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## Synthesis

# Behaviour interventions <sup>i</sup>

Moderate impact for moderate cost, based on extensive evidence

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Behaviour interventions seek to improve attainment by reducing challenging behaviour. This entry covers interventions aimed at reducing a variety of behaviours, from low-level disruption to aggression, violence, bullying, substance abuse and general anti-social activities. The interventions themselves can be split into three broad categories:

1. approaches to developing a positive school ethos or improving discipline across the whole school which also aim to support greater engagement in learning;
2. universal programmes which seek to improve behaviour and generally take place in the classroom; and
3. more specialised programmes which are targeted at students with specific behavioural issues.

Other approaches, such as Parental engagement and Social and emotional learning programmes, are often associated with reported improvements in school ethos or discipline, but are not included in this summary, which is limited to interventions that focus directly on behaviour.

## How effective is it?

Evidence suggests that, on average, behaviour interventions can produce moderate improvements in academic performance along with a decrease in problematic behaviours. However, estimated benefits vary widely across the categories of programme described above. Impacts are larger for targeted interventions matched to specific students with particular needs or behavioural issues than for universal interventions or whole school strategies. School-level behaviour approaches are often related to improvements in attainment, but there is a lack of evidence to show that the improvements are actually caused by the behaviour interventions, rather than other school interventions happening the same time. Parental and community involvement programmes are often associated with reported improvements in school ethos or discipline and so are worth considering as alternatives to direct behaviour interventions.

Approaches such as improving teachers' behaviour management and pupils' cognitive and social skills seem to be equally effective.

The majority of studies report higher impact with older pupils. There is some anecdotal evidence about the benefits of reducing problematic behaviour of disruptive pupils on the attainment of their classmates, but this is an understudied dimension in evaluations of behaviour programmes.

## Latin American Evidence<sup>ii</sup>

There are several studies in Latin America and the Caribbean on student behaviour, school environment and school life. This research is mostly descriptive and correlational, with a few based on pre and post-test evaluations. Some studies seek to describe the characteristics of bullying in school, types of violent practices, factors associated with bullying, the role of family and student social background, and to a lesser extent, how bullying, violence and negative school environments are related to academic performance.

A study conducted in Mexico shows that school bullying affected the academic performance of fifth and sixth graders in terms of generating absenteeism and classwork problems. Another study carried out in Chile, shows that bullying was present in both private and public schools and among boys and girls. Its prevalence at primary level was higher than at secondary level and it tended to decrease as pupils got older, but it did not disappear completely. The researchers concluded that at primary level bullying affected both school environment and performance whereas for secondary students, performance was only indirectly affected, through the school environment.

Behaviour interventions in Latin America tend to focus more on improving school environment, and reducing bullying and violent practices than on improving academic attainment. In general, it is not possible to conclude to what extent the improvement of attitudes and behaviour impacts on academic performance because the evidence is limited and not generalizable. Further research is required to establish causal claims between behaviour and academic performance.

## How secure is the evidence?

Overall, it is clear that reducing challenging behaviour in schools can have a direct and lasting effect on pupils' learning. This is based on a number of meta-analyses that review robust studies of interventions in schools.

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Some caution is needed in interpreting the headline finding as the majority of the meta-analyses of behaviour interventions focus on pupils diagnosed with specific emotional or behavioural disorders, not on low-level classroom disruption. Further research is needed to investigate links between universal approaches to improving general classroom behaviour and better learning outcomes.

One meta-analysis of an anger management intervention shows a positive effect on behaviour but an overall negative effect on learning. This implies that careful targeting and evaluation is important, and demonstrates that it is possible to reduce problematic behaviour without improving learning.

This lack of strong evidence does not mean that impact is not achievable, but schools considering aspiration interventions cannot assume that raising aspirations will be straightforward or will necessarily increase attainment.

## What are the costs?

Costs will be highly dependent on the type of intervention. Teacher-led behavioural interventions in the classroom are the least expensive (the only cost is likely to be that of relevant continuing professional development for the teachers) but the also least effective. One to one support is more expensive but more effective. The cost rating presented here relates to the cost of the more intensive interventions. Overall, costs are estimated as moderate.

## What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Targeted interventions for those diagnosed or at risk of emotional or behavioural disorders produce the greatest effects.
2. Programmes of two to six months seem to produce more long-lasting results.
3. The wide variation in impact suggests that schools should look for programmes with a proven track record of impact.
4. Have you considered what training and professional development is required for any programmes you plan to adopt?
5. Have you explored how to involve parents or communities in behaviour programmes? This appears to increase impact.

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SUMMA (2019) Latin American Evidence, Behaviour interventions.