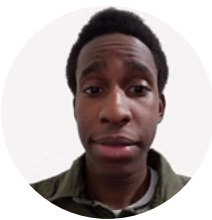

Why can't they all be best in class?

Researchers at VCU and the University of Florida are developing positive-reinforcement intervention techniques to address problem behavior that may be more prevalent among schoolchildren from low-income homes.



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According to psychologist Arnold Sameroff's transactional model of development, human beings affect their environment and vice versa. Unfortunately, children from poor families may be disproportionately affected by the negative aspects of their environment. They may be more inclined to misbehave because of poor nutrition and other factors associated with poverty.

Fortunately, researchers at VCU and the University of Florida are developing intervention techniques to address problem behavior that

Best in Class advocates reinforcement, such as praise and rewards, to shape children's behavior.



may be more prevalent among schoolchildren from low-income homes. The research has an appropriate name: Best in Class.

The research began in 2007 with children in pre-kindergarten from Henrico and Richmond. The resulting intervention methods soon were applied in several communities in Florida. Several years and grants later, the program has expanded to elementary school students as well as pre-K.

The Best in Class concept was developed by:

- Dr. Kevin Sutherland, a professor of the VCU Department of Special Education and Disability Policy at VCU
- Dr. Maureen Conroy, a former VCU professor and now co-director of the Anita Zucker Center of Excellence at the University of Florida
- Dr. Bryce McLeod, an associate professor of the VCU Department of Psychology who specializes in treatment integrity measurements

Sutherland's interest in child development began with his work in residential treatment and teaching of children with emotional and behavioral disorders.

In 2007, officials with the Virginia Preschool Initiative in Henrico County contacted Sutherland and Conroy to develop a treatment for children with problem behavior. After a lot of deliberation and a grant from the federal Institute of Education Sciences, the VCU duo started to develop what is now known as Best in Class.

The intervention is based on three psychological theories:

- B.F Skinner's operant conditioning theory, which says behavior is determined by



WELCOME TO THE BEST IN CLASS WEBSITE!

BEST in CLASS, developed with funding from the Institute of Education Sciences of the United States Department of Education as a Goal 2 (Development and Innovation) project, is a Tier 2 intervention designed to address the needs of young children who demonstrate persistent and intensive challenging behaviors in early childhood programs, which place them at future risk for developing social, emotional and behavioral disorders.

‘We’re trying to break the cycle early and make those coercive interaction patterns more positive,’ Sutherland says.

reinforcement and punishment. Best in Class advocates reinforcement, such as praise and rewards, to shape children’s behavior.

- Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory. It says our behavior and outlook on life are molded by society, which is molded by the government and media, which are molded by communities, which are molded by families, which mold an individual.
- Sameroff’s transactional theory, which says we affect and are affected by our interactions with our environment. When those interactions are negative, they can create a vicious cycle for the child-teacher relationship.

“We’re trying to break the cycle early and make those coercive interaction patterns more positive,” Sutherland said. “So from a transactional perspective, the child impacts the teacher’s behavior and the teacher’s behavior in turn impacts the child. What we’re trying to do is change that cycle.”

Instead of punishment, the intervention focuses on constructive support such as praise and positive feedback.

Best in Class is known as a Tier 2 intervention. It focuses on 15-20 percent of a selected population – or about two or three students per class. The program uses teacher input and national data to identify students who most need help with behavioral disorders. Teachers then implement the Best in Class teachings on these high risk students, but are more than encouraged to apply these methods to the rest of the class.

The next step in the study is to determine whether the intervention methods have lasting effects on children. The researchers are hoping

to track the benefits over time.

“My hope is that the elementary project that we are developing will demonstrate promise and we will write a grant for a larger study,” Sutherland said. “What I would like to do is follow those kids in subsequent years in school.” •