

Supporting Students with Comorbid Reading and Behavioral Disabilities

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What are comorbid disabilities?

Students with comorbid disabilities experience significant challenges in two or more domains, including reading, math, writing, behavior, attention, anxiety, etc. Students with comorbid reading and behavioral disabilities often struggle to accurately and fluently decode text while also exhibiting challenging behaviors.

How do comorbid reading and behavioral disabilities present?

Students that struggle with both decoding skills and exhibit challenging behaviors often engage in behaviors to avoid reading tasks. For example, when asked to read a list of words with consonant digraphs, a student may begin arguing with a peer to avoid reading words they perceive as challenging.

What are the outcomes for students with comorbid disabilities?

Students with both reading and behavioral disabilities are at increased risk for adverse outcomes. Students with an emotional or behavioral disability often perform one to two grade levels below their same-age peers in reading and writing (Gage et al., 2014, Low & Feldman, 2007). An inability to decode words accurately and fluently can have dire effects of students' ability to progress through school and can lead to increased rates of high school dropout and fewer opportunities for desired employment. These difficulties tend to increase over time due to the comorbid, reciprocal relationship between problem behavior and literacy challenges (Chow et al., 2018).

What are best practices for supporting students with reading and behavioral disabilities?

Reading

- Provide explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics
- Use a research-based intervention that includes an established scope and sequence
- Provide students ample opportunities to practice reading decodable texts
- Ensure students are still have access to high-quality Tier 1 reading instruction
- Monitor student progress through frequent formative assessments and adjust instruction based on student data

Behavior

- Know the function of the behavior -
 - Is the student trying to escape the activity, get attention, or gain access to an activity (such as recess)?
- Provide as many opportunities to respond for the student as possible to keep them engaged.
- Remember the magic ratio!
 - 5 (or more) positives for every 1 correction
- Reinforce students demonstrating expected behaviors through a token economy or group contingency plan.

How can we support students with both reading and behavioral challenges simultaneously?

Taxonomy Component	What is this?	Integrated Phonics & Behavior Supports
Strength	Does evidence suggest that this intervention is expected to lead to improved outcomes in the identified area of need?	<p>Phonics instruction is a widely researched and effective method for teaching students to decode words. Explicit phonics instruction has been found to be effective for a range of student populations.</p> <p>A variety of positive behavior support can be embedded into phonics interventions to support and improve students' prosocial behaviors. c</p>
Dosage	Will the group size, duration, structure, and frequency provide sufficient opportunities for students to respond and receive corrective feedback? Does the intervention include high rates of practice opportunities, positive feedback, reinforcers, and corrective feedback?	<p>Phonics instruction can be effectively delivered individually, in small groups, or whole class (NRP). Interventions up to 20 weeks can lead to substantial reading gains. Most interventions last from 20 - 50 minutes per day.</p> <p>Phonics interventions can be intensified by providing increased rates of OTRs, embedded more frequent positive feedback for appropriate behavior and accurate responding, and providing differential reinforcement. Differential reinforcement can be used with praise or tokens that are later exchanged for the student's preferred items/activities to support students' appropriate behavior.</p>
Alignment	Does the intervention match the student's identified needs? Are there embedded rewards that match the student's preferences?	<p>Phonics interventions should be used with students who have demonstrated word reading difficulties (rather than, for example, reading comprehension difficulties) to ensure intervention is effective (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008).</p> <p>Ensure the academic intervention is appropriately matched to students' abilities. Students may need explicit instruction in pre-requisite academic skills to reduce their frustration with challenging academic tasks (Sutherland et al., 2019).</p> <p>Ensure the behavioral supports are aligned to the students' function of their challenging behaviors.</p>
Attention to Transfer	Does the intervention assist the student in generalizing target skills to general education or other tasks?	<p>Connected texts can provide students opportunities to practice phonics skills in context and transfer skills to reading passages rather than words in isolation (Foorman et al, 2016). The cognitive processes behind reading and spelling are closely connected. Spelling practice should be part of phonics instruction to support struggling readers with their writing skills as well. (IDA).</p> <p>Ensure there is consistency of expectations and routines within the phonics intervention and other contexts (e.g., general education classroom, other interventions). Students may more easily generalize skills if the phonics intervention and English Language Arts instruction are similar in behavioral expectations and routines.</p>
Comprehensiveness	Does the intervention include elements of explicit instruction? Does the intervention include differential reinforcement for appropriate behavior?	<p>Phonics instruction should follow a scope and sequence based on developmental progression of phonics skills from basic to more complex sound-spelling patterns and smaller to bigger words (e.g. monosyllabic to multisyllabic words) (Foorman et al, 2016).</p> <p>Phonics intervention sessions should include explicit instruction, that includes teacher modeling and student practice, on behavior expectations. This prepares students for the expectations on how to appropriately engage and participate in the intervention. Frequent feedback with behavior specific praise or tokens/points that the student can later exchange for preferred activities/items can help support students' motivation during intervention (Chen et al., 2021).</p>
Academic & Behavior Support	Does the student have opportunities to develop the behavior skills necessary to be successful? Does the academic and behavioral interventions complement each other?	Ensure the phonics intervention materials and the behavioral supports complement one another. For example, ensure the selected behavioral supports can integrate easily into academic interventions. For example, increased OTRs may integrate easily into a direct instruction phonics intervention. Additionally, Tier 2/3 supports such as a token economy, Check-In/Check-Out or self-monitoring can be embedded within phonics intervention. The goals included in those interventions can target specific academic behaviors on interest.
Individualization	Can the intervention be individualized with a data-based process to meet student needs?	The phonics and behavioral interventions should be individualized and adjusted based on progressing monitoring and assessment data. Interventionists should employ data-based individualization to ensure the integrated interventions are resulting in positive effects on student reading outcomes (Lemons et al, 2014) and their prosocial behaviors.

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