

# INTENSIVE INTERVENTION: A PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PARENTS AND FAMILIES

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National Center on  
**INTENSIVE INTERVENTION**

at American Institutes for Research ■



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## Introduction

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For children with the most severe and persistent academic and/or behavioral challenges, parent and family involvement is vital. Student outcome data suggest that our current educational system does not adequately prepare students with the most intensive needs, particularly students with disabilities, for the world of college and work. Although the performance of some students with disabilities has improved during the past two decades, these students continue to fall behind their peers in reading and math and are more likely to experience discipline problems at school than their peers. The use of intensive intervention is one way that schools can use to improve outcomes for students, including students with disabilities.

School teams can use this guide to better understand intensive intervention and how to engage parents and families with the process. The language and examples throughout this guide are summarized versions of more comprehensive content related to intensive intervention and data-based individualization (DBI) available through the [National Center on Intensive Intervention \(NCII\)](#). This guide includes the following sections:

- Section 1: Defining Intensive Intervention and DBI
- Section 2: Supporting Family Engagement Within the DBI Process
- Section 3: Federal Efforts to Improve Results for Students With Disabilities

## Section 1

# Defining Intensive Intervention and Data-based Individualization

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This section overviews intensive intervention and the DBI process. Moreover, it shares how intensive intervention and DBI fit within a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) framework and align with core instruction.

## What is intensive intervention?

Evidence suggests that intensive intervention that uses data to systematically individualize interventions can improve reading, mathematics, spelling, and behavioral outcomes for students with disabilities, compared with common special education practice (NCII, 2013). Intensive intervention is characterized by increased intensity and individualization of academic instruction and/or behavioral supports. It is not a one-size-fits-all approach. School teams implementing intensive intervention use data to individualize instruction, increase engagement, and provide opportunities for students to practice new skills that will support their success within the core curriculum.

## Who needs intensive intervention?

Students who have the most persistent and severe learning and/or behavioral challenges may benefit from intensive intervention. This group may include students with identified disabilities and students who are struggling to meet academic or behavioral expectations through their current interventions. Specifically, this group includes students who:

1. Have not responded to the interventions currently being provided (e.g., evidence-based intervention delivered at Tier 2),
2. Have very low academic achievement and/or severe behavior problems, or
3. Have an identified disability and are consistently not making adequate progress in meeting their individualized education program goals.

## Things to Remember About Intensive Intervention

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1. **Intensive intervention** is a *process*; it is not a *product* or program.
2. **Intensive intervention** is an ongoing process that often requires school teams to make a number of changes before performance improves. It is not a *quick fix*.
3. **Intensive intervention** uses a collaborative, team-based, problem-solving process to adapt and modify interventions based on student data.
  - Families and students can play an important role by participating on the team or sharing data to inform the process.
  - Teams are encouraged to share data with families and students.
4. Academic and behavioral needs often do not exist separately from each other, but **intensive intervention** allows school teams to examine how *academics and behavior intersect* to support effective educational planning or individual students.
5. **Intensive intervention** should be documented in individualized intervention plans that highlight the adaptations and strategies that the team has identified based on individual student needs. The intervention plan may consist of:
  - Administering interventions in *small groups*,
  - Providing interventions *more frequently or for a long duration*,
  - *Changing the environment* to address behavioral needs,
  - Incorporating *linguistic and cultural supports*, and
  - Adapting *how teachers deliver instruction and the content they deliver*.

Teams may also identify additional strategies.

## What is the DBI process for delivering intensive intervention?

DBI is a research-based approach to intensive intervention (Deno & Mirkin, 1977; NCII, 2013).

- DBI uses assessment data to determine WHEN and HOW to intensify intervention in reading, mathematics, and behavior.
- DBI relies on the systematic and frequent collection and analysis of student-level data (e.g., progress monitoring, diagnostic data) and a team-based problem-solving process.

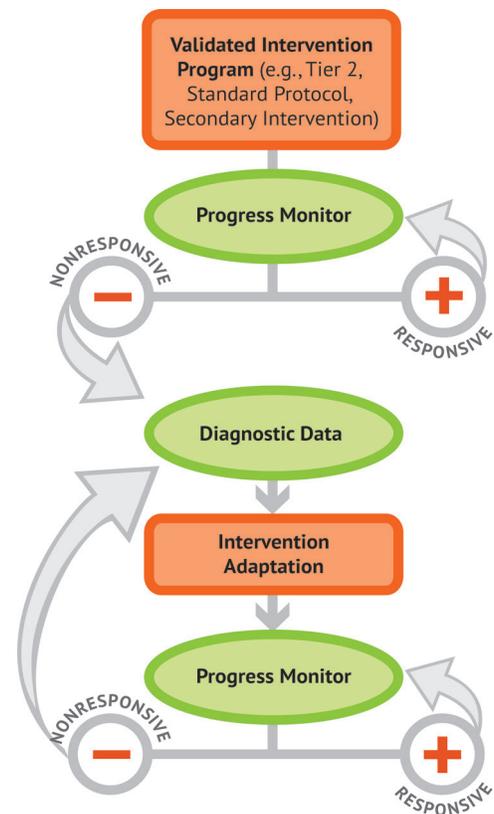
### DBI includes five iterative steps:

**Step 1:** DBI builds on a **validated or evidence-based intervention program** delivered with fidelity.

**Step 2:** Teachers regularly collect **progress monitoring** data to determine whether the student is responding to the intervention or if an instructional change is needed. If the student is responsive, then the teacher continues to provide the validated intervention program and monitor student progress until the student reaches expectations. If the data suggest that the student is not responding while other students who have received the intervention have responded, then the teacher moves to the next step in the process.

**Step 3:** If the student continues to struggle, then the teacher collects **diagnostic data** to identify and target specific academic or behavioral skill deficits. At this step, the teacher may collect both formal and informal diagnostic data, including feedback from parents and families.

**Step 4:** Teachers use the diagnostic data along with educator expertise and parent input to modify or **adapt the intervention** to better meet the student's individual needs. Intervention adaptation typically falls into two main categories.



- The first type: *quantitative adaptations*, which may include smaller group size, increased time, or change in who is delivering the intervention. Quantitative adaptations are often the first approach a teacher or team uses when intensifying the intervention.
- The second type: *qualitative adaptations*, or changes that alter the way in which content is delivered; these involve more explicit instruction and providing more opportunities for students to practice skills, including self-regulation strategies.

For many students, teachers incorporate both *quantitative adaptations* and *qualitative adaptations* into their intervention plan.

**Step 5:** Teachers continue to collect **progress monitoring** data at regular intervals to determine whether the student is making progress. Students whose data indicate responsiveness continue with the adapted intervention. Students whose data indicate nonresponse return to step 3; the teacher will analyze additional data and consider other adaptations.



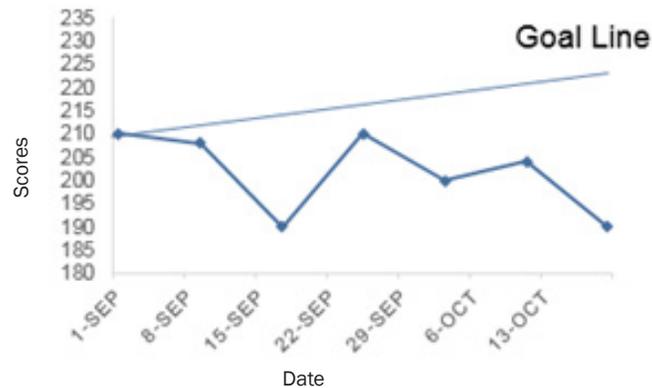
*It is important to remind ourselves—and parents and families—that DBI is an iterative process that may include multiple rounds of data analysis and adaptations to identify an approach that will meet a student's unique needs.*

## What does DBI look like in practice?

The scenario below provides a simplified example of the DBI process. In practice, it may be necessary to revisit steps and make changes to ensure that the student makes adequate progress.

**DBI Process Step****How One School Team Implemented DBI****Background Information**

John has participated in an evidence-based math intervention for 30 minutes, four times a week. Progress monitoring data show that he is not making progress. The scores on his progress monitoring chart are below his goal line.



**Step 1:**  
**Validated intervention program**

**Action 1:**

The team decides to increase the amount of time that John spends in the math intervention to 50 minutes per day and to increase from four to five sessions per week. The team develops an individualized intervention plan that outlines the new intervention approach.



**Step 2:**  
**Progress Monitoring**

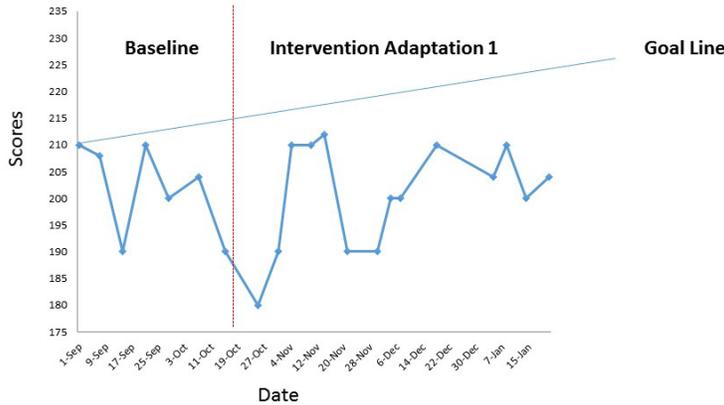
**Action 2:**

The team continues to collect progress monitoring data and notices that John's scores continue to fall below his goal.

**DBI Process Step**

**How One School Team Implemented DBI**

**Progress Monitoring (cont.)**



**Step 3:  
Diagnostic Data**

**Action 3:**

The team collects diagnostic information (e.g., common errors on assessments and work samples, classroom observations) to identify why John’s scores are not increasing



at the expected rate. The team identifies, through their diagnostic assessment, that John is inconsistently performing on math concepts he has already learned and he struggles with self-regulation.<sup>1</sup>

**Step 4:  
Intervention Adaptation**

**Action 4:**

The team decides to add a self-regulation<sup>1</sup> strategy to John’s existing intervention plan. Self-regulation strategies encourage students to take responsibility for identifying and managing their emotions and behaviors. The team reviews the NCII self-management guide and decides to try the Incredible Five-Point Scale (Buron, 2015).

Rating
5
4
3
2
1



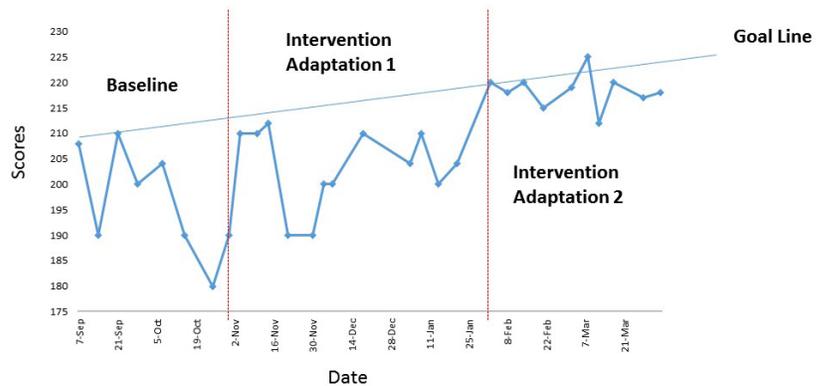
## DBI Process Step

## How One School Team Implemented DBI

### Step 5: Progress Monitoring

### Action 5:

The team continues to monitor John's progress in the current intervention plan, and John's scores increased toward his goal.



<sup>1</sup> Self-regulation or self-management strategies can be taught to children to help them take responsibility for their behavior. It includes the ability to observe yourself and know if you are doing an activity according to a standard (for example, knowing if you do or do not understand what you are reading, or whether your tone of voice is appropriate for the circumstances). Find out more at <https://intensiveintervention.org/intervention-resources/behavior-strategies-support-intensifying-interventions>

## If our school implements MTSS can we still implement DBI?

MTSS provides a comprehensive problem-solving framework that uses data to monitor how students are responding to different types of services and instruction across a continuum of supports to promote academic and behavioral success. MTSS involves various staff who partner with families as they assess, implement, and monitor instruction and interventions as a team.

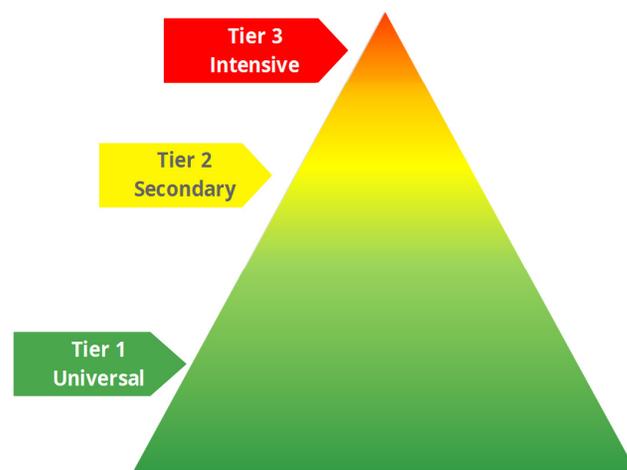
MTSS and DBI have many similar components. Like MTSS, DBI uses a problem-solving team approach, relies on assessment data (e.g., progress monitoring), and includes evidence-based interventions and strategies. Often, DBI and MTSS are integrated into one framework.

- Within the MTSS framework, intensive intervention delivered through DBI can be found at the most intensive tier or level (Tier 3).
- The DBI process builds upon the instruction and intervention that a student is already receiving at Tier 1 or Tier 2 levels.

### Resource Spotlight

You may have heard of other initiatives such as response to intervention (RTI) or positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS). MTSS integrates these two frameworks to provide an approach that considers the whole child. To help parents learn about MTSS, see the [Rhode Island's Family Guide: Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) or look for a similar resource in your state.

In addition, DBI may be used for students who require intensive intervention in one skill area (e.g., word problems) but receive Tier 1 instruction or Tier 2 intervention in other areas (e.g., number sense, computation). In this way, DBI is connected to the full continuum of intervention supports that make up the MTSS process.



## How do intensive intervention and DBI relate to core instruction?

Intensive intervention does not replace high-quality core instruction in the general education classroom. Instead, intensive intervention focuses on ensuring that students can access and benefit from the instruction they receive in the general education classroom.

Intensive intervention should not be defined by the location where services are delivered.

- Many students who receive intensive intervention through the DBI process may receive instruction in the general education classroom.
- For some students, intensive intervention may be delivered in a different setting outside of the general education classroom, including special education or other remedial instruction such as Title I services.
- The content covered in intensive intervention may be below the student's current grade level, but it should address skills that underlie grade-level content. For example, computation with whole numbers serves as a foundation of mastering computation with rational numbers. The focus of intensive intervention for one student may be computation with whole numbers so that they may work toward developing understanding of rational numbers. The goal of intensive intervention is to help students have access to the core curriculum. To see progress, some students may need a combination of instruction at their current grade level and on skills typically taught in earlier grades, which provide the foundation to learn later skills.
- School teams, with feedback from parents and families, should make decisions about where and how intensive intervention is delivered to best meet the needs of the individual student.



*Parents and families may come to the table with ideas to try for their child based on something they read about or learned from another parent. Listen to their ideas, but be prepared to discuss the evidence base for or against the strategy, as well implications based on the child's data.*

## Section 2

## Promoting Family Engagement Within the DBI Process

Parents and families are critical partners in supporting students with intensive academic and behavioral needs. This section provides resources and suggestions for how educators can encourage parent and family engagement in the DBI process.

### How can schools encourage parent and family engagement within the DBI process?

It is important to recognize that every parent and family member is different, with varying levels of knowledge and levels of comfort with school; they may not consider their involvement in the school in the same way that the school perceives it. As a result, your approach to parent and family engagement should be differentiated. NCI has developed a series of resources that may be helpful when discussing intensive intervention with parents and families.

## Share

information about the school's approach to MTSS and DBI, the student's progress through graphed data, and the individualized intervention plan. When sharing, don't use jargon, but don't oversimplify. Ask follow-up questions to ensure parents and families understand the process.

**Intensive Intervention**  
An Overview for Parents and Families

Are you concerned that your child is not making progress in school? Have you noticed that your child is not meeting his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals? Is your child acting out or struggling with behavioral problems and motivation?  
**Intensive intervention may be able to help.**

**WHO?**  
For students with and without disabilities who are struggling with reading, math, and/or behavior despite receiving high-quality instruction and intervention.  
For students with disabilities, intensive intervention may be helpful if they are not making progress on their IEP goals.

**WHAT?**  
Intensive intervention is a team-based process that uses student data to help teachers figure out when and how to change and intensify instruction (more practice, feedback, structure, focus) to help students be more successful.  
In some schools this may be called **Tier 3**.

**WHERE?**  
The location of the intervention may vary, but intensive intervention often occurs in small groups of one to three students. The intervention is led by a specialist or expert (reading specialist, special educator, math specialist, behavioral specialist, school psychologist, school counselor).

**WHEN?**  
Intensive intervention often includes more frequent intervention — more times per week, more minutes per session or day, or more total sessions.  
Teachers also need to collect student data more often. Quick (less than 5 minutes) skill checks may happen daily or weekly so that teachers can learn sooner if they need to make a change to instruction.

**HOW?**  
A team of teachers and specialists goes through your child's data to:

- Determine **WHEN** a change should be made to instruction.
- Figure out **HOW** to make that change.
- Develop a **PLAN** that matches his or her needs.
- Continue collecting **DATA** to see if the changes are working.

Intensive intervention is not a one-size-fits-all approach or a quick fix. It may take time and changes before the student makes progress.

**Intensive Intervention**

Questions parents and families can ask when talking to their child's school about intensive intervention

**Monitoring Progress**

- How will the team be monitoring my child's progress?
- How will I be informed about my child's progress?
- How frequently will I receive updates?
- What happens when my child is not making enough progress?

**Sharing Information**

- What information should I share about my child?
- How can I best share information?
- Will I be invited to participate in data meetings?
- Are there other ways to be involved if I can't be there in person?

**Understanding the Intervention Plan**

- What is my child's intervention plan?
- Who is responsible for implementing the plan?
- How long does each intervention take?
- How can I support my child's plan at home?

## Invite

parents and families to be a part of the process by regularly seeking their input on decisions, especially when their child's plan changes. Provide them with the types of questions they might consider asking throughout the process to support their involvement.

## Ask

parents and families for information about their child and remind them that this process is individualized and takes time. Encourage them to communicate frequently and share any information that the school may not be aware of (e.g., recent changes in the home environment, updates to medical history, outside therapy reports/evaluations, how their child is performing at home). Remind them of the importance of celebrating progress toward goals, even when slower than expected.

### How Can You Support Intensive Intervention? TIPS FOR FAMILIES

Is your child struggling with academic or behavioral challenges? Has he or she made slow progress? Have you noticed that your child is not meeting his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals? Intensive intervention may be able to help. With intensive intervention your child's teacher uses data to determine WHEN and HOW supports can be changed to better meet your child's individual needs. Here are some tips to help you get started.

**Celebrate Your Child's Growth**

Intensive intervention is customized to address your child's unique needs. As a result:

- Each child's intervention plan will look different.
- Each child's progress is compared to his or her own individual goals, not other students.
- Parents should provide encouragement and celebrate success, even small improvements.

**Communicate!**

- Share openly about your child. You may know things that the school doesn't.
- Confused about the data, tests, or interventions? Ask for clarification when you don't understand.
- Ask about ways you can support your child at home.

**Be Patient and Persistent**

- Intensive intervention is *not* a quick fix. It takes time and effort to see progress.
- Intensive intervention is a *problem-solving* process. If we are not seeing progress, we have not yet found the right approach and we will keep trying.

View these infographics on the NCII website at <https://intensiveintervention.org/resource/intensive-intervention-infographics-parents-and-families>

### ***Reminder From the Research***

*Check your bias! Parents and families may be engaging in an activity that they consider as involvement (e.g., driving their child to and from school, helping with homework). Before discrediting a parent's involvement, consider their perspective. Many times, parents and families think they are staying involved in their child's education, but the school may not recognize what they are doing as involvement (Nelson & Guerra, 2009).*

## Section 3

## Improving Results for Students With Disabilities

To create an increased focus on improving outcomes for students with disabilities, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) within the U.S. Department of Education has refocused its accountability system and funded technical assistance centers such as the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII), [National Center for Systemic Improvement](#), and [more](#) to improve results for students with disabilities.

In addition, OSEP began the Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) initiative in 2014 to help states develop plans aligned with the new accountability system. As summarized by the Center for Parent Information and Resources, “RDA begins with a premise—that the *results* we want to achieve need to drive the *actions* we take, not the other way around. Simply put, if we want to achieve X [a certain goal], *what actions must we take to get there?*”

In applying the RDA approach to improving results for students with disabilities, each State must now ask itself:

1. What *improved results* for children with disabilities do we want to achieve?
2. What *actions* must we take to achieve those results?” (Center for Parent Information and Resources, 2014).

In addition, states must consider how they are engaging stakeholders, including parents and families, to support both actions and results.

Under RDA, all states identified a child- or family-level academic or social-emotional outcome as their result. In their RDA plans, some states incorporated intensive intervention into their existing tiered support models (response to intervention [RTI], positive behavioral interventions and supports [PBIS], multi-tiered system of support [MTSS]) to better meet the needs of struggling learners, including those with disabilities.

### Resource Spotlight

*Serving on Groups That Make Decisions: A Guide for Families* provides tools and resources to help families gain skills and confidence in serving on decision-making groups. This resource may be helpful for engaging stakeholders in broader change initiatives like RDA and/or for school-based teams within the DBI process. This resource was developed by Wisconsin Family Assistance Center for Education, Training, and Support as part of the State Personnel Development Grant (2007–2012) from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction under the Office of Special Education Programs. [View the guidebook.](#)

## RDA in action: What does RDA look like in Rhode Island?



Rhode Island identified *mathematics achievement* as the *result* they wanted to improve, and the *action* that the state identified to achieve the goal is *intensive intervention*.

From 2012 to 2016, select Rhode Island districts received support from the NCII in collaboration with the Rhode Island Department of Education and the Rhode Island Parent Information Network to implement intensive intervention. The focus on intensive intervention as part of their RDA plans allows the state to build from the experiences of these districts.

While Rhode Island's emphasis is on increasing achievement in mathematics for its RDA work, intensive intervention can support students who have difficulty in other academic subjects and behavior.



*Communicating with parents and families about broader “contexts” that inform school practice may help to increase their understanding of why those practices are in place.*

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