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SCHOOL-WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT: Preventing the Escalation of Antisocial Behavior in Schools

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Abstract

Antisocial behavior, often defined by aggressive, delinquent and violent acts, is increasing dramatically among our nation's youth. Efforts to address antisocial behavior call for intervention across multiple contexts, including the home, the community and the school. School-wide positive behavior support is a three-tiered model of school-based prevention that provides educators with a framework to address escalating antisocial behavior. Initial research on model effectiveness is promising. Moreover, the model allows for clear and collaborative roles for both education and behavioral health care professionals in addressing the needs of students requiring the most intensive level of support.

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Introduction

Nothing has monopolized the public education scene lately more than the constant haranguing over *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). NCLB, the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, is designed to close the achievement gap that exists between groups of students in American schools. This mission is an important one and serves to underscore teaching – or helping students to acquire and master academic skills – as a primary purpose of schools.

Meeting the demands of NCLB, for many schools, means re-evaluating and revising long-standing instructional practices to create accommodations for students at risk for academic failure. Standard practice in schools today, as a result of the NCLB legislation, often includes increased classroom time devoted to testing, greater emphasis on the adoption of empirically-supported curricula and the amount of content covered, and, particularly for urban schools, large-group after school tutorial sessions.

Despite the emphasis on academic achievement, however, it is interesting to note that it is not one of the primary concerns of most Americans. The 36th annual Gallup Poll, as it has for the past several years, cites lack of discipline, along with lack of financial support, as one of the top two concerns of the public with regard to the schools, while the use of drugs as well as fighting and violence round out the top five (Rose & Gallup, 2004). The situation is not likely to improve soon. Schools are enrolling an increasing number of troubled children. Problems, evident even during the preschool years, occur as early as kindergarten and continue into the primary grades (Gilliam, 2005; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2003/04). By the time these students are

in middle school they are wreaking havoc in the classroom as well as in non-classroom settings within the school. Many of these students are disruptive and defiant to the point of being aggressive. They disrupt the learning of other students, threaten safety and overwhelm teachers and administrators. In a recent poll of teachers, 17 percent indicated that they lost four or more hours of teaching time per week simply addressing disruptive behavior. In urban schools, that percentage jumps to 21 percent at the elementary level and 24 percent at the secondary level (Walker et al., 2003/04). It is not likely that the primary mission of the schools – that of improving academic performance – can be accomplished in the face of so much lost teaching time. Worse yet, these numbers reflect the situation in general education.

So what about special education? Not surprisingly, the number of students receiving special education services for serious emotional disturbance (i.e., emotional/behavioral disorders; EBD) has increased by 18.4 percent over the past ten years alone (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As such, special education mirrors the trend in general education which appears to be reflective of the overall societal drift. More and more children and youth are adopting a pattern of behavior generally referred to as “antisocial.”

Antisocial Behavior

Aggression, delinquency and violence are all strongly linked dimensions of a pattern of behavior generically referred to as “antisocial.” Broadly defined, this pattern of behavior is the opposite of prosocial and suggests a willingness to commit rule infractions, defiance of adult authority, and violation of the norms and mores of society (Kazdin, 1995). Associated behaviors include those

considered mildly disturbing such as noncompliance, talking back and temper tantrums to those considered more serious and disruptive to the environment such as threatening others, physically harming others, destroying property and even sexual assault. Evidence suggests that this is a pattern of behavior that may be on the rise in more technologically advanced societies. Grossman (1996) and Grossman and DeGaetano (1999), for example, point to the dramatic national rise in aggravated assault rates even in the face of decreasing murder rates, suggesting that, in part, it is a function of desensitizing our nation's youth to violence and death through repeated exposure to violent television shows, violent video games and violent films.

The pattern of behavior considered antisocial does not necessarily portend a formal, clinical diagnosis. However, children with chronic and well-developed repertoires of antisocial behavior may be diagnosed with conduct disorder, a debilitating condition for which there are no evidence-based treatments demonstrated to be effective over a long period of time. There are, however, interventions that have shown promise over a shorter period, typically up to a year post treatment (Henggeler, Schoenwald, Borduin, Rowland, & Cunningham, 1998; Reid & Eddy, 2002). Furthermore, due to the stability of this pattern of behavior, after about the age of 8 severe antisocial behavior and conduct disorder should be considered a chronic condition that will require supports and appropriate interventions across the life span (Kazdin, 1995).

Developmental Pathways

Research has identified two developmental pathways by which children and youth acquire antisocial behaviors leading to clinically significant conduct problems. The first, termed "life course persistent," begins in early childhood and typically continues into adulthood. Needless to say, it is the most serious form of the condition and one of the best predictors of adolescent delinquency and later adult criminality (Loeber & Dishion, 1983). These children, influenced in part by neurological deficits

that affect the development of verbal skills and executive functions of the brain, evidence poor academic performance, poor social information processing, impulsive behavior and a restricted behavioral repertoire which often leads to social rejection, a poor self-concept, and continued aggressive behavior (Caspi & Moffitt, 1995; Moffitt, 1993). "Early starters" tend to be noncompliant and avoidant at a very early age. When they go off to school, their well-developed behavioral responses lead to difficulties with teachers and, of course, with forging and maintaining satisfactory relationships with peers (Walker, McConnell, & Clarke, 1985). The situation is exacerbated when parents, often overwhelmed by the child's behavior and other related factors (e.g., problems in school and community), are unable to adapt their discipline and supervision styles to adequately address the situation (Patterson, 2002; Reid & Patterson, 1996). Many children evidencing difficult temperaments as well as those who are overactive and distractible (i.e., symptoms of ADHD) are at risk for life course persistent antisocial behavior (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995).

The second developmental pathway, known as adolescent-limited antisocial behavior, has an onset during middle childhood or early adolescence. Patterson and Yoerger (2002) describe these youngsters as "marginal" in their antisocial repertoires. These youngsters are primarily influenced by peers, who are themselves antisocial, and are involved in antisocial behavior for a limited period of time. Involvement may include the use of illegal substances (i.e., drugs and alcohol), gang-related and delinquent behavior (e.g., theft, vandalism). Youths with adolescent-limited antisocial behavior are aggressive, like those with early-onset antisocial behavior, but the long-term outcomes are typically not as dire.

Other Contributing Risk Factors

The antisocial pathway produces a collateral impact in a number of areas. For example, children with antisocial behavior often exhibit deficits in

academic skills (particularly reading), as well as social or interpersonal skills (Dishion, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Patterson, 1984; Patterson, 1982). Similarly, they appear to have difficulty with self-regulation which may translate to the development of later alcohol and drug problems (Miller & Brown, 1991). Antisocial youth are also at risk for exhibiting early and risky sexual behavior leading to other problems including sexually transmitted disease and teen pregnancy. Finally, the multitude of failure experiences that these children and youth encounter, including poor school performance, low social reinforcement, and continuing conflict with peers, parents and teachers, contributes to depressed mood (Dishion, et al., 1995).

Chronic antisocial behavior is associated with a multitude of negative life outcomes including, among others, delinquency, school dropout, drug and alcohol abuse, relationship problems, unemployment, hospitalization, and even mortality (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999; Reid & Eddy, 2002). Researchers concerned with antisocial behavior (Dishion et al., 1995; Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995) have identified the need for the earliest possible intervention across three primary settings, including the home, the community (including peers), and the school. The focus of this paper is on the school setting, a context that provides access to all children and youth and, thereby, offers the greatest opportunity for prevention and early intervention.

The School's Role in Escalating Antisocial Behavior

What might be surprising to many is that risk factors operating *directly* in the development of antisocial behavior include getting in trouble at school, failing to engage and bond with the process of schooling, and academic failure (Walker & Shinn, 2002). The school, often unwittingly, plays a powerful role in contributing to the development or maintenance of antisocial behavior through many well-intentioned (but ineffective or potentially harmful) practices.

Typical Responses

The most common responses in schools to students who exhibit problem behavior are control, containment, exclusion, and punishment. Schools often attempt to control misbehavior by implementing structural measures such as metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and locker checks (Skiba, 2000). Although somewhat counterintuitive, research has demonstrated that greater efforts to run a secure premise primarily through these physical means may actually lead to *greater* disorder (Mayer & Leone, 1999). Self-containing students in special education is also a common systemic response. However, although the number of students receiving special education services for behavior disorders has increased in the last decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), outcomes such as school attendance, academic achievement, post-school employment, and incarceration remain the poorest for this group of students, and trends are not favorable (Jolivett, Stichter, Nelson, Scott, & Liaupsin, 2000).

Excluding students from participation in school activities is often used in an attempt to intervene with students with antisocial behavior. Again, however, we see nationally that there are more students suspended each year, a trend that extends downward to preschool (Gilliam, 2005), and that 30-50% of suspensions are due to repeat offenders (Skiba, 2000). This suggests suspension is not effective and, worse, may be exacerbating behavioral offending in schools. To date, there is not a single research study that supports the use of suspension to positively affect behavior. Finally, it is common practice to use punishment in schools in an effort to diminish problem behavior. Theoretically, a behavior that is punished will decrease in frequency. However, there have been consistent research findings in support of the fact that using a strictly punitive approach to deal with antisocial behavior is associated with *increased* aggression, vandalism, and truancy (Mayer, 2001). The message is clear: although the intent is to help, typical responses of schools to students exhibiting problem behavior are not effective. Worse, they

may be contributing to and/or intensifying childhood antisocial behavior.

Other Ways the School Contributes

In addition to inadvertently contributing to antisocial behavior by relying primarily on reactive strategies, schools create problems for students when expectations are not clear, rules are not taught, and prosocial behavior is not consistently reinforced. In training hundreds of teachers, these authors routinely ask school professionals to list their classroom rules. Almost without exception, there are as many different responses as there are teachers. This begs the question – if the rules are not clear to the staff who are charged with implementing them, then how can they possibly be clear to students? And, if they aren't clear to students, how can we reasonably expect students to follow the rules? This lack of clarity contributes to the use of punishment, and subsequent development or maintenance of antisocial behavior, because it puts students in the situation of having to learn what is expected through a process of trial and error. The research reliably demonstrates that simply the presence of clearly stated expectations, or rules, has a positive and direct impact on rule-breaking behavior (Sugai, Horner, & Gresham, 2002).

An overall negative “climate” in schools can also be blamed in contributing to antisocial behavior. Several commentaries (e.g., Flora, 2000) have summarized the consistent, but unfortunate, findings that disapproval is used more frequently than approval in schools, and praise for appropriate classroom social behavior – despite its proven effectiveness - is only rarely observed. Recognizing students for what they are doing well, or conversely only recognizing students when they are doing something wrong, has a profound impact on the learning culture. In one study, students with disabilities reported that school was a more negative, aversive, place than youth prisons in which they had been incarcerated (Larson, 1994, as cited in Mayer & Sulzer-Azaroff, 2002).

Preventing Antisocial Behavior: School-Wide Positive Behavior Support

Indeed, there is consensus between the US Department of Education (2002) and the Surgeon General (U.S. Public Health Service Office of the Surgeon General, 2001) regarding antisocial behavior in the schools. Specifically, it is suggested that the majority of disruption can be traced to ways in which schools are organized, and that schools can help prevent antisocial behavior by creating positive school climates and adopting a primary prevention agenda. School-wide positive behavior support (SWPBS) uses a proactive and preventive approach to address escalating behavior problems that seriously threaten school safety. SWPBS is an emerging alternative to the typical reactive approach used by most schools in which misbehavior is addressed primarily through the use of a punishment response.

SWPBS is a model of school-wide prevention and intervention based on the work of the U.S. Public Health Service. As shown in Figure 1, the model incorporates three progressively intensive levels, or tiers, designed to help educators to more effectively manage and address challenging behaviors as they occur across the school.

Primary Prevention: Universal Support

It is expected that, in any given school, about 80 to 90 percent of the population is comprised of students with few, if any, serious problem behaviors. The figure may be a little lower in urban schools. Considered the primary level of prevention, the universal support system is designed as an initial strategy intended to promote a positive school climate and to strengthen rule-governed behavior across the system.

The first step in organizing a universal support system is to develop school-wide expectations and setting specific rules. School-wide expectations (e.g., “Be Respectful,” “Be Responsible,” “Be Ready”) are typically broad in scope and serve as a slogan, or mantra, to remind students of the

behaviors expected across all settings in the school. Specific setting rules further define the expectation for each area in the school. For example, “Being Respectful” in the classroom is defined as raising your hand to be acknowledged and following directions without reminders. However, in the cafeteria, “Being Respectful” may include using a “restaurant” voice and in the hallway it may translate to walking quietly.

Once defined, school staff members actively teach the expectations and rules to all students. Teaching is facilitated with the implementation of a school-wide recognition system that includes the delivery of tickets or tokens to (a) recognize and reward students for following the rules and (b) prompt educators to deliver behavior-specific praise. Low rates of teacher praise are characteristic of schools with problems of aggression and vandalism (Mayer, 2001).

In addition to teaching expected behaviors, school staff members work together to clarify corrective procedures to address negative or disruptive behaviors. It is important that teachers and others are clear about which behaviors are addressed in the classroom and which qualify for a referral to the office for administrative support. Administrators, too, must have ready access to a hierarchy of disciplinary responses to address problem behavior.

Once developed, efforts to continuously improve the universal support system are critical. A leadership team comprised of administrators, teachers, counselors and, at times, parents should convene regularly to review data and make necessary revisions. Data collection incorporates information that is easily accessed and serves as a key indicator of school climate. For example, data may include the number of office discipline referrals (ODRs), the number of suspensions, or even the number of students in detention. To facilitate the process, schools and school districts may purchase a site license for a web-based data management system like the Educational Tracking, Recording, Analysis, and Charting System (eduTRACS) from

Devereux’s Center for Effective Schools. The program provides a method to monitor and display, in graphic form, the data necessary to facilitate decision-making. However, even if the school administration does not have access to a web-based data management system it is important that team members appreciate the need to review and act upon the data, not just collect it.

Finally, accounting for the reciprocal relationship between antisocial behavior and academic failure, most educators are acutely aware that simply focusing on behavior is not enough to prevent the continued escalation of disruptive behavior. Universal support planning must, in addition to addressing social behavior, incorporate an emphasis on academic instruction, particularly reading and writing, curricular targets so necessary for the development of important student-student and student-teacher relationships (McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Secondary Prevention: Targeted Support

Secondary prevention is intended to prevent students at-risk for problem behavior from developing more serious and chronic patterns of antisocial behavior. Despite successful implementation of the universal support system, there will always be a group of students, typically about five to fifteen percent, for whom more thorough planning efforts are necessary. “Targeted” interventions are easily arranged, group-based interventions. One example of a targeted intervention that is easily established in schools is a simple check-in/check-out procedure (Hawken & Horner, 2003).

Based on the accrual of a high number of ODRs, the leadership team may identify a small group of students requiring additional support. Instead of designing several individualized behavior support plans, a time-intensive process to say the least, the students are assigned to check-in each morning with an adult in the school. During check-in, the adult inquires about each student’s preparedness for the school day (e.g., “Do you have a pencil or pen?”

“Are your assignments complete?” “Did you have breakfast?”). Students are then given a rating card and sent to class. At the end of each class period, the teacher provides a numeric rating (e.g., 0, 1, or 2) of the student’s behavior based on how well he or she complied with the school-wide expectations and his or her performance on an individual goal. Students check-out each day with another adult in the school. Together, they review the student’s ratings and the adult provides the student with a small reward (e.g., a snack, a positive phone call home) for meeting a pre-specified criterion (e.g., earning 80 percent of possible points).

The check-in/check-out procedure is an efficient tool for addressing the needs of several students at one time. Furthermore, the process can be easily individualized with the use of a simple functional behavioral assessment (Crone & Horner, 2003). Examples of other targeted interventions include mentoring, social skills training, drop-out prevention, and group-based parent training.

Tertiary Prevention: Indicated Support

Tertiary prevention is intended to prevent the most seriously involved students from becoming more deeply entrenched in antisocial behavior. Typically, about one to seven percent of students qualify for indicated support. In addition to family members, successful intervention at this level will likely involve mental health and/or juvenile justice agencies as well. Interventions are function-based, involving a thorough functional behavioral assessment (FBA) and multi-layered behavior support plan that takes into consideration the multiple contexts (i.e., school, home, community) in which the student is involved. Interventions may be singular (e.g., curricular modification, teaching and strengthening prosocial skills) or may involve multiple interventions and conjoint planning (e.g., home and school efforts to reduce truancy). Data is collected to monitor progress and formatively develop the intervention.

The typical student requiring indicated support, for example, may be an elementary (3rd grade) student who engages in severe temper tantrums,

endangering himself and others, and is at risk for a referral for special education services. Based on an interview with involved staff, the Behavior Support Team discovers that the tantrum behavior occurs daily, lasts for hours, and usually subsides only when the student is removed from the classroom for at least an hour. Based on an FBA, the Team reaches consensus that the behavior serves an “escape” function because it allows the student, who has a history of reading difficulty, to avoid, or escape from, the task (i.e., academic) demand.

In this case, the classroom-based interventions may include a combination of curricular modifications (e.g., initially decreasing the amount of work expected), teaching the student how to request assistance (e.g., signaling the teacher for help, obtaining the assistance of an instructional aide) and rewarding the student for starting his work without engaging in problem behavior (Crone & Horner, 2003; Kern, Bambara, & Fogt, 2002). Additionally, a home-based reading intervention may be implemented with the parents to strengthen the student’s reading fluency. Once the plan is put into action, a designated team member collects data, monitors student progress, and, if necessary, reconvenes the team to modify the plan.

What Does the Research Say?

To date, the research on SWPBS is promising, showing positive and sustainable student outcomes for reductions in disruptive, noncompliant behavior and vandalism in suburban (Taylor-Greene & Kartub, 2000) as well as urban (McCurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003) schools. In some of the earliest research incorporating experimental designs, Mayer and his colleagues demonstrated that the implementation of a training and consultation intervention (including elements of universal support) designed to increase the “reinforcing ambience” of the school (i.e., creating a more positive school climate) resulted in a significant increase in the rates of teacher-delivered praise followed by significant reductions in off-task student behaviors and overall vandalism costs at both the elementary and middle school levels

(Mayer, Butterworth, Nafpaktitis, & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1983). In a follow-up investigation, Mayer, Mitchell, Clementi, Clement-Robertson, and Myatt (1993) applied the same training and consultation intervention to classrooms at nine high schools. Results, again, showed an increase in teacher-delivered approval statements followed by an increase in student on-task behavior and decrease in student suspensions. In a similar study, Gottfredson, Gottfredson, and Hybl (1993), again incorporating elements of universal support, increased the clarity of school rules, the consistency of rule enforcement, and the reinforcement of appropriate student behavior, among other things, to positively and significantly improve student conduct across six middle schools over a three year period.

More recent empirical investigations have continued to examine the impact of SWPBS on conduct and related problems with positive results (Nelson, 1996; Nelson & Colvin, 1996). However, reflecting on the concern with NCLB, the question arises with regard to the extent that SWPBS may be related to enhanced academic performance. In the only investigation thus far to respond to this question, Nelson, Martella, and Marchand-Martella (2002) demonstrated, via a quasi-experimental design, that a comprehensive SWPBS program operating in seven elementary schools over a period of two years (and compared to 28 nonparticipating sites) resulted in reduced suspensions and office discipline referrals as well as improved achievement in reading, language arts, spelling, science and social studies for grade four students.

Moving Forward: Impacting the School Setting to Address Antisocial Behavior

The fact that antisocial behavior is on the rise is no secret. Ask any educator to list his/her top concern about working in the schools and a diatribe recounting the surge of discipline problems quickly follows. The increase in antisocial behavior is a national concern that has come to the attention of the present administration (U.S. Public Health Service Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). As several researchers have indicated, the most

effective solution will require intervention in multiple contexts (Reid & Patterson, 1996; Walker et al., 1995). Much of the effort to date has focused largely on the home and community (e.g., multisystemic therapy; Henggeler et al., 1998). Movement into the schools has lagged behind but some recent innovations, including projects like Bully Prevention (Olweus, 1991), the Families and Schools Together program (FAST Track; Bierman, Coie, Dodge, Greenberg, Lochman, & McMahon, 1992), and the recent Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers project (Eddy, Reid, & Fetrow, 2000), have demonstrated promise.

SWPBS, too, has shown promise as a prevention/intervention strategy to address antisocial behavior. The focus on creating a more positive school climate is consistent with several strategies recommended by the Surgeon General for reducing violence, including the use of positive reinforcement, behavior monitoring and school-based environmental approaches (U.S. Public Health Service Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Of course, more research is needed. The advantage of SWPBS, *unlike* other school-based programs, is that the procedures and strategies employed are a natural fit within any school environment. However, *like* other school-based programs, positive outcomes will hinge on the degree to which the program is implemented with integrity.

Communities would do well to promote the adoption of SWPBS in their constituent schools and to stimulate partnerships between schools and community-based behavioral health care providers, through creative funding, in a greater effort to impact antisocial behavior. There is a clear role for behavioral health partners at both the secondary and tertiary prevention levels of SWPBS, working in collaboration with education professionals to address the needs of small groups of students or in partnership with the school's behavior support team to intervene with individual students and their families. Mental health partners have expertise to share at the universal level as well, consulting with the leadership team to plan and implement

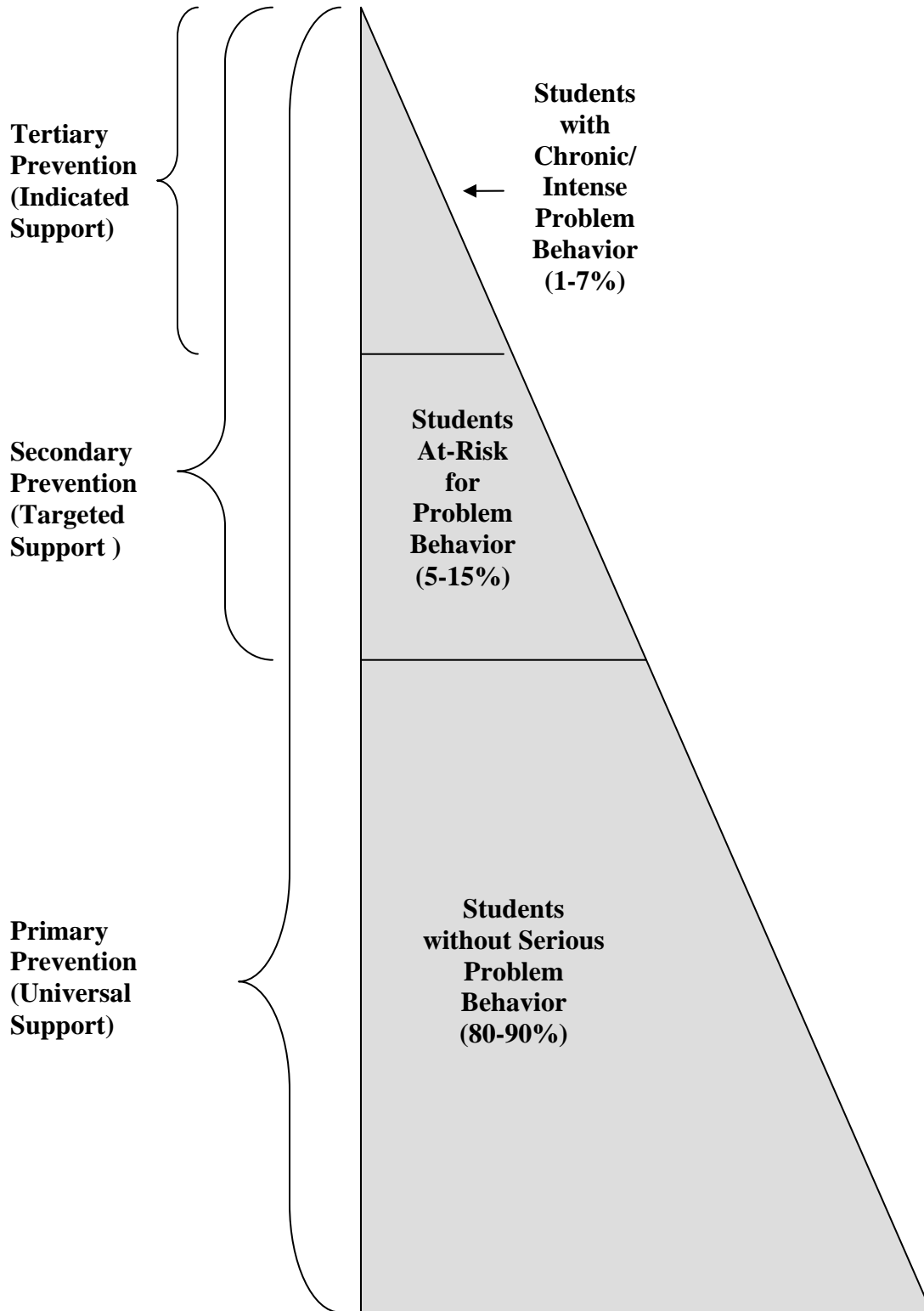
strategies to promote a more positive school climate overall. Researchers and policy makers alike have long espoused the need for this type of service integration. SWPBS provides a realistic framework for greater collaboration between education and

mental health professionals in an effort to ensure academic and behavioral success for all children and youth and, in particular, for those at risk for antisocial behavior.

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Figure 1

Schematic overview of the three types of school-based prevention based on the U.S. Public Health Service model.



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