PBIS Forum 8: Practice Brief
Family-School Collaboration in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: Creating a School Atmosphere to Promote Collaboration

PBIS Leadership Forum- *Roundtable Dialogue*   February 2019

The purpose of this practice brief is to describe family-school collaboration in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and review approaches that help to create conditions that promote collaboration. A brief background on family-school collaboration is provided, followed by guidance on a schoolwide approach for collaborating with families that strengthens family-school connections and improves student performance.

Family-School Collaboration

Two primary environments that support child development are home and school. Parents and educators share many similar roles. For example, parents and teachers both support children's social, emotional, behavioral and academic (SEBA) performance. In fact, many research studies have demonstrated that parent involvement in SEBA realms is associated with improved student performance in them (Jeynes, 2007; Pomerantz, Kim, & Cheung, 2011). Furthermore, interventions that promote family-school collaboration improve outcomes for youth, such as improvements in school attendance, grades, and social behavior (Garbacz & McIntyre, 2016; Stormshak, Connell, & Dishion, 2009). In addition, such interventions can strengthen connections across home and school, which can in turn amplify positive outcomes for youth (Sheridan et al., 2017). However, research on family-school collaboration has identified that interventions are not closely aligned and integrated with schoolwide systems and practices (Garbacz, Hirano, et al., in press), such as the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), and this is limiting family-school interventions (Leslie et al., 2016).

Family-School Collaboration in PBIS

A promising line of work has emerged in the last several years that includes systematic study of approaches to align and integrate family-school collaboration within MTSS such as PBIS (Dishion, 2011; Garbacz, Witte, & Houck, 2017; Lewis, Mitchell, Horner, & Sugai, 2017; Weist, Garbacz, Lane, & Kincaid, 2017). This line of work has focused on defining family-school collaboration within and across the tiers of support intensity within PBIS to clarify how families and schools can collaborate to support youth. In addition, engaging community stakeholders, such as community mental health professionals in PBIS is a central feature of family-school-community engagement. Partnerships among community agencies, homes, and schools can provide supportive systems for youth that extend across settings (Minch, Kincaid, Tremaine, & Thomas, 2017; Weist et al., 2012). Increased emphasis on family-school-community collaboration in PBIS and related MTSS led to the development of the Family-School-Community Alliance (FSCA). The FSCA is dedicated to enhancing family-school-community collaboration within PBIS and related MTSS, which includes a focus on coordinated implementation support and advancing a research agenda (see https://fscalliance.org).

Family-school collaboration in PBIS includes defining collaboration at Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III (Garbacz, Rose, Weist, & McIntosh, 2018). Family-school collaboration involves families and educators working together as co-equal stakeholders who share responsibility for educating youth (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). Family-school collaboration occurs across a continuum, wherein educators support parent engagement

S. Andrew Garbacz, University of Wisconsin–Madison; Mark D. Weist, University of South Carolina

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in ways that are consistent with family goals and expectations. Furthermore, family-school collaboration must be culturally responsive. Family culture is celebrated and included in school procedures and practices (see Owens, Watabe, & Michael, 2013).

In PBIS at Tier I, family-school collaboration focuses on strengthening support for schoolwide practices, such as extending clear and operational behavior expectations across home and school settings, and promoting family collaboration on PBIS Tier I teams. At Tier II, educators collaborate with families in defining home-to-school behavior support plans, such as within Check-In/Check-Out (CICO; Dishion, 2011). Families may also be included in group-based skills training, such as to support youth problem-solving skills. At Tier III, families are engaged in collaborative meetings to identify and define targets within intervention planning (e.g., compliance, reading comprehension), collect data at home and school to understand current levels of behavior and to refine goals, co-create behavior support plans, and evaluate progress toward the student achieving goals at home and school. Similar to teachers, parents play a key role in Tier III supports by co-creating procedures and coordinating intervention implementation at home (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008). In this work, families should be viewed as equal collaborators, who have more knowledge about their child than educators or clinicians (Weist et al., 2017).

Barriers to Family-School Collaboration in PBIS

There are several commonly reported barriers to promoting family-school collaboration in PBIS. Barriers reported by school PBIS team members include lack of school resources, perceived lack of family and school interest in collaborating, logistical challenges, and problems with home-school communication (Garbacz et al., 2018). For example, school PBIS team members may be reluctant to bring families on the Tier I team. In addition, families may be uncertain about their role at school meetings. Furthermore, many families report a lack of trust in their child's school, which can lead to a lack of involvement at school events and hesitation to participate in school meetings (Santiago, Garbacz, Beattie, & Moore, 2016). Barriers such as these can impede progress toward authentic family-school collaboration at Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III. Thus, it is important to consider a school's approach to collaborating with families, including family culture, neighborhood characteristics, educator beliefs about family-school collaboration, home-school communication practices, and parent trust in schools.

Creating a School Approach that Embraces Family-School Collaboration in PBIS

Creating a school approach that embraces family-school collaboration means viewing parents as essential for promoting children's academic performance and social behavior (Christenson, 2004). Such a view permeates all school actions and features of PBIS. There are five strategies that can help create a school approach that is anchored in family-school collaboration: 1) Creating a clear role for family-school collaboration in PBIS, 2) reaching out to families proactively, 3) enhancing the school atmosphere, 4) emphasizing two-way

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communication, and 5) providing guidance and support for family collaboration in PBIS. These strategies are reviewed in the following and summarized in Table 1.

1) **Creating a clear role for family-school collaboration in PBIS**. A first step to promoting a school atmosphere anchored in family-school collaboration is to define family-school collaboration in PBIS. Defining family-school collaboration in PBIS includes specifying how families and educators will work together at Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III (see Weist et al., 2017). For example, at Tier I a family-school team may be created that is a subset of the Tier I team tasked with advancing family-school collaboration efforts at the school. Alternatively, there may be two family members who serve on the Tier I team to help make decisions about school systems and practices as well as how home settings will be included. To promote family-school collaboration in Tier II, families should be involved in collaboratively developing CICO procedures with school staff, which in turn increases the likelihood of effective school-home and home-school communication. At Tier III, the role for family-school collaboration may mean that families and educators create behavior support plans and mental health treatment plans together and that the plans are implemented in homes and schools, with cross-setting coordination. After the role for family-school collaboration is created and defined, it is shared with families using multiple avenues, such as in the school handbook, on the school website, through email, and during parent-teacher conferences.

2) **Reaching out to families proactively**. Families often hold the expectation that educators define family-school collaboration and contact them for support (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Thus, each school year starts with the Tier I team contacting families to clarify role expectations for collaboration and defining how they will collaborate to support youth. One approach to promote this process is through a beginning of the year parent screener and questionnaire. This one-page form requests that parents report on specific dimensions of their child's academic and social behavior as well as asks parents about their preferred ways to interact and support their child across home and school (Garbacz, Beattie, Masser, & DeGarmo, in press). The Tier I team can use data from this form to design school events that address family priorities and enhance communication strategies to align with family preferences. In addition, members of the Tier I team can make positive phone calls to parents when their child meets a goal or exhibits schoolwide expectations. Consistent with standard PBIS practice, there should be at least four positive, strength-focused communications with family for every communication that includes corrective feedback.

3) **Enhancing the school atmosphere**. To create a school environment that promotes family-school collaboration, the school atmosphere should convey to families that they are welcome and supported (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). There are several features to a school atmosphere. First, the school atmosphere includes the physical space in the school building. Enhancing the physical space means clarifying entry procedures, welcoming families with a warm and friendly greeting upon arrival, and including clear instructions throughout the building to show where to go for certain activities. Second, the school atmosphere includes an online presence. A school may have social media and a website. Each online source is easy to navigate

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and provides families with clear signals they are collaborators in their child's development. Third, the school atmosphere includes PBIS materials. The Tier I team may have an "Introduction to PBIS" flyer for parents, the school PBIS systems can be clarified for parents, including ways that parents can use similar features at their home (Garbacz, 2019). All school materials are written in clear language without jargon and available in multiple formats (e.g., written, in a video, online; see Murphy, 2017).

4) **Emphasizing two-way communication**. Common approaches to home-school communication include one-way (school to home) communication that is primarily either (a) to inform parents of procedures or activities (e.g., send home a field trip notice) or (b) to convey a concern about a problem (e.g., their child was in a fight at recess; Christenson, 2004). Such approaches to communication are important, but when communications do not promote parent voice and often occur when problems arise, there is a lack of positive interactions that can lead parents to be reluctant to participate in school meetings or facilitate parent beliefs that educators do not value their opinion and expertise. As an alternative to one-way communication, two-way communication provides opportunities for families and educators to communicate back-and-forth, share information, and develop a working relationship (Garbacz et al., 2017; Murphy, 2017). Examples of two-way communication include asking and integrating parent feedback about school expectations, including opportunities for parents to share back to educators their opinions about material that is sent home (e.g., a school newsletter) and holding "town hall" style meetings at the school where discussions about school priorities and future directions can be held in an open and supportive forum. At Tier III, behavior support and mental health treatment plans can be coordinated across home and school so that parents and teachers are sharing information back-and-forth about child behavior and progress toward goals (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2008).

5) **Providing guidance and support for family collaboration in PBIS**. Families may be hesitant to collaborate with educators to enhance PBIS systems and practices due to a lack of knowledge or experience. Other families may question their role in PBIS. Educational systems include terms, procedures, and a culture that is not familiar to all families. Educators can support families to collaborate with them to enhance PBIS procedures (Garbacz et al., 2017; Lewis et al., 2017). There are several ways families can be supported to collaborate. One approach is to form a family subgroup of the Tier I team, which includes two educators from the Tier I team. The two educators can serve as parent liaisons by sharing information about PBIS and meeting procedures, answering questions about meeting structures and team member roles, and clarifying how parents can participate on the Tier I team. Another option is to lead parents through the Guidebook to Serving on Groups (see https://servingongroups.org), a tutorial for parents about serving on school teams. Once capacity for guiding and supporting families to collaborate in PBIS is created, parents can begin running sessions and supporting other parents.

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Implementation Considerations and Key Stakeholders

Creating an atmosphere that promotes family-school collaboration involves dedicated school faculty who embrace parents as collaborators. The Tier II team is an appropriate place to begin conversations about enhancing the school's approach to collaborating as administrators, parents, and representative school faculty are key members. Implementation guidance for enhancing family-school collaboration in PBIS begins with taking stock about attitudes toward collaborating (Garbacz et al., 2018). Taking stock of attitudes includes a dual emphasis on (a) inviting parents and school faculty to complete a survey and (b) holding focus groups at the school to discuss expectations about working together. After information is available about attitudes toward collaborating, those data are used to address the school's approach. For example, if parents describe only hearing from the school in times of crisis, educators might focus on positive phone calls home. Thus, the emphasis is on continual use of family-school data to make decisions about enhancing family-school collaboration in PBIS (see Garbacz et al., 2017; Minch et al., 2017).

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Table 1

Key Considerations for a Schoolwide Approach to Family-School Collaboration in PBIS

Strategy	Description	Key Stakeholders
Creating a Clear Role for Family-School Collaboration in PBIS	Define family-school collaboration at Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III	Tier I, Tier II, Tier III teams
Reaching out to Families Proactively	Clarify role expectations, Use data from families to inform actions, Make positive phone calls home	Tier I team, Teachers, School counselors, School psychologists, Administrators
Enhancing the School Atmosphere	Enhance school spaces, Use warm greetings, Use social media, Make PBIS materials family friendly	Tier I team, All school staff and faculty
Emphasizing Two-Way Communication	Ask parents for feedback and use their feedback, Hold "town hall" meetings or parent focus groups, Coordinate behavior support plans across home and school	Tier I team, Administrators, Teachers
Providing Guidance and Support for Family Collaboration in PBIS	Create a family subgroup of the Tier I team, Use a tutorial about serving on school teams	Tier I team, State consultants

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