

Developing Positive Disciplinary Strategies to Support Children with ADHD and Tourette Syndrome

Considerations for School Administrators



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At a glance

What do administrators need to know?

Children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and/or Tourette syndrome (TS) benefit when schools use positive discipline strategies, rather than punitive discipline. Applying positive, supportive approaches to student discipline can improve existing support systems, helping schools better meet the needs of all students in their care and reduce the use of exclusionary discipline practices that may violate student protections.

What does positive discipline look like for children with disabilities?

Positive discipline can encompass a range of strategies built on a foundation of empathy, respect, and inclusion, rather than exclusion and punishment. Positive disciplinary systems are predictable and achievable for students. They include teaching expectations and social, emotional, and behavioral skills, providing opportunities for students to practice these skills and creating learning environments that support and reinforce positive behaviors. For students with disabilities, these practices are most effective if they are tailored to the child's needs and abilities. Multiple strategies can be implemented concurrently to strengthen school environments for all students.

Why is implementing positive discipline important?

Punitive discipline leads to poorer outcomes for students with disabilities, whereas successful implementation of evidence-based positive discipline has been shown to increase school connectedness, engagement, as well as improved climate and safety. It may also result in long-term cost savings. This may be particularly important for students whose disabilities, such as ADHD and TS, affect behavior and self-regulation, but may, for purposes of assistance and accommodation eligibility, be categorized as "other health impairment," which does not obviously suggest behavioral issues.

Which approach is right for my school?

There are a variety of factors, including school readiness, that could influence your approach. As some first steps, you may wish to review your school's current discipline policies and practices and analyze your existing discipline data. It can also be advantageous to engage faculty, parents/guardians, and students early on to explore what's working, weigh potential returns on investment, and partner with organizations and groups from your district, region, or state that can support support any shifts you choose to make towards a more positive approach.

What do administrators need to know about the benefits of positive discipline approaches?

Positive discipline can help students & improve the overall school environment.

When developing positive disciplinary strategies, school administrators must balance the needs of students of all abilities in their care, including those who face behavioral or cognitive challenges such as ADHD or TS. Fortunately, many positive disciplinary strategies are linked to the following outcomes, making their adoption a potential win for students, teachers, and administrators alike:



Improved school performance



More effective classroom management



Greater physical, mental, social, and emotional health and well-being for students.^{1,2,3,4}

For students with ADHD, for example, while punitive discipline may lead to poorer task performance,⁵ positive discipline systems that include anticipatory guidance, followed by tailored, meaningful rewards, can improve task performance.^{6,7,8} Anticipatory guidance is based on understanding the student's skills and needs and using tailored instruction, guidance, redirection, and support to achieve the desired behavior.

That said, students of all abilities can benefit from positive approaches implemented school-wide. Students with disabilities, whether identified or not, can benefit further when schools implement evidence-based practices within a multi-tiered system of support framework, like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).⁹

Positive discipline can make legal compliance easier & create better student outcomes.

School administrators are likely aware of the growing body of information indicating that punitive discipline is often ineffective or even harmful to children with disabilities.¹⁰ However, the benefits of revising their school disciplinary policy may extend even further – to support their various state and federal legal obligations. Positive disciplinary strategies can rise above the baseline support required by law, creating stronger systems.¹¹ See “Step five” below for examples of state and federal laws associated with school discipline.

Students of all abilities can benefit from positive discipline approaches implemented school-wide.

What steps can my school take to implement positive discipline approaches?

When deciding which approach(es) to implement, it is important to consider the needs of students, parents, and faculty, as well as the school's legal obligations. The following outlines steps for selecting positive discipline approaches that are right for your school and ensuring buy-in from those affected.

STEP ONE: Analyze your school's data about which groups of students may be experiencing higher levels of discipline.

Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 Plans are disproportionately affected by punitive discipline.^{12,13,14} However, federally collected data do not provide information on all types of disability – such as whether children with ADHD or TS are specifically disproportionately affected – and schools may not always be monitoring this issue. To ensure that discipline procedures are effective and equitable, it is important for schools to understand whether and how discipline is currently applied between different demographics in their student body, including by type of disability. In addition, students with intersectional identities, including LGBTQ students,¹⁵ students affected by poverty, and Black, Native American, and Pacific Islander students with disabilities are disproportionately suspended and expelled¹⁶ and may therefore see the greatest benefits from an alternative approach.

Schools can also use their data to estimate different returns on investment of alternative discipline strategies. These may include social, economic, or environmental returns.





STEP TWO: Review your school's current discipline policies & practices.

As you begin to evaluate your school's discipline plan for effectiveness, consider the goals and objectives of all policies and rules that involve student behavior. To be effective, behavioral expectations must be predictable and achievable for each student. Disciplinary practices inevitably disadvantage children with disabilities if involuntary manifestations of those disabilities overlap with behaviors that violate student codes of conduct. Seemingly neutral policies, such as those around attendance, dress code, and homework, may be written or enforced in a way that make compliance more difficult for some students who struggle with behavior regulation, such as those with ADHD or TS. This may lead to punitive discipline for behaviors that pose no threat to the safety of students.^{17,18}

Revising student codes of conduct to emphasize anticipatory guidance, timely feedback, and positive reinforcement as alternatives to punitive discipline in the context of minor rule breaking may be a reasonable early step in your process. This will also likely reduce the administrative burden of creating new punitive disciplinary action when rule breaking occurs.



STEP THREE: Engage faculty, parents/guardians, & students to explore what is working & what could be improved.

All parts of this process can include student, parent/guardian, faculty, and community engagement to assess readiness and which strategies may be best suited to their unique school environment.

This also offers an opportunity for administrators to engage with and center students in this process, which can lead to garnering feedback on current disciplinary strategies. Engagement with students may, for example, result in the revision of dress codes,^{19,20} which have been associated with high rates of punitive discipline.²¹ Engagement with faculty, parents/guardians, and students may reveal misunderstandings or challenges with meeting certain behavioral expectations. Addressing these challenges might include incorporating positive interventions identified in a student's IEP or 504 Plan both inside and outside of the classroom, additional instruction or changes to the environment, anticipatory guidance and redirection.

All parts of this process can include student, parent/guardian, faculty, and community engagement to assess readiness and which strategies may be best suited to their unique school environment.



STEP FOUR: In partnership with parents/ guardians, teachers, students, & community groups, select which approach(es) to adopt.

There are many positive approaches that schools can implement, and it's important to work with your school community to identify the right fit. This community may extend beyond school grounds, to education- and disability-focused organizations and groups in your district, region, or state.

Common approaches are outlined in the Appendix. Note that these strategies may be implemented concurrently for a comprehensive approach to strengthen the school social and emotional environment and help all students thrive. For example, a school could adopt a trauma-informed approach and prioritize addressing the impact of traumatic stress when offering cognitive behavioral therapy through a tiered support system like PBIS, and simultaneously implement restorative practices in the classroom for all students to address harm within the school ecosystem.

In addition to the Appendix, this fact sheet highlights resources such as CDC's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child model and includes multiple resources for strategy development and implementation.





STEP FIVE: Explore how state & federal laws can bolster new practices.

As a reminder, such laws include, for example:

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA).

IDEA emphasizes the unique needs of students, addresses individualized behavioral interventions, requires a process for determining appropriate disciplinary actions, including an assessment of whether student conduct was a manifestation of their disability (a.k.a. manifestation determinations),²² and addresses exclusionary discipline, including what disciplinary actions school staff may or may not take such as informal removals.²³

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

This federal law states that schools must make reasonable adjustments to discipline policies to accommodate students with disabilities.^{24,25} Like IDEA, it requires a manifestation determination prior to a significant change in placement due to disciplinary removal.²⁶

Due process.

The due process clause of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution guarantees due process before the government can deny a person of “life, liberty, or property.”^{27,28} If not properly implemented, disciplinary actions may constitute a violation of the child’s constitutional due process rights.²⁹ There are also due process rights provided by IDEA.

State law.

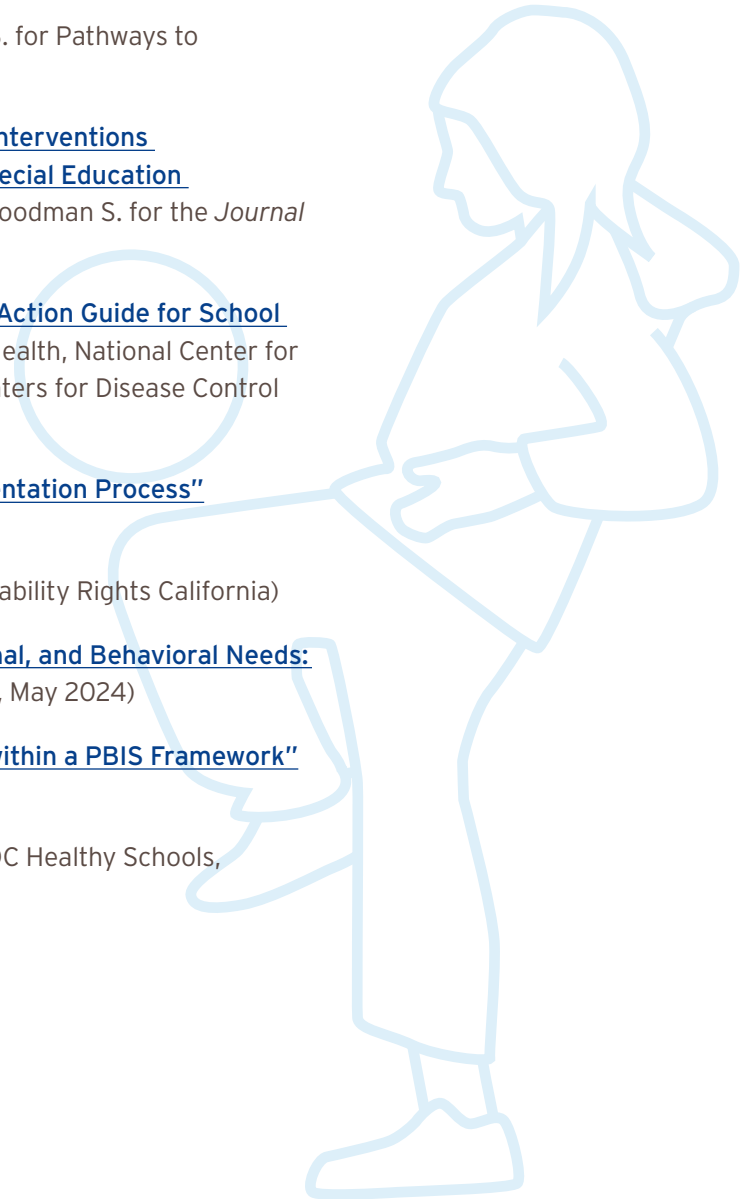
State laws often regulate many areas of school discipline, such as the grounds for suspension or expulsion,³⁰ the scope of codes of conduct,³¹ and use of multi-tiered frameworks and systems of support.³² Differences on state laws can be accessed through [U.S. Department of Education’s list of State contacts](#) or the [Education Commission of the States’ 50-state comparison on K-12 governance](#).

District rules and requirements.

Districts and local communities may have additional rules and guidance that affect discipline and behavior expectations.

Resources

- [Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports \(PBIS\)](#)
- [National School Climate Resource Center](#)
- [“50-State Comparison: School Discipline Policies”](#) (Education Commission of the States, May 2021)
- [“Fostering Belonging, Transforming Schools: The Impact of Restorative Practices”](#) (Darling-Hammond S. for the Learning Policy Institute, May 2023)
- [“Guiding Questions for Policies and Procedures”](#) (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments’ Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package, July 2018)
- [“Integrating Restorative Practices and PBIS”](#) (Hampson B. for Pathways to Restorative Communities, October 2019)
- [“Leveraging Findings on the Cost of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports to Inform Decision Making by Leaders in Special Education Programming”](#) (Bradshaw C., Lindstrom Johnson S., and Goodman S. for the *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, March 2021)
- [“Promoting Mental Health and Well-Being in Schools: An Action Guide for School and District Leaders”](#) (Division of Adolescent and School Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, December 2023)
- [“Restorative Justice in Schools: A Whole-School Implementation Process”](#) (Center for Court Innovation, January 2020)
- [Special Education Rights and Responsibilities \(SERR\)](#) (Disability Rights California)
- [“Supporting and Responding to Students’ Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Needs: Evidence-Based Practices for Educators”](#) (Center on PBIS, May 2024)
- [“Supporting Students with Disabilities in the Classroom within a PBIS Framework”](#) (Center on PBIS, September 2020)
- [Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child \(WSCC\)](#) (CDC Healthy Schools, February 2023)



Case studies & examples

- [“Can Restorative Practices Improve School Climate and Curb Suspensions?”](#)
(Augustine C., Engberg J., Grimm G., Lee E., Wang E.L., Christianson K., Joseph A. for RAND, December 2018)
- [Examples](#) (Center on PBIS)
- [Restorative Justice](#) (Oakland Unified School District)
- [“Promoting Positive School Discipline: Four Colorado School Case Studies”](#)
(The Evaluation Center at University of Colorado Denver)



Appendix: What are examples of positive discipline strategies that schools can implement?

This section includes common positive discipline strategies that schools can implement. They can be implemented concurrently to strengthen school environments. Additional, concurrent school-based mental health supports may improve the efficacy of such strategies, as is the case when implementing trauma-informed schools.³³

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS)

MTSS is a framework that incorporates data-based decision-making to support students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs. The framework can support program improvement, high-quality instruction and intervention, positive behavioral supports, and social **and** emotional learning.³⁴ Below are some examples of practices and approaches that can help advance and implement MTSS.



Trauma-informed schools

Children who have experienced trauma are less likely to be engaged in school³⁵ and more likely to experience punitive discipline in high school.^{36,37} Trauma-informed policies “recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress” and “infuse and sustain trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills into...organizational cultures, practices and policies.”³⁸

What administrators should know:

- These policies are linked to reduced anxiety,^{39,40,41} suspensions,^{42,43} and disciplinary referrals.^{44,45}
- Trauma-informed policies may be most effective when they employ the concepts of cognitive behavioral therapy and when schools develop/implement them in partnership with trained mental health clinicians.⁴⁶

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

The most common adoption of the MTSS framework, PBIS, provides different levels of services based on a child's need. This offers the most support to the children who need it most.

What administrators should know:

- Schools and IEP teams are required to consider PBIS to address behavior that impedes a child's learning or that of others for children receiving services under IDEA⁴⁷ and Section 504.⁴⁸
- PBIS has been shown to improve relationships between teachers and their students with ADHD, which are more likely to be strained.⁴⁹
- PBIS improves social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes and reduces suspensions of students with disabilities.⁵⁰
- PBIS should be carefully tuned to the specific sociocultural needs and capabilities of students and include coping skills, supportive structures, anticipatory guidance, a focus on attainable rewards, and a broader understanding of mental health.⁵¹
- **Schools should note that PBIS is a comprehensive framework that includes evidence-based practices to support and respond to students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs at the classroom, school, and district levels. Focusing solely on rewards is not consistent with a PBIS approach and may not benefit students with involuntary behaviors, such as students with TS.**^{52,53,54}
- Reward systems must be carefully tailored to children who have difficulties with motivation, behavior regulation, or sustained attention, as is typical for children with ADHD.
- PBIS implementation can return significant cost savings.⁵⁵

Restorative practices

Restorative practices, also known as restorative justice (RJ), focus on relationships rather than punishment and are premised on the belief that students will adopt prosocial behavior out of a desire for positive relationships.⁵⁶

What administrators should know:

- **RJ** program success may be highly dependent on key factors, **such as the following:**
 - **Program quality.** Lighter-touch programs that rely heavily on teachers to get up to speed on restorative practices and less on intentional cultural shifts in schoolwide values are cheaper but less effective.⁵⁷
 - **Readiness to adopt restorative practices.** Schools that do not have sufficient buy-in from staff may struggle to shift practices.⁵⁸
 - **Teacher discretion.** Discretion in when to employ restorative practices may lead to racially biased implementation.⁵⁹
- RJ programs that are implemented while intentionally considering systemic and institutionalized inequities⁶⁰ may be more equitable and effective. Failing to make these considerations may lead to policies that are “destined to maintain the legacy of institutional racial [and ability] bias as expressed in the school-to-prison pipeline.”⁶¹
- RJ processes may need to leave room for flexibility to best support students with disabilities.⁶²
- RJ can reduce exclusionary discipline use overall and narrow disparities in punitive discipline of children with disabilities and/or children of color.
- RJ may be most effective in programs with the following qualities:
 - Principle-based
 - Comprehensive
 - Focused on equity
 - Include contextually sensitive implementation plans
 - Rolled out strategically
 - Include long-term implementation plans focused on sustainability and professional support⁶³

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