

Managing Classroom Behaviors Using an RTI/MTSS Framework

by Jim Wright

Response to Intervention (RTI) and Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) both describe the same concept: Schools should be organized to make optimal use of scarce resources and employ best practices to help students achieve academic success and engage in appropriate classroom behaviors. This reference guide describes a range of evidenced-based RTI/MTSS strategies to address classroom (Tier 1) behaviors. It includes specific interventions for non-compliance, defiance, inattention, hyperactivity, and anxiety, along with advice on managing behavioral outbursts.

The RTI/MTSS Model: Organizing School Resources to Support Positive Behavior

RTI/MTSS for behavior is a general education initiative and can be easily tailored to fit any school's resources and needs. The model is built upon these non-negotiable elements (Fairbanks, Sugai, Guardino, & Lathrop, 2007):

1. RTI/MTSS motivates students by teaching and reinforcing positive behaviors rather than punishment.
2. The school develops a continuum of supports that start with teacher-friendly ideas to address minor classroom behavior problems and culminate with individualized problem-solving meetings for students who present with intensive behavioral and social-emotional needs.
3. Intervention strategies used in RTI/MTSS are of high quality: they are supported by research, documented in writing, and monitored over time to ensure that they are actually benefiting the student.

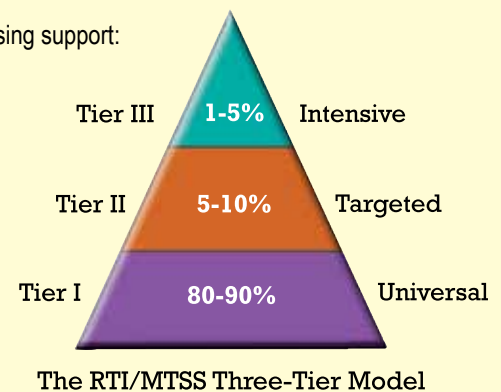
Here is a brief description of how RTI/MTSS services are organized schoolwide into three tiers of increasing support:

- **Tier 1—Classroom: Whole-Group Behavior Management and Individual Intervention Plans.**

Tier 1 includes the teacher's capacity to effectively manage the entire class and also provide individualized behavior support to specific students as needed. Tier 1 is called 'universal' because all students in a classroom benefit from it.

- **Tier 2—Schoolwide: Supplemental Intervention.** When a student's behavior or social-emotional needs exceed the ability of a classroom teacher alone to address, that student is enrolled in Tier 2. Perhaps 5-10 percent of students might need this level of support. Tier 2 RTI/MTSS provides programs and services that target common problems such as lack of motivation, limited social skills, and non-compliance with teacher requests. Students needing Tier 2 services are identified via schoolwide behavioral screeners or teacher referrals and matched to appropriate programs. Tier 2 services can be provided via small group, mentor relationships, or brief individual counseling.

- **Tier 3—Problem-Solving Team.** When students display more severe behavior problems such as physical aggression, chronic non-compliance, or crippling levels of anxiety, they can be referred to the RTI/MTSS Problem-Solving Team. This Team develops customized intervention plans that can include strategies for all stakeholders that interact with the student. Perhaps 1-5 percent of students might need Tier 3 assistance in a given school year.



“Big Ideas” in Effective Behavior Management

Teachers skilled in classroom management are able to respond appropriately to just about any behavior that a student brings through the classroom door. While having a toolkit of specific behavioral strategies is important, the real secret of educators who maintain smoothly running classrooms with minimal behavioral disruptions is that they are able to view problematic student behaviors through the lens of the following 'big ideas' in behavior management:

- **Check for academic problems.** The correlation between classroom misbehavior and deficient academic skills is high. Teachers should, therefore, routinely assess a student's academic skills as a first step when attempting to explain why a particular behavior is occurring. When poor academics appear to drive problem behaviors, the intervention that the teacher selects should address the student's academic deficit.
- **Identify the underlying function of the behavior.** Problem behaviors occur for a reason—they serve a function for the student. The most commonly observed behavioral functions in classrooms are escape/avoidance and peer or adult attention. Identifying the probable function sustaining a particular set of behaviors and selecting interventions that are targeted to match the function makes for greatest likelihood of success. For example, if a teacher decides that a student's call-outs in class are sustained by the function of adult attention, that instructor may respond by shifting the flow of that attention—e.g., interacting minimally with the student during call-outs but boosting adult attention during times when the student shows appropriate behavior.
- **Eliminate behavioral triggers.** Problem behaviors are often set off by events or conditions within the instructional setting. Sitting next to a distracting classmate or being handed an academic task that is too difficult to complete are two examples of events that might trigger student misbehavior. Eliminating triggers of negative conduct tends to work quickly and—by preventing class disruptions—results in more time available for instruction.
- **Redefine the behavioral goal as a replacement behavior.** Rather than attempting to merely extinguish challenging behaviors, the teacher should select a positive behavioral goal that is an appropriate replacement for the student's original problem conduct. The replacement behavior reframes the student concern in a manner that allows for more effective intervention planning. For example, an instructor concerned

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that a student is talking with peers about non-instructional topics during independent seatwork might select as a replacement behavior that the student will engage in “active, accurate academic responding.”

- **Focus on factors within the school's control.** Focusing solely on student risks beyond the school's ability to change (e.g., limited parental involvement) can be counter-productive, sapping resolve and undermining intervention efforts. Instead, schools can best counteract the influence of negative outside factors and promote student resilience by providing supports within the educational setting such as skills instruction, tutoring, mentoring, and use of positive behavior management strategies.

- **Be flexible in responding to misbehavior.** Teachers have greater success in managing the full spectrum of student misbehaviors when they respond flexibly—evaluating each individual case and applying strategies that logically address the likely cause(s) of that student's problem conduct. An instructor may choose to respond to a non-compliant student with a warning and additional disciplinary consequences, for example, if evidence suggests that the misbehavior stems from his seeking peer attention and approval. However, that same teacher may respond to non-compliance with a behavioral conference and use of defusing strategies if the misbehavior appears to have been triggered by a negative peer comment.

Effective Classroom Management: Foundation Strategies

Students are most likely to show appropriate behaviors when the instructional environment is well managed. To create a foundation of strong behavior management, teachers must communicate clear behavioral expectations, actively supervise and monitor their classrooms, and proactively intervene to prevent behavior problems.

BEHAVIORAL EXPECTATIONS. Strong classroom management starts with clearly teaching and reinforcing positive behaviors. The instructor should:

- ☐ **Teach Culturally Responsive Behavioral Expectations.** Explicitly teach and reinforce classroom behavioral expectations that are selected and framed in a manner that acknowledges the diversity of cultures within the school community and recognizes the need for students to be active rather than passive learners.
- ☐ **Train the Class in Basic Classroom Routines.** Establish routines to deal with common classroom activities. Examples of classroom routines include:
 - Engaging students in meaningful academic activities at the start of class (e.g., using bell-ringer activities);
 - Assigning and collecting homework and classwork;
 - Transitioning students efficiently between activities.
- ☐ **Post Positive Classroom Rules.** Display a set of 3-8 rules or behavioral expectations prominently in the classroom. State those rules in positive terms as ‘goal’ behaviors (e.g. “Students participate in learning activities without distracting others from learning”). Review the rules frequently.

EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION. When instruction is well paced and matched to skills, students are engaged, well-behaved learners. To accomplish this goal, the instructor will:

- ☐ **Provide Explicit Instruction.** When teaching new material, deliver instruction in a manner that maximizes understanding: starting with (1) modeling and demonstration, moving to (2) supervised practice with performance feedback, and concluding with (3) opportunities for independent practice with feedback.
- ☐ **Promote Active Engagement.** Insert activities at key points throughout the lesson to ensure that learners are engaged in academic tasks at rates sufficient to hold attention and optimize learning.
- ☐ **Maintain a Brisk Rate of Instruction.** Present an organized lesson, with instruction moving briskly. Plan so that there are no significant periods of ‘dead time’ (e.g., drawn-out transitions between activities) when misbehavior can start.

- ☐ **Offer Opportunities to Choose.** Provide the class with appropriate opportunities for choosing how to complete in-class academic tasks. Sample options include deciding what materials to use, where to sit, and with whom to work. Offering options and allowing students to choose can increase academic motivation and focus while reducing problem behaviors.

DAILY MANAGEMENT. Active, positive techniques used on a daily basis promote a positive behavioral and learning environment. The instructor will:

- ☐ **Scan the Class Frequently.** Take time to notice how students are behaving during whole-group instruction, cooperative learning activities, and independent seatwork. Strategically and proactively recognize positive behaviors and redirect off-task students.
- ☐ **Employ Effective Verbal Commands.** Deliver clear directives that are (1) spoken calmly, (2) brief, (3) stated when possible as DO statements rather than as DON'T statements, (4) framed in clear, simple language, and (5) delivered one directive at a time and appropriately paced to avoid confusing or overloading students. Directives should be positive or neutral in tone, avoiding sarcasm or hostility.
- ☐ **Provide Active Supervision.** Frequently move through the classroom and strategically recognize positive behaviors while redirecting students who are off-task. As needed, give behavioral reminders or prompts, teach or reteach expected behaviors, and acknowledge examples of appropriate behavior.
- ☐ **Shape Behavior Through Praise.** To increase desired behaviors, praise students when they engage in those target behaviors. Effective praise consists of two elements: (1) a description of noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior, and (2) a signal of teacher approval. Use praise at a rate sufficient to motivate and guide students toward the behavioral goal, and maintain a ratio of four praise statements for every disciplinary statement.
- ☐ **Establish a Range of Consequences for Misbehavior.** Maintain a continuum of classroom-based consequences for misbehavior (e.g., redirecting the student; having a brief private conference with the student; temporarily suspending classroom privileges; sending the student to another classroom for a brief reflection period) to be used before considering administrative removal of any learner from the classroom.

Strategies for Non-Compliant or Defiant Behaviors

While there are no magical strategies for managing non-compliant or defiant behaviors, you will usually achieve the best outcomes by remaining calm, following pre-planned intervention strategies, not allowing yourself to be pulled into arguments, and acting with consistency and fairness when intervening with or disciplining students. Here are additional ideas to manage non-compliance and defiance:

- **Re-channel Interactions through Scheduled Attention.** One strategy to increase positive behaviors is to “catch the student being good” with regular doses of “scheduled attention”: (1) Decide on a fixed-interval schedule to provide attention (e.g., every 8 minutes); (2) At each interval, observe the student; (3) If the student is engaged in appropriate behaviors at that moment, provide a dose of positive attention (e.g., verbal praise; non-verbal praise such as thumbs-up; brief positive conversation; encouragement). If the student is off-task or not behaving appropriately, briefly redirect the student to task and return immediately to instruction until the next scheduled-attention interval.
- **Planned Ignoring: Turn Off Attention for Misbehavior.** Planned ignoring involves withholding attention when a student engages in a minor misbehavior that you think is meant to attract your attention. Ignoring problem behavior can remove the source of its reinforcement and thus help to extinguish it. Planned ignoring is more powerful when the teacher also provides scheduled attention whenever the student engages in positive, replacement behaviors.
- **Allow a Cool-Down Break.** Select a corner of the room (or area outside the classroom with adult supervision) where the target student can take a brief respite break whenever he/she feels angry or upset. Be sure to make cool-down breaks available to all students in the classroom, to avoid singling out only those students with anger-control issues. Whenever a student becomes upset and defiant, offer to discuss the situation once the student has calmed down and then direct the student to the cool-down corner.
- **Use Non-Verbal and Para-Verbal Behaviors to Defuse Potential Confrontations.** Maintain non-threatening body language, a soft tone of voice, or strategically pause during speech to reduce tensions. For example, if a student is visibly agitated, you may decide to sit down next to the student at eye level (a less threatening posture) rather than standing over that student. Or, you might insert a very brief wait time before

each response to the student, as these micro-pauses tend to signal calmness, slow the pacing of your interaction, and help to prevent it from escalating into an argument.

- **Keep Responses Calm, Brief, and Businesslike.** Strive to respond to the student in a neutral, business-like, calm voice and keep responses brief. Short teacher responses give the defiant student less control over the interaction and can also prevent instructors from inadvertently rewarding misbehaving students with lots of negative adult attention.
- **Listen Actively.** Many students lack effective negotiation skills in dealing with adults. These students may become angry and defensive when they try to express a complaint to you, even when that complaint is well founded. Signal that you want to understand the student's concern by summing up the crucial points in his/her own words (paraphrasing). Examples of paraphrase comments include: “Let me be sure that I understand you correctly...”, “Are you telling me that...?”, “It sounds to me like these are your concerns:...”. When teachers engage in active listening through paraphrasing, they demonstrate a respect for the student's point of view and can improve their own understanding of the student's problems.
- **Choice Statements in Two Parts: Frame the Alternative Consequences.** Present a request to an uncooperative student as a two-part “choice” statement: (1) Describe the negative, or non-compliant, choice and its consequence (e.g., “John, you can choose to stay after school today to finish this in-class assignment.”); (2) Next, state the positive behavioral choice that the student is encouraged to select (e.g., “Or you can finish your work now and not stay after school. It's your choice.”). If the student fails to comply within a reasonable time (e.g. 1 minute), impose the disciplinary consequence.



Strategies for Anxious Behaviors

Students who struggle with anxiety can be preoccupied with the thought of performing poorly on classwork or otherwise having unwanted attention focused on them. Here are classroom ideas to support the anxious learner:

- **Increase Predictability through Schedules.** When students know in advance what to expect in an upcoming activity, how long it will last, and/or the payoff for participation, their level of engagement rises and problem behaviors decline—a good definition of motivation. Provide, in the simplest form possible, a schedule outlining the day's classroom activities that includes a title and brief description for each activity, along with the start and end times. Younger children or those with special needs may also benefit from pictorial cues or having the schedule read aloud to them.
- **Make the Complicated Simple with an Academic-Skills Checklist.** For intimidating multistep tasks, give students a checklist detailing each

step and instructions for completing it. Before the activity, prompt students to preview the checklist; after the activity, have them use the checklist to review the work.

- **Response Effort: Reduce Task Difficulty.** Any method that reduces the apparent difficulty (“response effort”) of an academic task is likely to boost engagement. Examples of strategies that lower response effort include having students pair off to start homework in class and breaking larger academic tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks.



Strategies for Inattentive/Hyperactive Behaviors

Teachers who focus on making their instruction orderly, predictable, and highly motivating find that they can hold the attention of most of their students most of the time. Here are some ideas to boost rates of student attending and on-task behavior:



- **Use Preferential Seating.** Preferential seating means that the student is seated in a location where he/she is most likely to stay focused on what you are teaching. Remember that all teachers have an action zone, a part of the room where they tend to focus most of their instruction. Once you have identified your teacher action zone, place the student's seat somewhere within that zone.
- **Remind about Positive Behaviors through Pre-Correction.** Some students need a timely reminder of expected behaviors just before they transition into situations or settings in which problem behaviors occur. At this 'point of performance', give the student a timely reminder of goal behaviors, using inventive prompting strategies such as stating goal behaviors, having the student preview a checklist of goal behaviors, asking the student to describe goal behaviors; or praising a nearby student for demonstrating goal behaviors.
- **Provide a Quiet Work Area.** Students who are easily distracted benefit from a quiet place in the classroom where they can go when they have more difficult assignments to complete. A desk or study carrel in the corner of the room can serve as an appropriate workspace. When introducing these workspaces to students, stress that the quiet locations are intended to help students to concentrate. Never use areas designated for quiet work as punitive time-out spaces, or else students will tend to avoid them.
- **Provide Attention Breaks.** If students find it challenging to stay focused on independent work for long periods, allow them brief "attention breaks." Contract with students to give them short breaks to engage in a preferred activity each time that they have finished a certain amount of work. For example, a student may be allowed to look at a favorite comic book for two minutes each time that he/she has completed five problems on a math worksheet and checked the answers. Attention breaks can refresh the student and also make the learning task more reinforcing.
- **Seat the Student Next to Distraction-Resistant Peers.** For managing low-level motor behaviors, rearrange seating in the classroom so that the student sits near peers who are good behavior models and not readily distracted by that student's minor fidgety movements or playing with objects.
- **Reduce Length of Assignments.** Students' attention may drift when completing long assignments. For new material, trim assignments to the minimum needed for understanding or mastery. When having students practice skills or review previously taught material, break that review into a series of short tasks rather than one long assignment to sustain interest and engagement.
- **Capture Attention Before Giving Directions.** When giving directions to an individual student, call the student by name and establish eye contact before providing the directions. When giving directions to the whole class, use group alerting cues such as "Eyes and ears on me!" to gain the class' attention. Wait until all students are looking at you and ready to listen before giving directions. When you have finished giving directions to the entire class, privately approach any students who appear to need assistance. Quietly restate the directions to them and have them repeat the directions back to you as a check for understanding.
- **Use a Checklist to Script Transitions.** Students sometimes struggle with the complexity of managing multi-step routines such as transitioning between classroom activities or across different locations within the school. You can assist by making up step-by-step checklists that walk the student incrementally through the routine. Use these checklists as guides to teach and measure student success in navigating transitions. Also, have the student employ the checklist as a prompt and guide to follow the expected steps.
- **Allow Discretionary Motor Breaks.** When given brief "movement" breaks, highly active students often show improvements in their behaviors. Permit the student to leave his/her seat and quietly walk around the classroom whenever the student feels particularly fidgety. Or, give the student a discretionary pass that allows him/her to leave the classroom briefly to get a drink of water or walk up and down the hall.
- **Adopt a "Silent Signal."** Redirect overactive students in a low-key manner by using a silent signal. Meet privately with the student and identify for the student those motor or verbal behaviors that appear to be most distracting. With the student's help, select a silent signal that you can use to alert the student that his/her behavior has crossed the threshold and now is distracting others. Role-play several scenarios with the student in which you use the silent signal and the student then controls the problem behavior. When you are able to successfully use the silent signal during instruction, be sure to praise the student privately for responding appropriately and promptly to your signal.

The Aggression Cycle: How to Manage Angry Classroom Outbursts

Though outbursts of anger can appear unpredictable and chaotic, they usually follow an identifiable five-phase sequence called the “aggression cycle” (Reilly et al., 1994; Videbeck, 2014): (1) Trigger; (2) Escalation; (3) Crisis; (4) Recovery; and (5) Post-Crisis. This table describes the aggression cycle and provides advice for how to respond at each phase. Proactive intervention is a way of breaking the aggression cycle: the teacher who manages to eliminate an anger trigger (Phase 1) or to successfully defuse anger (Phase 2) can head off a major outburst or aggression episode.

Aggression Cycle: Guide for Teachers (Reilly et al., 1994; Videbeck, 2014)

Phase	What to Do
<p>PHASE 1: TRIGGER. The student has a negative experience or event to which he or she responds with anger. This initiates the aggression cycle.</p> <p>The student may first experience an event or situation that embarrasses, shames, frustrates, or frightens him or her—triggering anger as a secondary emotional response.</p>	<p>PHASE 1: Manage or Eliminate the Trigger Event. The teacher’s primary goal during this initial phase is to address the trigger itself by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Respond to the event.</i> If the trigger experience or event has already occurred, move quickly to correct the situation or address the student’s needs so that his/her initial primary negative emotion does not spiral into anger. For example, provide immediate help to the student struggling with an in-class assignment or reprimand/move the seat of a peer who is teasing that student. • <i>Eliminate the trigger.</i> When possible, identify in advance and take steps to prevent triggers that can lead to anger. For example, if a student often responds with embarrassment and then anger when directed to read aloud in front of others, revise reading tasks to remove this performance requirement.
<p>PHASE 2: ESCALATION. The student shows signs of irritation or hostility, such as looking flushed or tense, grumbling, or muttering under his/her breath. The student’s level of agitation increases and may include arguing, leaving his/her seat, and refusing to respond to peers or adults.</p> <p>The student is likely to be preoccupied with anger at this point, interfering with his/her ability to comply with rules and respond rationally to adult requests or directives.</p>	<p>PHASE 2: Interrupt the Anger. Interact with the student in a calm and non-judgmental manner. Reduce the student’s level of anger by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Take the student aside for a conference.</i> Ask the student open-ended questions to determine what precipitated the anger event and then explores a solution to the problem. • <i>Direct the student to use relaxation techniques.</i> Prompt the student to use one or more strategies to calm down, such as taking deep breaths and releasing slowly or counting backward from 10. • <i>Remove the student from the setting.</i> Direct the student to take a brief (non-punitive) break from the setting (e.g., move to a quiet part of the classroom; visit a counselor).
<p>PHASE 3: CRISIS. The student’s behavior intensifies, posing a potential risk of safety to self and/or others.</p> <p>The student may express anger through disruptive, confrontational verbal behavior such as insults, threats, arguments, or physical aggression toward property or other people.</p> <p>At this stage, the student’s anger and other strong emotions may limit or overwhelm his/her ability to process language accurately and respond rationally.</p>	<p>PHASE 3: Maintain Safety and Defuse Anger. Works toward teh following three goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Ensure the safety of the student and others.</i> Take immediate steps to keep the student, peers, and adults in the vicinity safe, which may include summoning additional adult support or removing the student or peers from the room. The student remains under constant adult supervision during this stage. • <i>Prevent further anger escalation.</i> Avoid actions likely to intensify the student’s anger and aggression, such as yelling at the student, issuing threats or ultimatums, or engaging in arguments about who is right. • <i>Calm the student.</i> Make a conscious effort to reduce the level of the student’s anger and arousal, such as speaking in a calm voice, respecting the student’s personal space, and communicating that student and adults will work together to resolve the problem in a positive way. Because the student’s heightened emotional state may reduce his/her ability to engage in and comprehend dialog, keep statements simple and short, check for student understanding, and repeat key statements as often as needed.
<p>PHASE 4: RECOVERY. The student regains control of his/her emotions and behavior.</p> <p>As the student transitions from a state of anger and high arousal to normal functioning, the recovery process might include periods of crying, emotional withdrawal, expressions of remorse, or even sleeping.</p>	<p>PHASE 4: Support Student Recovery. Maintain a supportive environment to more rapidly help the student to regain composure and self-control.</p> <p>During the recovery phase, refrain from attempts to analyze, assign blame, or impose disciplinary consequences for the behavioral incident, as such actions can prolong or rekindle the anger state.</p>
<p>PHASE 5: POST-CRISIS. The student has fully recovered control of emotions and behavior.</p>	<p>PHASE 5: Engage in Reflection and Problem-Solving. Conference with the student to discuss the incident and develop a future response plan. Keep the tone of the meeting positive and focused on preventing future incidents, not on assigning blame. The meeting includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Analyze the behavioral incident.</i> Identify what triggered the event and how the student responded. • <i>Create a plan for future incidents.</i> Develop and write out a plan for how that student might respond proactively when faced with future situations with similar triggers. • <i>Provide the student training as needed.</i> For example, for a student who has difficulty identifying when he/she is angry provide training in how to use an “anger meter” to gain awareness of and self-monitor anger levels.

Managing Behaviors Through the Power of Personal Connection

Teachers who are proactively positive in their classroom interactions can strengthen adult-to-student connections with reduced effort. Here are strategies for establishing rapport:

- **Greet students by name at the start of class.** This modest effort has been shown to substantially increase student attention and focus.
- **Promote positive interactions via the 3-positives:1-negative ratio.** Self-monitor encounters with particular students and set the goal of having at least 3 positive interactions for each disciplinary interaction. Positive teacher-student interactions can take many forms: for example, greeting, praise, conversation, smile, thumbs-up sign. This ratio increases the odds that every student in the class will view the instructor as fair and caring.
- **Use targeted praise.** Enhance the positive climate of the classroom, motivate learners, and shape performance in the desired direction by using frequent praise statements. Praise should describe in specific terms the behavior that is note-worthy, and should be delivered as soon as possible after the observed behavior.
- **Emphasize the positive in teacher requests.** Avoid negative phrasing (e.g., "If you don't return to your seat, I can't help you with your assignment") when making a request of a student. Instead, state the request in positive terms (e.g., "I will be over to help you on the assignment just as soon as you return to your seat"). This approach is less likely to trigger a power struggle and more likely to gain compliance.
- **Provide positive attention: The 2-minute intervention.** This time-efficient strategy involves committing to having a positive 2-minute conversation with students who are having behavioral issues at least once per day across 10 consecutive school days. Positive attention should be delivered at times when the student is not misbehaving. This strategy helps to improve both behavior and the relationship between the teacher and student.

References and Resources

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Other Resources Available From www.NPRinc.com



The Power of RTI: Classroom Management Strategies K-6
2009, DVD, 68 minutes Item # DPRT

RTI Toolkit: A Practical Guide for Schools
2007, paperback Item # RTIT

RTI: Success in Secondary Schools
2012, paperback Item # SRTI

FBA and BIP
2016, 6-page laminated reference guide Item # SRTI

Challenging Classroom Behaviors
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Jim Wright's web site: www.interventioncentral.org
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Jim Wright is available for presentations/workshops through Comprehensive School Solutions (CSS), the training division of NPR, Inc.



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