

What Is B.I.S.T.?

After some researching, we discovered that in Missouri, and increasingly throughout the Midwest, a particular behavioral modification program known as Behavior Intervention Support Team, or BIST, has been adopted for regular classroom management in public school districts.

The primary aim of BIST is to ensure smooth compliance of school directives in a "zero-tolerance with zero reject" environment. BIST was originally designed for use in a treatment facility for troubled teens in Kansas City, MO, known as Ozanam. The BIST program seeks to address behavior problems in the class through an aggressive, preemptive intervention strategy. This is accomplished through "GRACE with accountability," where GRACE stands for "Giving Responsibility and Accountability to Children in Education." In its original conception, BIST aimed at keeping high-risk students successful in a regular classroom setting; however, as the program's current mission statement shows, today it is used for all children to reduce "challenging" behaviors in the classroom.

So what's so bad about that? At first, we didn't know ourselves.

BIST, Behind the Scenes

But let's think about this. Should a program developed for use with troubled teenagers in a reform school be applied across the board to normal children in a regular elementary school? This results in a severe prison-like environment with rules and procedures for every activity, no matter how minor. Being a zero-tolerance system, any infraction of the rules no matter how accidental or benign is treated the same as the most blatant and willful violation. In such a system, there is no way for a youngster to not be in violation. This causes children to be cowed, their spirits, along with their natural curiosity, broken. The school day becomes a tricky navigation of the system as they are hit with something every time they turn around.

It is hard to imagine how extreme these schools have become. For example, back when we were in school, we were expected to stay in line and be orderly in the halls. But now, there are actual lines marked on the floor which the kids must stay on when walking, and they are reprimanded for stepping off the line. Also there is a whole list of rules posted in the bathroom: "No Talking, Only One Squirt of Soap, No Shooting Baskets with the Paper Towels," etc. They are not allowed to talk in the bathroom? We would never have imagined.

BIST in Action: Act, Don't Speak

After researching BIST further, we found that students actually are rarely expected to say much, if anything at all. MisterBister instructs teachers to expect students to "do what asked within two secs" without talking or asking any questions. This is especially hard if you don't know what you've done. Or, if you know the directive is unjust. So, BIST provides for this, too. MisterBister advises these guidelines for students to follow:

1. Do what I don't want to. : Say "Yes." Calmly looking in the adults' direction. Do what asked within two secs.
2. Be OK when mad: Say "I feel mad. I can stay here or Can I go to the safe seat." Calmly looking in the adults' direction. Move if needed with two secs.
3. Be OK when others are not. Say "I don't like that. I can stay here or Can I go to the safe seat." Calmly looking in the adults' direction. Move if needed with two secs.

The obvious goal here is submissive compliance to an overbearing system of dominance wherein the children are treated as inmates. It is not a learning environment, but a punitive one: an environment where teachers and administrators are focused on children developing submissive acquiescence rather than acquiring knowledge, an environment which values docility over curiosity.

What we discovered was a steady onslaught of low expectations, coupled with a general belief that every behavior requires correction, and every directive necessitates instantaneous compliance. All of this adds up to an impossible and overwhelming environment that breaks the spirit of normal, intelligent, happy children.