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# Universal character education to support inclusion for students with emotional and behavioural challenges

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## Abstract

One of the most popular approaches to supporting the emotional and behavioral needs of students with disabilities in inclusive general education classrooms is the implementation of Tier-one practices (e.g., behavior-specific praise, opportunities to respond) within a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework. Although research has shown the promise of PBIS in supporting the needs of students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD), there is also recognition of the need for more intensive supports beyond PBIS practices to best address these students' many challenges in finding success in school. One option is to combine a PBIS approach with social-emotional learning (SEL) to deliver a more intense level of support. The current article describes such a program – the Positivity Project (P2) and outlines the ways in which it may be able to support the needs of students with EBD.

## 1. Introduction

Including students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) in the general education classroom can be a difficult task for teachers, as well as for the students themselves (Garwood, Brunsting, & McKenna, 2024; Marsh, 2018). Not only do teachers struggle to deliver effective instruction to students with EBD (McKenna, Newton, Brigham, & Garwood, 2022; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007), but these students continue to experience disproportionate rates of disciplinary exclusion in school (U.S. Department of Education EDFacts Data Warehouse, 2022). Despite these challenges, the rate of inclusion (i.e., being placed in the general education classroom for 80% or more of the day) for students with EBD increased from 44% in 2012 to 53% in 2020 (U.S. Department of Education EDFacts Data Warehouse, 2022). If the push for inclusion of students with EBD is maintained or intensified there needs to be a greater focus on preparing classroom teachers with the tools they need to best support these students; simultaneously, students with EBD need to feel welcomed and supported in these settings. Universal (i.e., Tier-one) approaches to behavior support may hold promise in supporting students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Simonsen, Meyer, Plumb, Duble Moore, & Sears, 2024).

## 1.1. Universal Behavioral Support for Inclusion

One of the most popular approaches to supporting the emotional and behavioral needs of students with disabilities in inclusive general education classrooms is the implementation of Tier-one practices (e.g., behavior-specific praise, opportunities to respond) within a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (Santiago-Rosario, McIntosh, Izzard, Lissman, & Calhoun, 2023) framework. Although research has shown the promise of PBIS in supporting the needs of students with Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (Lewis, Jones, Horner, & Sugai, 2010), there is also recognition of the need for more intensive supports beyond PBIS practices to best address these students' many challenges in finding success in school (Mitchell, Kern, & Conroy, 2019). One option is to combine a PBIS approach with social-emotional learning (SEL) to deliver a more intense level of support. Cook et al. (2015) explored this possibility and found that PBIS combined with SEL was more effective than either approach on its own in improving students' mental health and reducing externalizing behavior problems.

## 1.2. Social-Emotional Learning

The role of schools in children's development extends beyond a sole focus on academic achievement. For example, SEL the process of acquiring skills and attitudes to develop healthy emotions and behaviors, has become more prominent in schools across the United States (Gimbert, Miller, Herman, Breedlove, & Molina, 2023). Specifically, character education (CE), a form of SEL focused on behaviors and thoughts that promote positive relationships and goal attainment is now mandated in most states (Johnson, 2020). However, while meta-analyses have shown that SEL and CE interventions have a positive impact on the educational outcomes of general education students (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017), much less is known about the benefits of these programs for students with disabilities (Cipriano et al., 2023). Targeting students' subjective well-being through SEL/CE has been theorized as a possible path forward in the effort to improve educational outcomes for minoritized groups of students, such as students with disabilities (Elias, White, & Stepney, 2014). Students with EBD may especially benefit from this approach, as they are among the most vulnerable populations at risk for social and emotional difficulties (Skaar, Etscheidt, & Kraayenbrink, 2021). Researchers in the field of special education are calling for a strengths-based approach (Wehmeyer, 2021). Specifically, CE programs informed by the field of positive psychology may be able to help students reach their true potential in the classroom and beyond (Raley, Shogren, & Cole, 2021).

## 1.3. Positive Psychology

Whereas traditional approaches to student intervention have sought to identify areas of struggle for students (i.e., a deficit-based model), positive psychology offers a strengths-based approach to supporting students (Raley et al., 2021). The first question posed by those with a positive psychology orientation is, "What is right with the student?" Areas of strength are cultivated at the same time that attempts are made to address students' challenges. As the field of special education seeks to move past a deficit model that places undue stigma on students with disabilities (Wehmeyer, 2021), positive psychology provides a framework for the study of optimal student functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). "The ability to identify areas of strength can provide researchers and practitioners with important information to design interventions, engage in instructional planning, and support students' social, emotional, and academic needs" (Raley et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the use of positive psychology to inform interventions for students with disabilities is nearly non-existent (Shogren, 2013; Wehmeyer, 2021).

Recently, a CE program based on positive psychology – The Positivity Project (P2) – has been developed and is experiencing dramatic uptake in schools across the United States. P2 is an online professional development program offering a tier-one student CE curriculum. It equips educators and students with tools to foster socio-emotional skills through daily 15-minute learning modules throughout the school year. The program began with just 1 school and 480 students in 2015-2016 and expanded to an enrollment of over 800 partner schools and over 600,000 students in 29 states for the 2024-2025 school year.

## 1.4. The Positivity Project (P2)

The Positivity Project (P2) program focuses on the 24 unique character strengths (see Figure 1) from positive psychology to help students become the best versions of themselves. By taking a strengths-based approach to encourage positive behaviors, the program can potentially boost teacher buy-in. While many tier-one programs require strict adherence to intervention protocols, P2 is focused on giving teachers the flexibility to meet the individual needs of their students, all while making content delivery easier. By allowing teachers to adjust the material to fit each student, P2 also claims to strengthen the teacher-student relationship, as students feel that their teachers are providing relevant and personalized lessons. Research shows that a positive teacher-student bond helps improve the effectiveness of interventions (Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2013). The P2 implementation strategy playbooks, tailored to different grade levels, offer teachers ready-to-use resources for teaching character-building and relationship skills. These playbooks include detailed lesson plans and weekly slide presentations for quick, 15-minute daily lessons on character strengths (see Figure 2). The teacher-centered approach of P2 recognizes that teachers know their students best and should have the flexibility to adjust the curriculum as needed. However, consistency is key to the program's success, so the creators emphasize

sticking to the core structure. Teachers are encouraged not to change the slide decks themselves, but they do have the freedom to expand on the lesson content throughout the school day, drawing on their own knowledge of their students. Teachers introduce character strengths through explicit teaching for at least 10 minutes per day, 5 days per week (see Figure 3). Schools dedicate a whole week to each strength, helping students understand it through definitions, examples, discussions, and activities.
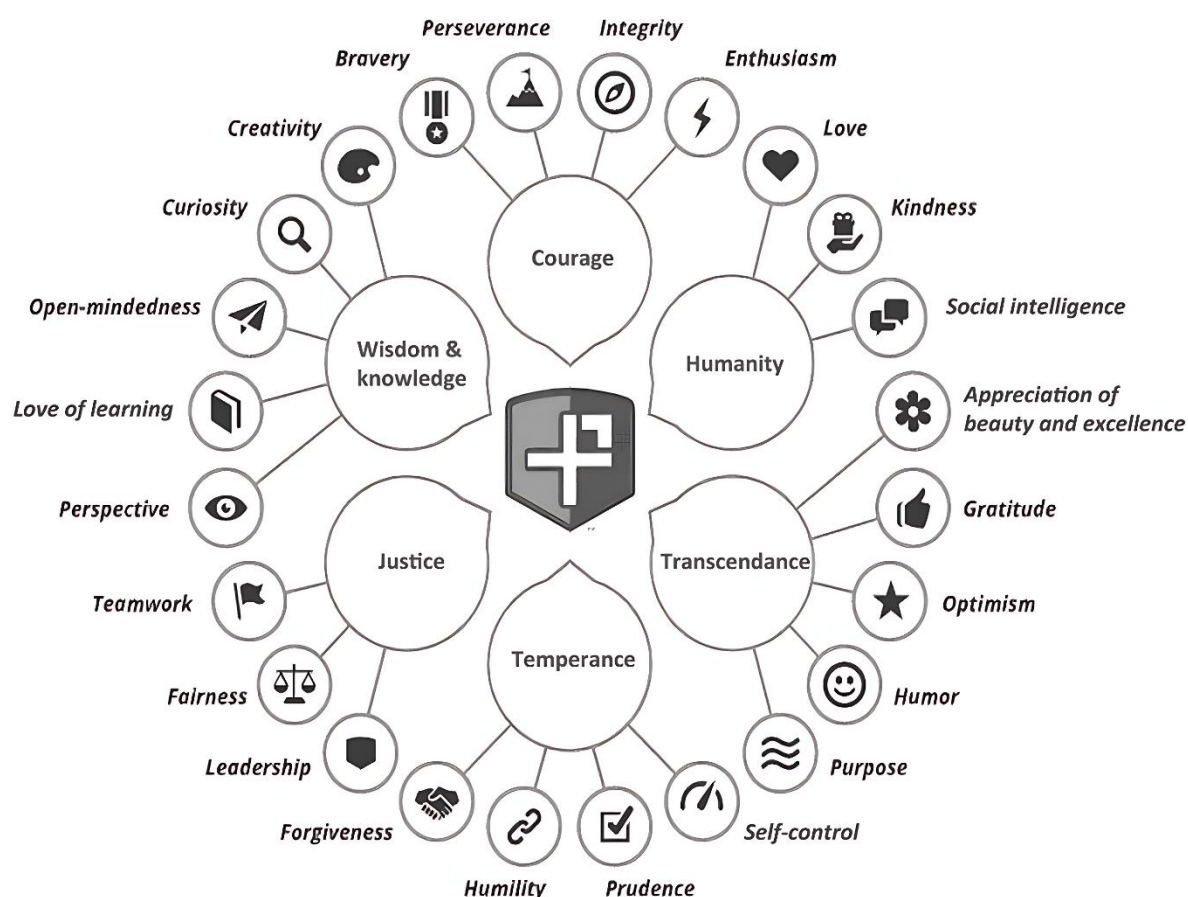


**Figure 1.** P2 model of positive psychology's character strengths and virtues.

The P2-school partnership starts with schools signing up on the P2 website. Once on board, elementary schools get online access to all of P2's digital resources, training, and strategies. This includes 32 weeks of grade-level slide presentations for daily, 15-minute lessons, plus 30 optional project-based learning lessons. Teachers also receive digital files for printing materials, and P2 even provides school apparel to distribute. At the start of the school year, school staff participate in a 3-hour staff-wide training using the P2 100 online video. This training helps teachers understand how to teach students about the 24 character strengths from positive psychology. The program offers two types of project units: school-wide and class-based. School-wide projects allow for celebrating local heroes, raising awareness about the P2 mission, or creating a shared theme across different grade levels. On the other hand, the class-based units let teachers help students apply their character strengths while making real connections to what they're learning in other subjects. There is also a P2 Project Library that teachers can explore for pre-developed projects, all tailored by grade level to meet the needs of students at different learning stages. Each daily 15-minute lesson includes a 3-5 minute opening activity (e.g., a video), followed by a discussion of the character strength for the day and week. Teachers have guiding questions in the slide deck to help lead the discussion. Students learn each strength through explicit teaching and by using a common vocabulary throughout the week. A typical P2 lesson plan might look like this:

Days 1 and 2: Introduce the character strength, reinforce its meaning, check for understanding, and have group discussions to clarify any questions.

Days 3 and 4: Engage students in an activity related to the strengths and continue small and large group discussions.

Day 5: Review the strength and give students time to reflect, possibly through journaling.

This approach helps keep the lessons focused and interactive while allowing teachers to connect with students in meaningful ways.
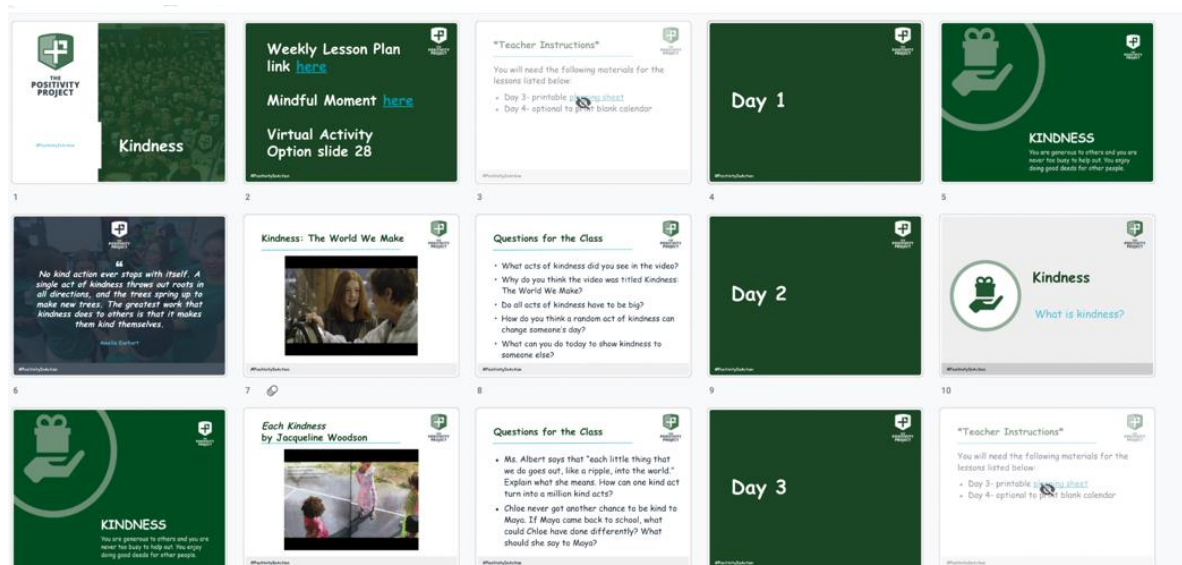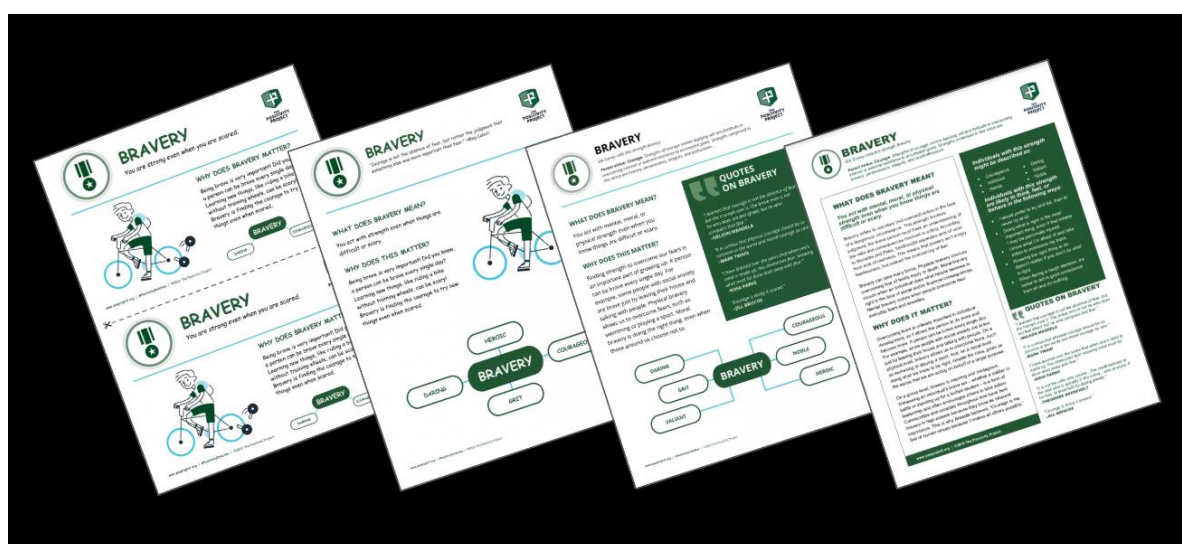
**Figure 2.** P2 slide decks for download.



**Figure 3.** P2 character cards.

### 1.5. Can P2 Support Students with EBD?

Although there is no empirical evidence demonstrating that a program such as P2 has a direct benefit for students with EBD, there is a theoretical match between the P2 curriculum and the diagnostic criteria for special education eligibility related to EBD. These criteria are admittedly vague, as has been stated by many experts in the field (Sallese, Garwood, Vannest, Kolbe, & Carlson, 2024; Wery & Cullinan, 2013), but students with EBD are known to struggle with feelings of belongingness (Marsh, 2018), motivation to learn (Lopes, 2005), social skills (Robinson-Ervin, Cartledge, Musti-Rao, Gibson Jr, & Keyes, 2016), and internalizing behaviors, such as anxiety and depression (Weist et al., 2018). Furthermore, students with EBD are known to struggle in developing relationships with others. A quasi-experimental study of P2 revealed significant increases in teacher-student relationship quality for elementary grade students, favoring the intervention group. Table 1 outlines ways in which P2 may address the unique challenges of students with EBD. Furthermore, there are four elements of the P2 program that may be especially beneficial to students with EBD and the teachers who serve them in schools. These aspects of P2 were gleaned from a review of the P2 YouTube page (@PositivityProject) and coded using both deductive and inductive qualitative methods.

**Table 1.** How P2May support students with EBD.

| Emotional disturbance criteria | Practitioner interpretation | Can P2 address these criteria? |
|---|---|---|
| 1.    An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. | Students may not have the intrinsic motivation to learn; they may experience learned helplessness. | The P2 program teaches students that they all have strengths and the ability to achieve their goals. |
| 2.    An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. | The student lacks a sense of belonging in school. | The P2 program has an explicit focus on empathy and relationship-building skills. |
| 3.    Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances | The student does not have appropriate social skills | The P2 program includes a common vocabulary taught to all students that may help create a sense of community in school. |
| 4.    A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression. | Student struggles with depression | The P2 program includes a focus on positive emotions, such as optimism and perseverance, which may help students overcome negative emotions. |
| 5.    A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. | Student struggles with anxiety; lacks appropriate coping skills | The P2 program has an other-people mindset taught throughout the school, increasing alignment in communication and expectations for student-to-student and student-to-staff interactions. |

### 1.5.1. Alignment with PBIS

P2 can serve as a complement to PBIS by explicitly teaching the prosocial behaviors and values that PBIS aims to promote. While PBIS establishes behavioral expectations and reinforcement systems, P2 may provide the instructional content to help students comprehend the underlying significance of these behaviors. Character strengths can be directly aligned with PBIS values, and recognition systems (e.g., tickets, shout-outs) can be utilized to acknowledge students who demonstrate specific P2 strengths.

### 1.5.2. Reduction in Behavioral Referrals

P2 delivers daily universal lessons designed to proactively instruct students on specific character strengths, such as self-control, forgiveness, fairness, and perspective. These lessons equip students with a structured framework for understanding and regulating their emotions and behaviors prior to the occurrence of conflict. Through daily discussions and reflections on character strengths and positive interpersonal relationships, students may gain a clearer understanding of the behaviors expected of them in school.

### 1.5.3. Increased Empathy and Care for Others

P2 explicitly teaches perspective, kindness, fairness, and love as character strengths and "Other People Mindset" lessons such as understanding and appreciating the good in others, knowing that your words and actions affect others, and supporting others when they struggle. Lessons often include scenarios that prompt students to think about others' feelings, followed by guided discussions, partner conversations, and reflection prompts. These practices help students consider how their actions impact others and cultivate an "Other People Mindset" the belief that relationships are foundational to well-being and success.

### 1.5.4. Improved Staff Morale

P2 lessons are designed to be low-prep and easy to facilitate, reducing the planning burden for educators. The structured, strengths-based approach also supports classroom management by fostering positive student behavior and reducing teacher stress. Additionally, the focus on relationship-building and shared language strengthens teacher-student connections, improving the overall classroom climate.

## 2. Conclusion

Research has yet to provide recommended approaches regarding P2 and students with EBD. However, there is reason to believe that such a CE program may be able to help these students. A strengths-based approach, such as the one used in P2, is considered best practice for students with disabilities.

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