

# **BEST in CLASS: Improving Interactions Between Teachers and Students**

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# BEST IN CLASS: IMPROVING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Young students who exhibit problematic behaviours in school often fail to fully benefit from their educational experiences and can have adjustment problems later in life. **Dr Maureen Conroy** at the University of Florida and **Dr Kevin Sutherland** at Virginia Commonwealth University have been developing a classroom-based intervention model called BEST in CLASS, designed to improve how teachers and young children with chronic behavioural problems interact with each other.

## Chronic Problematic Behaviour in Early Childhood

The number of children under five who present challenging behaviours that could interfere with their social or emotional development is on the rise. Studies suggest that around 14–30% of preschool children exhibit significantly problematic behaviour and that these rates tend to be higher for children living in poverty.

The term ‘problematic behaviour’ generally refers to a wide range of issues, including difficulties in interacting with others, disruptiveness, heightened aggression, or other anti-social tendencies. In very young children, these could be the initial signs of emotional and behavioural disorders, a series of conditions in which a child’s behaviour and emotions are greatly different from typically accepted norms, to the point of negatively affecting his or her performance at school or in other life situations.

In some cases, children who display challenging behaviours from a very young age can later be diagnosed with conditions such as conduct disorder, oppositional defiant disorder, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or anxiety disorders.

An early onset of behavioural issues in young children has also been found to predict other problems, such as drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, violence, and early school dropout. For children with problematic behaviours, learning and feeling

at ease within school environments can be particularly challenging.

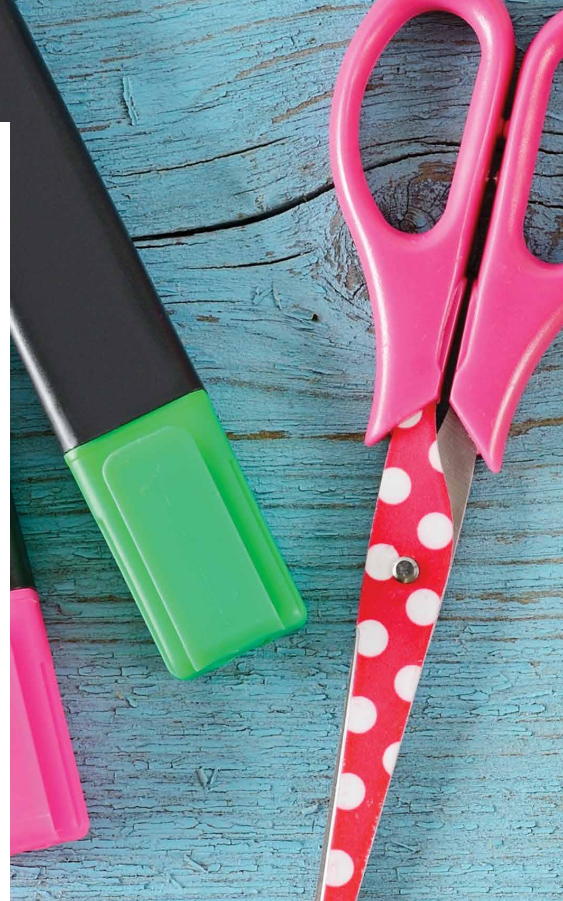
In time, adverse experiences in early school years could lead these children to develop an unpleasant relationship with classroom environments, accentuating their behavioural issues further. Teaching these children and helping them to modify their problematic behaviour can be a very difficult task and teachers might need to resort to more personalised instructional methods, tailored around their needs.

## A Need for Early Interventions

Research has found that if a child’s behavioural problems are not addressed at a young age they tend to increase over time, with the child needing more intensive support in the future. Evidence suggests that problematic behaviour could often be altered by effective early intervention programs designed for young children who are encountering difficulties as they are first entering learning environments.

Over the past few decades, researchers have tried to devise models that could be applied in early education settings, in order to address children’s behavioural problems sooner and try to prevent these from evolving into more serious issues.

Dr Conroy and Dr Sutherland have carried out extensive research into social and behavioural disorders in children, trying to devise interventions that could help affected children to develop an enduring positive



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relationship with their teachers in learning environments. Together, the two researchers have developed BEST in CLASS, a classroom-based tier-two early intervention program designed to improve chronic problematic behaviours in children who are at risk of developing emotional and behavioural disorders.

### **BEST in CLASS Intervention Program**

The BEST in CLASS intervention program was developed by Dr Conroy and Dr Sutherland working with other researchers from their respective universities. The project, funded by the National Center for Education Research, the National Center for Special Education Research and the Institute of Education Sciences of the US Department of Education, is aimed at addressing the needs of young children who present persistent and severe problematic behaviours within early learning environments.

Drs Sutherland and Conroy describe that, 'BEST in CLASS is a classroom-based tier-two model that trains and coaches teachers to improve their interactions with young children and students who exhibit chronic problem behaviours.' They explain that, 'teachers are trained and coached to implement evidence-based practices with these children as well as strategies for engaging families.'

The intervention has two main components, one being the content used to train teachers on how to encourage appropriate behaviours and social skills in the classroom, and the other focused on establishing a home-school partnership that could help improve the children's problematic behaviour.

The first component of the BEST in CLASS intervention is aimed at coaching teachers of students from preschool to Grade 3 (aged 3-8 years old) on the use of evidence-based instructional practices that could support children with challenging behaviours in their learning, preventing their behaviour from evolving into further issues in the future.

While most teachers may be already using some of these methods, BEST in CLASS trains and coaches' teachers to increase their high-quality use of these practices, in order to successfully instil the social and behavioural skills necessary for success in school to young children who might need it the most.

### **Coaching Teachers to Interact with Challenging Young Children**

The coaching model used by BEST in CLASS was developed by Dr Conroy and Dr Sutherland, based on the findings of prior special education research. The model is based on the notion that high-quality learning environments for children with problematic behaviour should be tailored around their individual needs. It supports teachers to use the evidence-based practices with specific students in their classroom who have chronic problem behaviour.

Teachers participating in the intervention receive a BEST in CLASS teacher manual and attend a one-day workshop introducing them to seven learning modules. During this workshop, the teachers are asked to complete a series of practical activities, view video examples of how to implement BEST in CLASS practices in their classroom, and participate in role-play scenarios with their coaches.



Subsequently, the teachers are coached individually for 14 weeks by a trained coach, who provides guidance and teaches them how to implement practices that could improve their students' problematic behaviour. The BEST in CLASS training and coaching model focuses on practices such as rules, pre-correction, behaviour specific praise, opportunities to respond, corrective feedback, and instructive feedback.

The teachers collaborate with their coaches throughout the training period, setting goals for the teachers' use of the practices in their classrooms and working together towards meeting these goals, by implementing the program's teaching practices in ways that might be more beneficial for their children. Teachers are then asked to apply what they discussed during the coaching sessions to their interactions with students who have been found to display persistent behavioural problems. After helping the teachers to devise a plan of action for specific children, the coach conducts weekly observation and feedback sessions as well as checking-in with them on a regular basis via e-mail or phone.

During weekly coaching meetings teachers are encouraged to reflect on their use of BEST in CLASS practices, communicating any relevant feedback or insights to the coach through a weekly self-reflection form. During the 14 weeks of coaching, coaches observe the teachers in a classroom situation and then meet with them to reflect on whether the goals they had set together have been met.

The families of the young students who present challenging behaviours are also involved in the program through the establishment of a stronger home-school partnership, and teachers are supported by coaches to encourage parents or caregivers to communicate with their children's teachers on a regular basis.

## Assessing the Effects of BEST in CLASS

Dr Conroy and Dr Sutherland have carried out a series of studies funded by the Institute of Education Sciences, to determine the effects of their BEST in CLASS intervention on the behavioural, social, emotional, and pre-academic outcomes of pre-school children at high risk of developing emotional and behavioural disorders.

These studies assessed the effects of BEST in CLASS by comparing two samples of teachers, one who participated in the program and one who did not. Among other things, these studies assessed how teachers used the relevant instructional practices and whether they felt more confident in delivering them after receiving coaching.

The BEST in CLASS intervention was found to have a positive impact on the teacher's sense of self-efficacy, with those who took part in the intervention using instructional practices more effectively and confidently than those who didn't.

After receiving coaching, the teachers demonstrated more competence in delivering instructional practices and felt they were more able to meet the individual needs of their students. Other important aspects that were examined include the general atmosphere in the classroom before and after the intervention, as well as the quality of interactions and relationships between the children and their teachers.

The researchers found that BEST in CLASS had an overall positive impact on the classroom atmosphere, increasing engagement of children in the treatment group and reducing their problematic behaviour. Moreover, the program also appeared successful in improving interactions between teachers and children who had persistently displayed challenging behaviour, increasing the number of positive exchanges and decreasing negative ones.

## Tackling Behavioural Difficulties from a Younger Age

The introduction of high-quality early childhood intervention programs is of great importance, particularly for younger children who are more at risk of developing emotional and behavioural disorders. The first years of life tend to be the best time to address

particularly challenging behaviours and many interventions in early learning environments were found to be effective in improving children's problematic behaviours.

Programs such as BEST in CLASS could be of great assistance to pre-school and elementary teachers, providing important support and guidance on how to best address any chronic behavioural problems presented in their classroom. In their research assessing the effects of the intervention, Dr Conroy and Dr Sutherland observed that the teachers' increased and higher quality delivery of instructional practices can be effective in improving young children's behaviour in the classroom.

The BEST in CLASS intervention program also appeared to prompt a cascade of positive effects on teacher-child interactions, relationships and classroom atmosphere, that was ultimately beneficial for both the children and their teachers. In future, the researchers aim to assess whether teachers who take part in the intervention continue to effectively deliver the BEST in CLASS instructional practices in the years after the program is complete.

Despite indications that support its effectiveness as an intervention to address problematic behaviours at early stages of life, the BEST in CLASS intervention might be difficult to be delivered in all educational settings given its use of coaches to support teachers' use of the practices. The current program requires teachers to meet up with coaches on a weekly basis, so some schools might not have the resources to completely implement the coaching aspect of the model.

The researchers are hence working on the development of a more efficient model, including a web-based adaptation that could reach a greater number of teachers and would not require as many resources as the face-to-face program.

In addition, Drs Conroy and Sutherland describe how, 'we're also currently adapting BEST in CLASS preschool for elementary school teachers, students and families and hope to test this model in a large randomised controlled trial.'



# Meet the researchers

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Dr Conroy is the Anita Zucker Endowed Professor, Professor of Special Education and Early Childhood Studies, and the co-director of the Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies at the University of Florida. She holds an MEd and a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University. Dr Conroy has carried out extensive early intervention research on children with social behavioural disabilities, or those at risk of developing them. She is a regular speaker at International conferences on topics related to early childhood and has received countless grants and awards for her work. Dr Conroy has published over 100 articles and chapters in the fields of autism, early intervention, and behavioural disorders.

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Dr Sutherland is a Professor in the Department of Counselling and Special Education, the director of the doctoral studies program, and a research faculty member at the Clark-Hill Institute for Positive Youth Development at Virginia Commonwealth University. He holds an MEd from the College of William and Mary and a PhD in Special Education from Vanderbilt University. Dr Sutherland is a member of a number of editorial boards and has published over 60 articles and chapters describing his work. His research focuses on intervention programs for problematic behaviour in schools and community settings, as well as adolescent bullying prevention initiatives.

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### PROJECT WEBSITE

<https://education.ufl.edu/best-in-class/>

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