The PAX Good Behavior Game

by Mark Katz, PhD

STUDIES SHOW A LINK between a child's self-control skills and a number of behavioral, educational, vocational, and other quality-of-life outcomes years later. If children with weak self-control skills can learn to control their behavior, the benefits may last a lifetime. It's no surprise, then, that the PAX Good Behavior Game (PAX GBG) is gaining more attention since studies show it to be a very effective tool for helping school-aged children learn to control their behavior.

Keeping the SPLEEMS at bay

PAX GBG is very simple to play. Children first develop a vision of a wonderful classroom. What would they wish to see, hear, feel, and do more of and less of? The things they want more of are called PAX, which stands for peace, productivity, health, and happiness. The things they want less of are called SPLEEMS, which are unwanted behaviors.

The children are then divided into small teams, usually two to five teams per class. Teams try to commit as few behavioral errors (SPLEEMS) as possible within a designated period of time, initially measured in minutes. To win the game, teams must commit three or fewer errors. Winning teams earn rewards, usually in the form of brief, fun activities.

To make the game fair, children with weaker self-control skills are equally distributed between groups. As the children become more familiar with the game, they play it for longer periods of time. Groups also change throughout the school year so that each child has a chance to repeatedly win the game.



Children eventually learn to predict what PAX and SPLEEMS are for each activity in real-time, greatly enhancing self-regulation. The use of the special words allows the spread of the strategy to any instructional or classroom activity as well as to assemblies, buses, cafeteria, afterschool programs, and many other situations where children must use self-regulation. Within weeks, teachers generally notice a significant decrease in impulsive and disruptive behaviors classwide. They also observe children actually rooting for each other to control themselves.

PAX GBG traces its roots back to the original Good Behavior Game, which is in the public domain (download free from the Baltimore Prevention Program, bpp.jhu.edu). The original GBG has been around for decades and has been the focus of numerous outcome studies. Prevention scientists have given it high marks for its ability to reduce impulsive, aggressive, and disruptive classroom behavior among young school-age children. Particularly impressive are studies showing long-term outcome benefits for children who only played the game in the first grade.

Prevention scientist Dennis Embry, PhD, realized the game's potential. If a simple, fun game can have this powerful an effect years later, imagine the potential of an expanded version that includes other simple, research-validated activities. Drawing from his years of research on simple behavioral practices that yield significant long-term behavioral results, Embry created PAX GBG.

Behavioral vaccines

Just as the polio vaccine inoculates children from contracting the disease years later, Embry believes that "behavioral vaccines" can inoculate children from serious behavioral problems down the road. "Our society is crying out for behavioral vaccines," says Embry. "We're crying out for simple, inexpensive behavioral practices that can be incorporated into children's lives in order to prevent major life problems." Longitudinal studies showed that the original GBG functioned much like a behavioral vaccine. To strengthen its inoculation powers, Embry's next step was to bundle it with other potential behavioral vaccines.



FOR MORE INFO

Learn more about PAX GBG at paxis.org. Several short videos describe the game in greater depth, and there is information about costs, training opportunities, and recommended steps for implementation.

It's hard to accurately convey in a short column how many simple, yet powerful practices are incorporated into this one game. There are practices to help children feel they belong, to help children connect with other children, to improve emotional self-regulation skills, and to help generalize new behavior skills to other settings and times of the day. There are also strategies for helping parents reinforce new behavioral skills at home, and procedures for helping teachers measure behavioral gains on an ongoing basis. Some schools now even incorporate components of the game into 504 plans and IEPs.

Embry also knew that steps to implementation would have to be simple and easy to understand, far more so than the original version of the game. Teachers, parents, and others find PAX GBG very user-friendly, an important improvement over the original version.

To children, PAX GBG is simple and fun to play. To anyone with an eye toward prevention, PAX GBG represents a direct link between research and practice. Embry has always been most interested in its potential population-level benefits. He envisions PAX GBG incorporated into every elementary school classroom in the country. He and his colleagues have actually been calculating the possible long-term benefits, not only in terms of children's long-term health and well-being, but also in terms of cost savings to our country.

PAX GBG is listed on the National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices. The NREPP website (nrepp.samhsa.gov) offers references to studies showing the game's impressive long-term benefits. Not yet referenced is a recent longitudinal study showing actual changes in gene expression, although its authors do note that replication of findings is necessary before firm conclusions can be drawn.*

Attention originally highlighted PAX GBG as a promising practice in 2004. Since that time, Embry's dream that the game would be used nationwide is closer to becoming a reality. The game is now being played by more than a hundred thousand students in the United States and Canada. The Canadian province of Manitoba is implementing PAX GBG in virtually all grade one classrooms. They have found that the game improves attention and reduces hyperactivity, conduct problems, emotional problems, and bullying in one semester.

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*Musci, R.J., Bradshaw, C.P., Maher, B, Hull, G.R., Kollam, S.G., & Ilonggo, N.S. Reducing aggression and impulsivity through school-based prevention programs: A gene by intervention interaction. *Prevention Science* (November 2013: 1-10).