Delivering Behavior Support in the Foster Care System

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PREFACE

Positive behavior support (PBS) emerged in the mid-1980s with a focus on the behavior support needs of individuals with severe intellectual disabilities and problem behavior (Carr et al., 2002; Dunlap & Carr, 2007; Dunlap & Hieneman, 2005). Since then, PBS has been demonstrated with many additional populations in schools, homes, and other community settings. As is evident in chapters throughout the current volume, PBS has been used effectively in an increasing number of human service systems, including early intervention (e.g., Head Start), public schools, and mental health.

One system that has received little attention with respect to systematic behavior support (including PBS) is child welfare. The child welfare system provides care for the many thousands of children who are without a biological family home within the context of an array of settings, such as foster care, therapeutic foster care, group shelters, group homes, and specialized adoptions. Principal reasons for children being placed in the child welfare system are abuse, neglect, and parental incarceration. Such children, of course, are extremely vulnerable to serious problems in social-emotional development and the emergence of problem behaviors.
There is a significant need for programs of effective behavior support in the child welfare system. First, it is widely known that, nationally, the child welfare system has been in disarray, and there have been frequent, horrific stories in the media about children being lost and mistreated. In 2000, Time magazine described foster care as “a quagmire that is spawning a generation of forgotten and forsaken children” (November 13, 2000, p. 5). Second, the children who comprise the population of the system typically have a considerable accumulation of risk factors that are known to contribute to social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties. Such risk factors include poverty, inconsistent parenting, exposure to violence in the home, exposure to violence in the community, and in general, an absence of stable, secure, and nurturing relationships with parents or parental figures. It is not unusual for children in child welfare to experience many of these risk factors, making them one of the most vulnerable of any population of children.

Although to our knowledge there have been no published accounts of programs identified as PBS serving children or caregivers in the child welfare system, there have been a handful of documented efforts using behavioral procedures to train caregivers and provide technical assistance to improve child functioning and well-being (Barth et al., 2005; Lutzker, Tymchuk, & Bigelow, 2001; Smagner & Sullivan, 2005). The program described in this chapter comes from this tradition. The Behavior Analysis Services Program (BASP) was established as a statewide initiative in the state of Florida in 2001 to improve the delivery of foster care by (a) providing training to foster parents; (b) conducting functional assessments; (c) delivering technical assistance in foster homes and other facilities in the child welfare system; and (d) assisting in special, high-profile circumstances, such as analyzing and intervening with the challenge of “runaways.”

The BASP was founded on the principles of applied behavior analysis and continues to operate as a behavior analytic enterprise. Professional employees within the BASP are board-certified behavior analysts. At the same time, BASP conducts its program in a manner that is fully consistent with the features and tenets of PBS (cf. Carr et al., 2002). This is understandable because BASP operates within the context of real-world circumstances and therefore must maintain a high level of ecological validity to be effective. BASP also emphasizes prevention of problem behaviors through skills development and environmental arrangements; seeks to build capacities of children, youth, and caregivers; and focuses on the accomplishment of positive outcomes. In other words, BASP is an example of a program that shares alliance with applied behavior analysis as well as PBS. As several authors have pointed out (Anderson & Freeman, 2000; Dunlap, 2006; Dunlap, Carr, Horner, Zarcone, & Schwartz, 2008), this congruence is not surprising since PBS emerged from the strong conceptual and procedural foundations of applied behavior analysis, and a good deal of community-based behavior analysis (though not all) is indistinguishable from contemporary applications of PBS.

This chapter presents an overview of the BASP and some empirical examples of data collection that illustrate some of its functions. We are