Data*

Monthly lunch and recess discipline referrals were collected. These data showed us that the targeted students clearly made up a majority of the referred fifth-grade students. While the 11 students in the ALPS made up only approximately 14% of the total fifth grade population (80 students), they, on average made up 65% of the lunch and recess referrals before ALPS. The range of percentages of ALPS students referred was 50% in September of 2004 to 83% in November 2005. The ALPS took place during the month of March; therefore, no referrals were collected and analyzed. Post-ALPS data indicates that there was a reduction in overall referrals. There were four total referrals from fifth grade for the month of April while the monthly average leading up to ALPS was over eight referrals. Of these four referrals



**Figure 3: Pre- and Post-ALPS Lunch and Discipline Referrals for 5<sup>th</sup> Graders**



filed after ALPS, three (75%) came from students who participated in the program.

#### *Teacher Surveys*

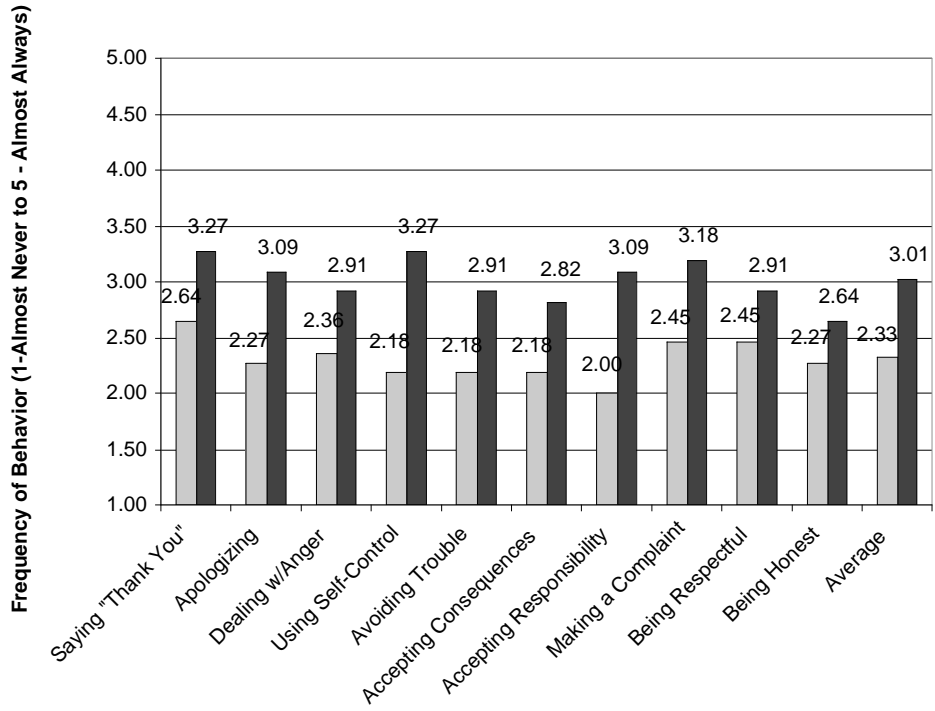
The findings from the Teacher surveys (Figure 4) indicate an overall improvement in how teachers perceived the ALPS students' behavior. Student demonstration of pro-social skills (e.g. Dealing with Anger) before ALPS were all rated as "Seldom" occurring. Post-ALPS ratings of all 10 behaviors increased indicating that teachers saw improvement in how well the targeted students demonstrated the skills focused on during the intervention. While it is not clear if these increases are clinically significant, the improved ratings by teachers across all behaviors are encouraging. In fact, some behavior ratings improved over 1-point on the 5-point Likert scale. For example, teacher ratings of how well students used "Self-control" before ALPS were approximately 2 ("Seldom uses skill"). After ALPS,

the rating improved to over 3 ("Sometimes uses skill"). Overall, the total survey scores increased .68 points after the ALPS program.

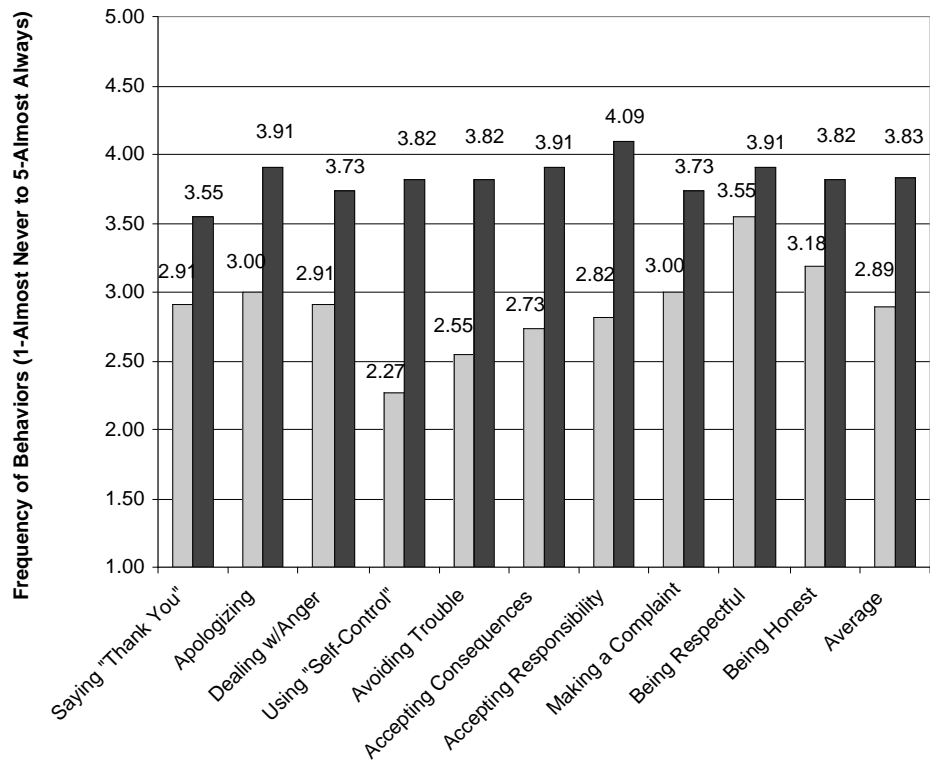
#### *Lunch Monitor Surveys*

The findings from the Lunch Monitor surveys (Figure 5) also indicate an overall improvement in the ALPS student behavior. Once again, post-ALPS ratings of all 10 areas of pro-social student behavior increased, however, the improvements seem more dramatic than teacher ratings. For example, lunch monitor ratings of how well students used "Self-control" and "Accepted Responsibility" before ALPS indicated that students seldom used these skills. However, the ratings after ALPS suggested that the targeted students improved, "sometimes" showing self-control and "often" accepting responsibility. Overall, the pro-social skills focused on in the ALPS were seen with increased frequency. In

**Figure 4. Pre- and Post-ALPS Teacher Surveys of Student Behavior**



**Figure 5. Pre- and Post-ALPS Lunch Monitor Surveys of Student Behavior**



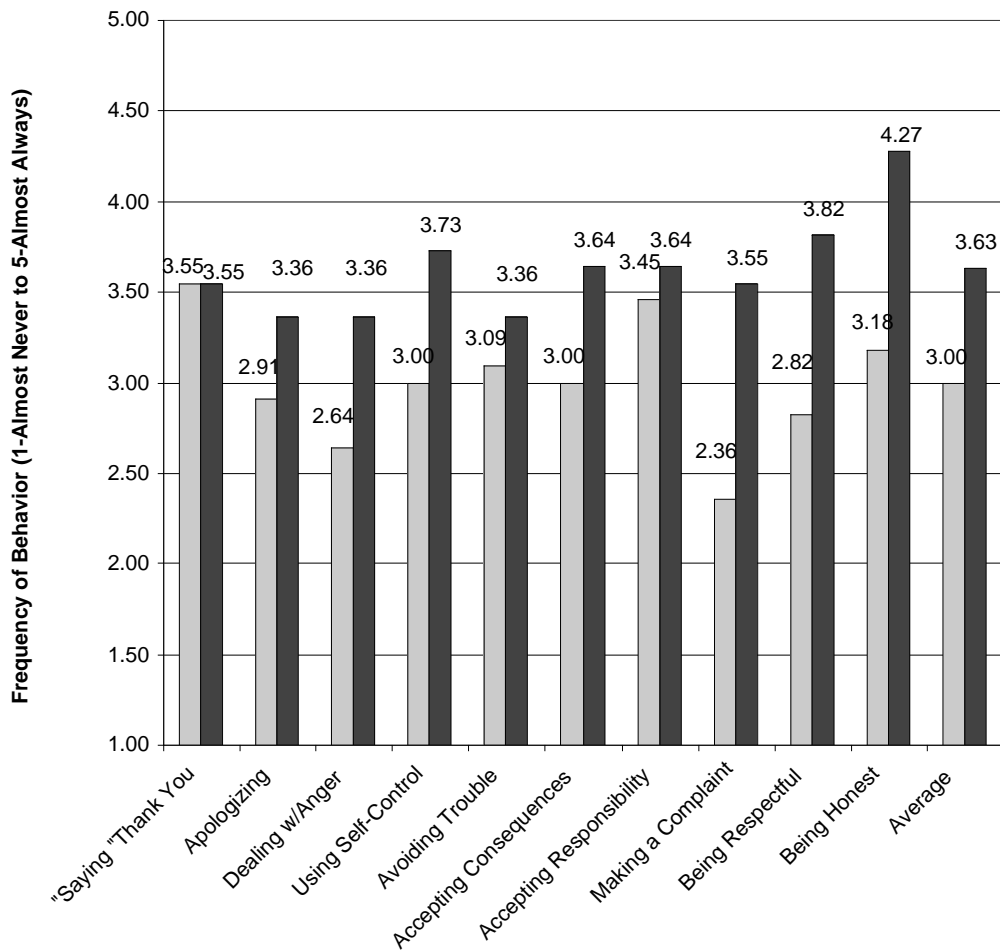
fact, the average survey scores increased by almost one whole point (.94) after the ALPS.

*Student Surveys*

Finally, the findings from the student surveys (Figure 6) also indicated an improvement after ALPS. More specifically, the students themselves felt that they improved in how well they demonstrated appropriate social behaviors. In fact, the average rating increased by .63 points. Interestingly, the student ratings of their own behaviors were fairly consistent with the adult ratings. This seems to suggest that the students were able

to accurately rate their own skill level. They did not seem to see themselves in an overly optimistic “light.” In fact, one targeted student who was a significant “repeat offender” for problems at lunch and recess demonstrated this point most clearly. When he was asked, before ALPS to rate how well he “accepted consequences” on a scale of 1 to 5, he used his pencil to add a rating of “-2” which he then circled. On the post-ALPS survey, this same student reported that he “sometimes” accepted consequences. This seemed to suggest that he felt he was getting better with his behavior.

**Figure 6. Pre- and Post-ALPS Student Surveys**



## Conclusions

This action research study marked an attempt to measure the impact of direct teaching on a targeted group of students who had persistent problems at lunch and recess. Eleven students were “targeted” to participate in a two-week social skills training program facilitated by the school social worker and school psychologist. This program referred to as ALPS (Alternative to Lunch Program for Students) involved ten sessions of direct instruction with skills such as “Accepting Consequences,” “Being Respectful,” and “Using Self-Control.” The sessions took place during the students’ lunch and recess.

Pre- and post-intervention measures included discipline referrals and surveys completed by classroom teachers, lunch monitors, and students. Pre- and post-ALPS surveys indicate that teachers, lunch monitors, and students alike perceived an overall improvement in pro-social behavior. However, the results must be interpreted with caution as the changes in pre- and post-intervention surveys may reflect a “halo” effect by which adult perceptions of changes in student behaviors are influenced by their knowledge of the student participation in ALPS. The discipline referrals showed a drop in overall referrals during lunch and recess after the ALPS. However, once again, caution must be used when interpreting the findings. While the number of referrals following ALPS was less than previous months, it is unclear if the difference is statistically significant. Also, there was a general downward trend in referrals from December through February and the April results may reflect a continuation of this trend.

The post-ALPS data also suggest that, unfortunately, the ALPS students continued to make up a majority of the referrals. However, when we looked closely at the referrals filed

after the intervention, we realized that only 3 of the 11 ALPS students were referred for behavior problems after the program. It will be important to continue to monitor the monthly referrals to see which ALPS students receive referrals. It may be that a small number of the targeted students need more “intensive interventions.”

In spite of some questions about the validity of the findings, it is our opinion that the ALPS is a worthwhile program that attempts to take a proactive approach to skill building in children with behavioral challenges. In the event that this study was to be replicated, it is recommended that more objective data collection methods be used to supplement the rating scales. For example, direct cafeteria observations before and after the ALPS might provide less biased information and strengthen the research design. Also, the authors may give consideration to using a social skills curriculum such as “Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum” (Grossman et al. 1997). Second Steps has been researched within the PBS framework and was found to be effective in both improving social skills and reducing violent playground behavior.

Overall, we were very pleased with the response of the students and staff to the ALPS. Only “time will tell” if the program truly made a difference for these students. However, it is our hope that the ALPS will assist our students in becoming problem solvers as well as respectful, responsible, and safe students.

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## Addendum 1

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Staff Member: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Listed on this sheet, you will find a number of skills that children are more or less proficient in using. This checklist will help you evaluate how well each child uses various skills. For each child, rate his/her use of each skill, based on your observations of his/her behavior at lunch and recess.

Circle 1 if the child is almost *never* good at using the skill

Circle 2 if the child is *seldom* good at using the skill

Circle 3 if the child is *sometimes* good at using the skill

Circle 4 if the child is *often* good at using the skill

Circle 5 if the child is *almost always* good at using the skill.

1. Saying "Thank You": Does the child tell others he/she appreciates help given, favors, etc.?

1      2      3      4      5

2. Apologizing: Does the child tell others sincerely that he/she is sorry for doing something?

1      2      3      4      5

3. Dealing with Anger: Does the child use acceptable ways to express his/her anger?

1      2      3      4      5

4. Using Self-Control: Does the child know and practice strategies to control his/her temper or excitement?

1      2      3      4      5

5. Avoiding Trouble: Does the student stay away from situations that may get him/her into trouble?

1      2      3      4      5

6. Accepting Consequences: Does the child accept consequences for his/her behavior without becoming defensive or upset?

1      2      3      4      5

7. Accepting Responsibility for Actions: Does the student assess what caused a problem and accept responsibility if appropriate?

1      2      3      4      5

8. Making a Complaint: Does the child know how to express disagreement in acceptable ways?

1      2      3      4      5

9. Being Respectful: Does the child act respectfully toward adults and peers?

1      2      3      4      5

10. Being Honest: Is the child honest when confronted with a concern or accusation?

1      2      3      4      5