



# dealing with behavior problems

The Use of Positive Behavior Support Strategies in Summer Programs

by Brian C. McKevitt, Jessica N. Dempsey, Jackie Ternus, and Mark D. Shriver

In recent years, positive behavior support (PBS) strategies have been promoted as alternatives to traditional discipline for children and youth (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). School use of PBS has been shown to significantly reduce the number of children referred to the office for discipline (Bohanon et al., 2006; Luiselli, Putnam, Handler, & Feinberg, 2005; McCurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003). It also allows administrators and teachers to regain time otherwise spent managing problem behaviors (Scott & Barrett, 2004).

Recently, PBS strategies have been applied outside the classroom in settings including playgrounds (Lewis, Colvin, & Sugai, 2000; Todd, Haugen, Anderson, & Spriggs, 2002) and summer recreation programs (Ternus, 2008). Though implementing traditional school-

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based PBS in out-of-school time (OST) programs may present challenges, PBS offers an appropriate alternative to punishment-based behavior management. Durlak and Weissberg (2007) found that afterschool programs that used evidence-based approaches to teaching social and behavioral skills had better student outcomes than did programs that did not use research-based strategies. PBS is a set of research-validated strategies for dealing with problem behaviors in a positive way (McKevitt & Braaksma, 2008). Our studies of PBS implementation in two community summer recreation programs suggest that PBS is a promising method for promoting desired behavior among children in OST programs.

### Features of Positive Behavior Support

PBS typically comprises five core features, regardless of setting (Horner & Sugai, 2000; McKevitt & Braaksma, 2008; Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2004):

- Creating common expectations
- Teaching these expectations to the children
- Acknowledging behavior that meets expectations
- Imposing consequences for behavior that does not meet expectations
- Collecting data on the PBS implementation and making decisions based on the data

Adults, perhaps in collaboration with participants, must decide on behaviors they will address and develop one simple set of rules that clearly communicates expectations, for example, “Be safe. Be kind. Be responsible.” Expectations should be worded positively rather than negatively: “Be safe” rather than “Don’t run.” The universal expectations must be defined for each program location and then communicated to staff and participants. For example, in the hallway, “Be safe” means walking with hands to one’s side, whereas running might be allowed on the playground. The expectations should be posted in several places throughout the site (McKevitt & Braaksma, 2008).

Direct instruction of expectations maximizes the effectiveness of PBS (McKevitt & Braaksma, 2008). Instruction should take place in the setting where participants are expected to follow specific rules; for example, adults would introduce gym behaviors while the group is in the gym. Staff should provide examples of desired and

undesirable behaviors and allow participants to practice the right way to behave.

Systems for acknowledging participants when they do what is expected may involve not only verbal praise but also tangible reinforcement such as tickets that participants can accumulate to earn rewards. Both group and individual conduct can be reinforced with rewards.

The PBS literature advocates for a clear and consistent process for addressing student behavior that does not meet expectations. Consequences for poor behavior must match the severity of the violation and should teach students how to avoid future violations. For example, if a child uses playground equipment unsafely, she would not be allowed to use the equipment the next day and would have to review and practice safety rules with an adult before being allowed to use the equipment again. This technique is in direct opposition to traditional punitive approaches that do not include an instructional component, including “zero tolerance” policies (Lewis-Palmer, Sugai, & Larson, 1999). When behavior violations occur, staff should be consistent not only in imposing consequences but also in documenting the incident in order to enable the next step in the PBS process.

Data on student behavior allow staff to monitor the progress of PBS implementation and make decisions about its effectiveness (OSEP, 2004). Data collection may include tracking incident reports and discipline referrals (Irvin, Tobin, Sprague, Sugai, & Vincent, 2004) as well as attendance, suspensions, and expulsions. It might also include interviews with administrators, staff members, and children (Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, Todd, & Horner, 2001). Data should be analyzed and shared monthly or at least quarterly. Adjustments can be made to the way staff implement PBS as needed.

### Implementing Positive Behavior Support in Afterschool Programs

Administrators who want to implement PBS can facilitate its success by:

- Establishing a leadership team
- Fostering staff buy-in
- Training staff
- Providing ongoing support

This technique is in direct opposition to traditional punitive approaches that do not include an instructional component, including “zero tolerance” policies.

First, a core team must be organized to lead the PBS implementation (OSEP, 2004; Sugai, Lewis-Palmer, Horner, & Todd, 2005). The team must include not only frontline staff but also an administrator who can provide guidance and make decisions about such matters as scheduling, funding, and personnel. The leadership team ensures that program practices are aligned with PBS, thus creating a consistent system. The team should have planning meetings to prepare for PBS implementation and then meet regularly after implementation to ensure ongoing success.

The PBS leadership team must work to gain the support of the rest of the staff. A general rule of thumb is that 80 percent of program staff must buy in to PBS in order to bring about changes in children's behavior (McKevitt & Braaksma, 2008; Sugai et al., 2005).

All staff need to be trained in the core features of PBS. Training typically starts with the leadership team, whose members train the rest of the staff. Ideally the training would occur over several days, but the limited resources of most afterschool programs may mean that training has to be condensed. The trainer is usually a person with advanced knowledge of PBS, such as a coordinator from a local school or a university professor (McKevitt & Braaksma, 2008).

Once PBS is implemented, the leadership team must provide ongoing support and reinforcement to staff engaging in PBS practices (McKevitt & Braaksma, 2008). Just as the children get ongoing positive support for engaging in desired behaviors, so too should staff members. To ensure sustainability, PBS must become part of the culture of the program. PBS funding should be written into the program budget. Buy-in from other key players, such as parents and community partners, will also help to ensure ongoing support (Sugai et al., 2001).

### Challenges with PBS in Afterschool Settings

Recent research (McKevitt & Dempsey, 2011; Ternus, 2008) has identified a number of unique challenges in implementing PBS in OST settings. Of primary concern are varying philosophies among staff about behavior management. PBS is rooted in a philosophy that includes positive reinforcement for engaging in desired behaviors. Some staff may not believe in rewarding children for doing what they are supposed to do, preferring instead to

rely on more traditional punishment-oriented strategies (Maag, 2001). Ongoing conversations about the effectiveness of PBS—and the ineffectiveness of isolated punishment—in bringing about long-term behavior change can help staff understand this critical feature of PBS.

Afterschool programs tend to have high staff and child turnover (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007), which can be a challenge for PBS implementation. New staff may not have immediate access to training, and children may miss behavior instruction. However, PBS may mitigate some of these challenges by creating common ground where children know what to expect of staff, whether the staff members are novices or veterans.

Other issues with implementing PBS in afterschool settings include lack of funds, limited time with children, and the wide range of ages that a single program may serve. While these factors may cause difficulty, they are not insurmountable. An effective leadership team and dedicated staff can plan ways to deal with potential problems. For example, staff may solicit donations of rewards from local businesses rather than using program funds. Older children can stay interested and involved by teaching appropriate behaviors to younger children.

Successful implementation of PBS creates a positive afterschool culture for adults and children. To demonstrate the effectiveness of PBS in out-of-school settings, and to illustrate some of the challenges, we feature two case studies of community-based summer recreation programs.

### Case Study #1

One summer program we studied took place in an elementary school in a large metropolitan school district in the Midwest. The program targeted girls ages 5–12 from low-income neighborhoods. The eight-week program met from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., five days a week, with a break between weeks 4 and 5. The girls were divided into three age-based groups for most activities: ages 5–8, 9–10, and 11–12. The girls participated in enrichment activities throughout the program, taking field trips and doing projects with area artists and chefs. The program had 32 girls and eight staff members: two full-time leaders and six temporary staff who were college students or school teachers.

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## Methods

The study began before the start of the program with PBS training for staff members conducted by a member of the research team. An additional coaching session helped leaders and staff build fluency with PBS through practice and role playing.

The summer program's behavior expectation manual listed three universal rules: "Be safe. Be respectful. Be responsible." With youth participants' input, staff members further defined these expectations for specific areas of the school building. Two weeks after the program started, staff explicitly taught behavioral expectations by taking the group to each area of the school and discussing what the "3Bs" meant in each setting. A group of older participants made a video acting out examples of meeting and not meeting behavioral expectations and then showed the video to younger participants.

To provide tangible reinforcement for meeting behavioral expectations, staff members handed out "Camper Cash" at the end of each activity. Participants kept their Camper Cash slips in envelopes at their desks, saving up to redeem them for prizes such as a bracelet, packs of gum or candy, or coupons to local fast food restaurants at the end of the eight-week program. In order to receive Camper Cash, participants had to follow the 3Bs during each activity. Consequences for not meeting expectations consisted of time out from favorite activities and notification of parents.

One important tool for this study was the program's behavior incident log. Program staff tracked behavior that did not meet expectations by recording the date and time of the incident, the location, the activity the participants were doing at the time, a brief description of the behavior, and the expectation that was not met. We used this log to track the number of behavior problems and their most common types.

We also conducted direct observation of adult staff to track instances of positive reinforcement delivered to participants. We used a frequency count to record instances of social and tangible positive reinforcement for 20 minutes each day and then graphed the results. Reinforcement was defined as staff members recognizing a girl or girls for meeting expectations; examples include giving verbal praise, patting a girl on the back, or giving Camper Cash. Observations were conducted on 23 program days during different kinds of activities or during transitions between activities.

Our study included two phases. Phase 1 baseline data were collected during the first two weeks of the summer program, before PBS techniques were implemented.

During this phase, staff members followed the pattern of past summers, facilitating rule-making sessions with the participants and addressing behavior incidents by taking away swimming time at the end of the week and notifying parents. In Phase 1, each age group set its own set of rules, approximately 10 in all, including, for example, "No running," "No hitting," and "Listen to the staff." Rule violations were recorded in the behavior incident log. In Phase 1, rules were not systematically taught, a tangible reinforcement was not used, and consequences were not tied to the problem behavior.

Phase 2 began in the third week. Staff systematically taught participants the expectations, taking the whole group around to the gym, cafeteria, and so on, to discuss what the 3Bs meant in each area. Staff members also hung posters of the 3Bs in the cafeteria. Throughout Phase 2, staff members referred to the 3Bs when talking to girls about behavior violations. Camper Cash was the tangible reinforcement, and staff imposed immediate consequences on undesired behavior by removing the offender from the group activity for 10–20 minutes. Staff members continued to record behavior incidents in Phase 2 as they did in Phase 1. Phase 2 lasted through week 5. During the first five weeks, a member of the research team conducted direct observations three times weekly to measure instances of positive reinforcement.

During weeks 6–8, the program experienced unanticipated staff turnover, resulting in a shortage of adult staff and a lack of administrative support. As a result, the program was run differently, and the new staff members no longer used the behavior incident log. Therefore, data from the final three weeks of the program were not collected for this study.

## Effects of PBS

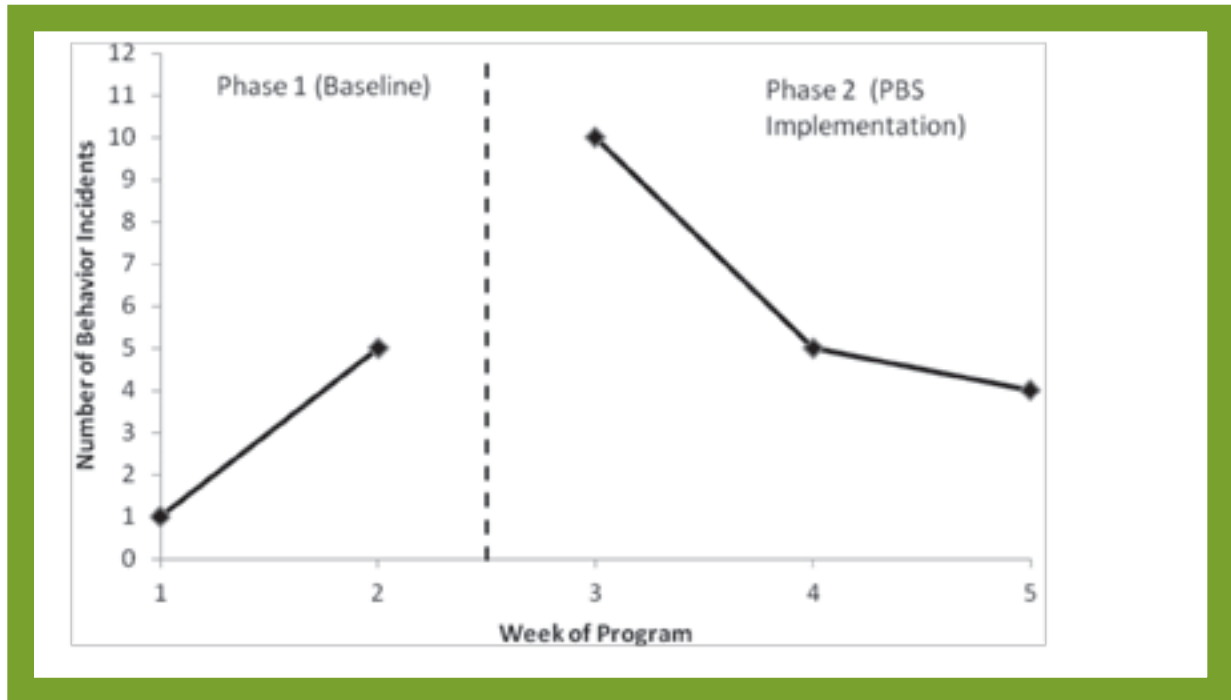
According to the behavior incident log, the number of behavior incidents increased from the first week to the second and peaked during the third week when Phase 2 began, as shown in Figure 1. The number of incidents then decreased during weeks 4 and 5.

Instances of positive reinforcement, shown in Figure 2, increased during Phase 2 when PBS was implemented. The median number of instances of praise during a 20-minute observation during Phase 1 was 9, with a high of 19 and a low of 0. During Phase 2, the median was 10 with a high of 20 and a low of 0. While the differences in medians between Phase 1 and 2 are not all that meaningful, a visual inspection of Figure 2 shows decreasing positive reinforcement in Phase 1 and an increasing trend in Phase 2 as PBS was implemented.

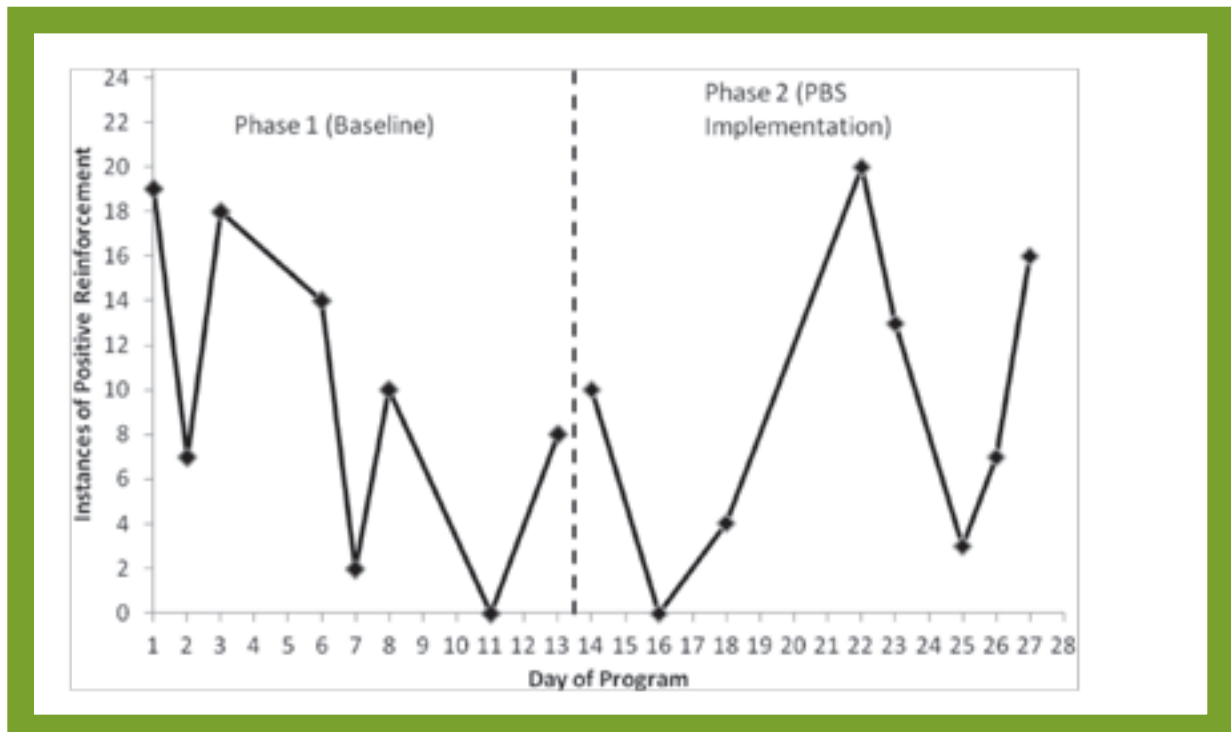
The data indicate that PBS had a positive effect on program staff and participants. Phase 1 baseline data, when staff were not using PBS, show that instances of positive reinforcement decreased over time and the number of behavior incidents increased. In Phase 2, when PBS was being implemented, behavior incidents showed a

downward trend after an initial increase, while positive reinforcement showed an upward trend. The finding that more problem behaviors were recorded at the beginning of Phase 2 is not surprising. Implementation of PBS includes data collection and aims to build consistency in how adults address behavior. An early increase in re-

**Figure 1. Number of Behavior Incidents in Case Study #1**



**Figure 2. Instances of Positive Reinforcement in Case Study #1**



corded problem behaviors is typical because staff are paying closer attention to rule violations. The decline shown in Figure 1 is also typical.

This case study revealed several strengths and weaknesses of the PBS implementation in this summer program. One strength was that staff members designed and used an ongoing reward system. During Phase 2, staff members reported that they taught the 3Bs. Both staff members and participants knew the rules. This finding is supported by a decrease in problem behaviors. Staff members also frequently used positive reinforcement, creating a constructive climate in which children's appropriate behavior was fully acknowledged. Weaknesses in the staff's implementation of PBS are not reflected in the data because they were in areas of sustainability and policy. Staff did not develop a documented system for responding to behavior problems or monitoring PBS implementation. They did not use data to make decisions, and they did not have sufficient administrative support.

One limitation of this case study is the lack of data collection during the last three weeks of the program, after major staff turnover. While PBS typically provides consistency in such circumstances and can actually help to mitigate problems associated with staff turnover, in this case the turnover was so great that there was no one left who knew anything about PBS. The remaining adults did not use the behavior log. It would have been interesting to see if the effects of PBS had lasted without trained staff. The sustainability of PBS without supportive staff members is an area for future research.

An interesting finding in this case study is that the data from the actual implementation of PBS demonstrate higher levels of problem behavior than at baseline. As noted above, a spike in problem behavior when PBS is first implemented can generally be explained by the increased attention paid to problem behaviors. However, in this case, the level of problem behaviors decreased during implementation but never got as low as at program start.

Two phenomena could explain this apparent discrepancy. One explanation is that the girls had a "honeymoon" phase: their behavior was better when the program was new and they were trying to figure out how it worked. Once they were comfortable with the staff, they felt freer to misbehave. This phenomenon is well documented in the literature on behavior change (Alberto & Troutman, 2009). A second explanation is that the expectations and consequences the girls came up with in Phase 1 were simply more powerful than those the adults reinforced in Phase 2. In Phase 1, the girls set their own rules,

and the consequence for not following the rules was to miss a fun activity at the end of the week. The rules and consequences determined by the youth may have been more effective than those determined by adults. In fact, Brinker, Goldstein, and Tisak (2003) found that children prefer punitive consequences and often dole out harsher punishments than an adult would. This is an area for further research.

## Case Study #2

More than 3,500 youth ages 6–15 participated in this summer community recreation program that took place across 27 parks in a large Midwestern city. The majority of the 100 staff members were of college age. The program was free to youth participants, most of whom came from low-income neighborhoods. Program activities included outdoor games and sports, board games, art projects, field trips, and swimming. The program took place five days a week from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

In the summer before our study, the program experienced a high degree of student expulsions because of problem behaviors. The program administrator sought help from a member of the research team. After several conversations about PBS, the administrator agreed to test the effects of PBS in three parks with the most problem behaviors. The administrator also agreed to hire a "behavior specialist," who travelled to all the parks to consult with staff members on youth behavior and individual problems.

## Methods

At the beginning and end of the summer, all staff members completed an anonymous survey. An open-ended question on the pre-program survey, about how respondents expected to address problem behaviors, corresponded to a post-program question about how they actually did so. In addition, on the post-program survey, staff members were asked if they taught program rules and expectations at the beginning of the summer and reviewed them at least once more during the program.

Staff members completed the pre-program survey a week before the program began. During mandatory staff training, a member of the research team had an hour and a half to educate staff on PBS strategies. Staff from each park decided as a group on expectations, reinforcements, and consequences, sharing their decisions with the large group.

After the program began, the researcher traveled to all 27 parks to consult with staff on youth behavior, focusing particularly on the three target parks. The re-

researcher demonstrated appropriate use of reinforcement and consequences and led small groups of youth in addressing particular problem behaviors. The researcher conducted one-hour direct observations at each of the three parks during the first, fourth, and last weeks of the program. Both problem behaviors and positive statements by adult staff were recorded, with the intention of finding the relationship between the two. During the last week of the program, the post-assessment survey was distributed to all staff members, who were instructed to return it with their end-of-year paperwork.

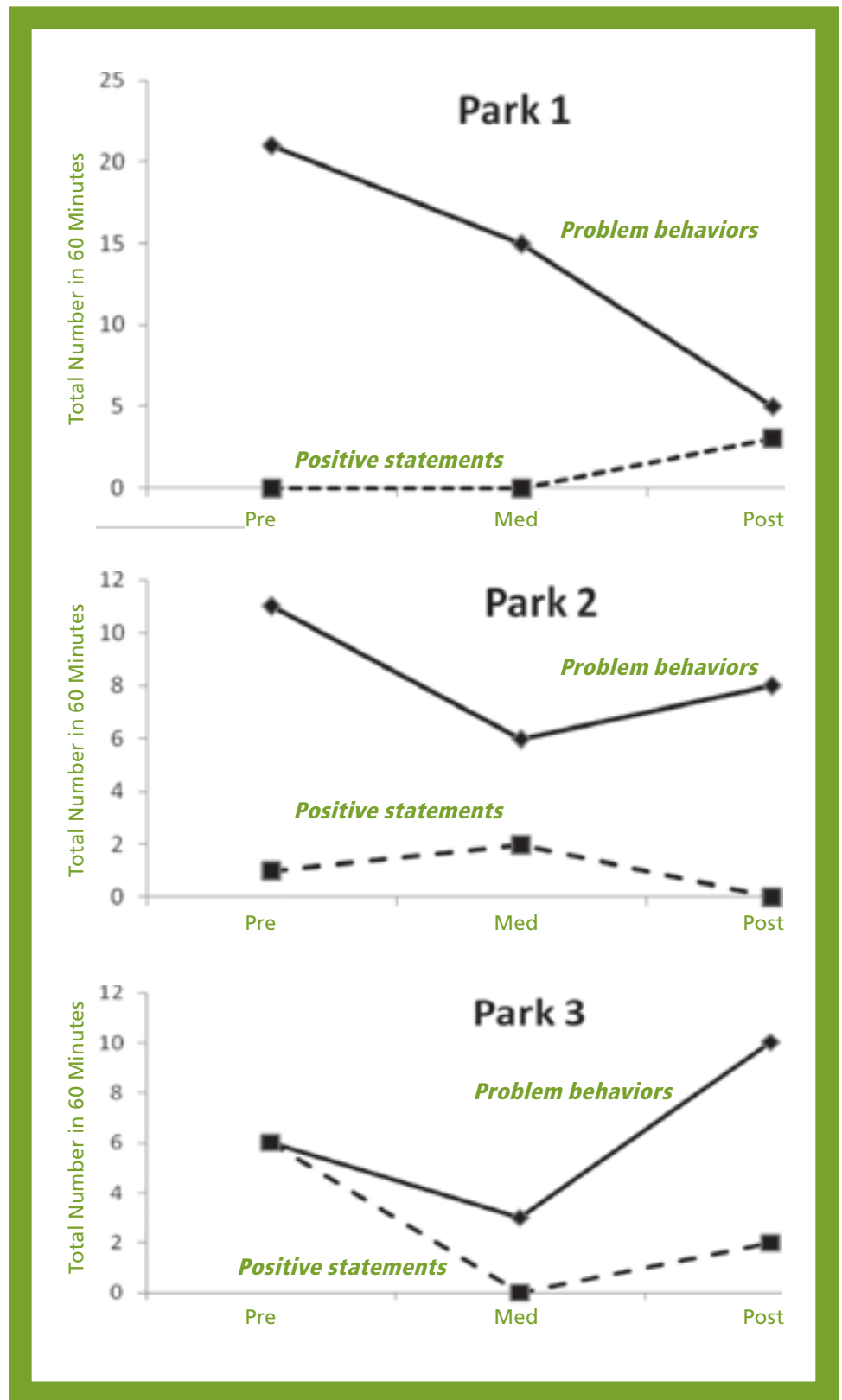
### Effects of PBS

Figure 3 displays the numbers of problem behaviors and positive statements observed in each park. At the beginning of the summer, Park 1 had the most problem behaviors, as had been the case the previous summer. During the program, problem behaviors declined, and positive statements were recorded for the first time during the final observation.

Results for the other two parks are less straightforward. Park 2 also began with a high number of problem behaviors. The mid-program assessment recorded a considerable drop in problem behaviors and an increase in positive staff statements. However, problem behaviors increased at the final assessment, though they were still considerably lower than at the beginning. Positive staff statements went back to zero.

Challenging behavior at Park 3 the previous summer had led to creation of the behavior specialist role and the hiring of new and

Figure 3. Problem Behaviors and Positive Statements in Case Study #2



**Table 1. Case Study #2 Pre- and Post-program Survey Results**

STRATEGY	Percentage of surveys indicating use of the strategy	
	Pre-program (126 total responses)	Post-program (85 total responses)
Talk with the youth (with no further indication of the content of the discussion)	34.2	16.3
Give a time out/lose privileges	24.4	51
Call the youth's parents	19.5	14.3
Consult with a supervisor	13.4	4.1
Discuss with the youth specifically why the problem behavior was wrong	8.5	34.7
Suspend or expel	8.5	12.2
Discuss specific consequences with youth	7.3	4.1
Discuss the rules	7.3	10.2
Discuss appropriate ways to behave	6.1	4.1
Give a warning	4.9	18.4
Other/no response	19.6	4.1

*Note.* Percentages add to more than 100 percent because respondents could list more than one strategy.

enthusiastic staff. At the initial assessment, the number of problem behaviors was considerably lower than at the other two parks, and positive statements were high. At the mid-point observation, both problem behaviors and positive staff statements dropped. Staff were expressing feelings of burnout, and many youth had transferred to different parks. At the final assessment, problem behaviors nearly doubled and positive statements were halved compared to the initial observation. By this time, several staff members had left; substitute staff had not attended the original training. The lack of positive reinforcement may have contributed to the increase in problem behaviors.

In general, Figure 3 shows that, as positive statements increased, problem behaviors decreased, and vice versa. Even small changes in the frequency of positive statements appeared to have a significant effect on the

frequency of problem behaviors. Park 3 did not follow this trend, but its special challenges may have contributed to variations in behavior problems and positive statements observed.

Table 1 shows results from the pre- and post-program surveys. On the post-program survey, after being trained on appropriately addressing problem behaviors and consulting with the behavior specialist throughout the program, staff reported more concrete ways to address problem behaviors. Prior to training, most staff responded to the open-ended question that they would talk with the youth, give time-outs, call the youth's parents, or consult with a supervisor. When they responded that they would "talk with the youth," staff members did not indicate what the content of the discussions would be. By the end of the summer, more surveys included specific examples of



the content of conversations with youth, such as indicating why behaviors were problematic, giving warnings, and discussing rules. This change from a generic strategy of “talking with the youth” to more concrete discussions may indicate that staff had gained knowledge about communicating with youth. The fact that the strategy of consulting with a supervisor decreased may indicate that staff felt more competent to manage problem behaviors on their own. Reports of the use of time-outs or loss of privileges increased to 51 percent at the end of the program, perhaps indicating that staff members had more strategies in their toolkits as a result of PBS training.

Staff members were also asked whether they presented the behavior expectations at the beginning of the summer and if they reviewed them throughout. A positive finding was that 91.8 percent of staff members reported teaching the rules at the start of the summer and 91.1 percent reported that they reviewed them at least once. In a narrative response, one staff member said that problem behaviors continued at her park until the expectations were posted for all the youth to see.

The data show that PBS had varying effects on behavior in the three parks. More rigorous evaluation could better demonstrate what PBS has to offer OST programs in large, open settings such as city parks. Still, the data from observations and staff reports indicate many positive changes associated with the implementation of PBS.

Some of the strategies reported on the open-ended survey question about how staff responded to problem behaviors before and after the summer program may be unclear. Prior to the program, more staff reported they would “talk with the youth,” while at the end of the program, more staff indicated they would discuss why the behaviors were wrong. This strategy may still be considered “talking with the youth.” However, staff were more specific in the post-program survey about what their “talk” would entail. Future research could further examine changes related to specific adult-child interactions when PBS is being implemented.

### A Promising Strategy

The implementation of PBS can have a positive impact on the behavior of youth participating in community OST programs. As shown by the two case studies, when PBS is implemented well—that is, when staff teach expectations and use ongoing reinforcement and positive statements—behavior problems decrease. The case studies also demonstrate that implementing PBS is difficult in these settings; staff turnover and lack of administrative leadership in particular can have undesirable consequences. Never-

theless, PBS is a promising strategy for creating positive climates for youth-adult interactions in OST programs. When behavior is well managed, adults and youth can focus on spending high-quality afterschool time together.

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