Teacher Attention: Shifting the Focus from Misbehavior to Positive Behavior

- Introduction...............................................................................................................02
- Scheduled Attention..............................................................................................03
- Praise......................................................................................................................04
- Planned Ignoring....................................................................................................06
- Contingent Instructions........................................................................................07
- Precision Requests.................................................................................................07
Teacher Attention: Shifting the Focus from Misbehavior to Positive Behavior

When a student's behaviors are reinforced by teacher attention, that learner can fall into a negative-attention 'trap'. In this common situation, the student engages in misbehavior and receives reinforcing instructor attention in the form of reprimands or other disciplinary interactions--which only increases the level of problem behavior. At the same time, the student receives lesser amounts of teacher attention when showing appropriate behaviors such as remaining on-task and completing work. Because teacher attention is tilted toward the student's negative behaviors, it tends to shape and increase the frequency of those problem behaviors.

To help the student to escape this negative-attention trap, the teacher changes the pattern of the attention that they give in 2 important ways. First, the teacher **increases** attention when the student is engaged in positive behavior, such as engagement in learning tasks. Second, the instructor uses several techniques to **minimize** attention when the student is off-task or misbehaving. Here is an overview of what this positive reallocation of teacher attention looks like:

1. **Increase attention to reinforce appropriate behavior.** The instructor gives the student periodic doses of positive attention such as praise on a fixed schedule of the teacher's choosing (e.g., every 5 or 10 minutes). Because the student finds teacher attention to be reinforcing, the instructor takes advantage of this insight by regularly bestowing that attention when the student shows desirable behaviors and thus shaping and increasing the frequency of those behaviors. The focus of this 'scheduled attention' is proactive-- 'catch the student being good' and as a result reinforce appropriate behavior.

2. **Minimize attention to misbehavior.** While the instructor is giving more attention to desired behaviors, that teacher at the same time is reducing to a minimum the attention the student receives when off-task or misbehaving. Depending on its type and intensity, there are 3 strategies that the teacher can use to respond to problem behaviors:

   a. **Planned ignoring.** To manage low-level problem behaviors that do not significantly interfere with student learning or class instruction, the instructor uses **planned ignoring.** When minor misbehaviors occur, the teacher ignores them--cutting off the reinforcing attention that might otherwise encourage them.

   b. **Contingent instructions.** When the teacher must actively intervene to interrupt misbehavior, the instructor can use **contingent instructions.** In this verbal strategy, the teacher first delivers a 'STOP' statement (e.g., "Jason, stop talking."). The teacher then delivers a "START" statement (e.g., "Continue working on your assignment."). The instructor concludes by PRAISING the student for beginning to comply with the teacher request (e.g., "Jason, thank you for putting your best effort into completing your work.").

   c. **Precision request.** When faced with a student who often fails to comply in a timely manner with teacher requests, the instructor can increase compliance through **precision requests.** The teacher first makes the request to the student as a "Please..." statement (e.g., "Ann, please return to your seat."). If the student fails to comply within a reasonable time, the instructor next uses an "I need..." statement (e.g., "Ann, I need you to return to your seat."). If the student still fails to comply, the instructor imposes appropriate disciplinary consequences.
It should be remembered that planned ignoring, contingent instructions, and precision requests are all ways to reduce the amount of attention that teachers focus on misbehavior. At the same time, teachers should not forget to rechannel their attention toward those times when the student is engaged in desired behavior. Minimizing adult attention during misbehavior and maximizing it during appropriate behavior is a sure recipe for breaking the negative-attention trap and promoting the student's behavioral improvement.

Scheduled Attention

Description. The teacher provides the student with brief doses of positive attention on a fixed-time schedule ('non-contingent attention').

Procedure: Here are the steps to prepare and use scheduled attention:

1. **Choose when to use scheduled attention.** The teacher selects one or more times during the class period or school day when the scheduled-attention intervention is to be used (e.g., independent seatwork, small-group activities) because the student is most likely to display off-task or problem behaviors.

2. **Decide how frequently to provide positive attention.** The teacher decides how frequently to provide positive attention in the form of a fixed-time schedule (e.g., 2-minute intervals, 5-minute intervals). One strategy to determine an appropriate interval for providing attention is to estimate how long the student typically remains on-task or behaving appropriately in the absence of teacher attention. The teacher then may adopt a schedule for providing attention that is slightly shorter than this baseline level. If, for example, a student is found to work independently for an average of 6 minutes before making attention-seeking noises, the teacher may select a fixed-time interval of 5 minutes for providing positive attention.

3. **Select a method for timing the fixed intervals.** The teacher chooses a timing option to provide an alert whenever an interval has expired and the student is to receive positive attention. Examples of timing solutions include watching the clock or using a mechanical kitchen timer or smart phone timer application set on vibrate. NOTE: Teachers with access to a device that can play MP3 (electronic audio) files can download a 'beep-tape' with fixed-time tones at a range of intervals that can serve as an ideal signal for scheduled attention. Those free beep-tapes and instructions for use can be accessed at: [http://www.interventioncentral.org/free-audio-monitoring-tapes](http://www.interventioncentral.org/free-audio-monitoring-tapes)

4. **Provide scheduled attention.** Whenever the scheduled-attention intervention is in use, the teacher observes the student's behavior at the conclusion of each fixed interval. If the student is displaying appropriate behavior, the teacher approaches and provides brief positive attention (e.g., praise, high-five, question about how the student is doing, encouragement). If instead the student is engaged in inappropriate or problem behavior, the teacher chooses either (1) to ignore the behavior altogether and continue with instruction or (2) to briefly redirect the student to task in neutral fashion (e.g., "No talking") and with a minimum of attention.

**Tips for Use.** Scheduled attention works best if the teacher makes an effort to provide positive attention on a fixed-interval schedule and minimizes attention to the student outside of that schedule. Of course, whenever the student misbehaves, the teacher can intervene to redirect or impose appropriate disciplinary consequences. However, the instructor should also take care to minimize the amount of adult attention during episodes of misbehavior to avoid reinforcing this conduct.
References


Praise

**Description.** Teacher praise is performance feedback that includes verbal or non-verbal communication of teacher approval of student behavior. Praise is easy to implement and fits into the natural pattern of classroom communication (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011).

**Procedure:** Effective teacher praise consists of two elements: (1) a description of noteworthy student academic performance or general behavior, and (2) a signal of teacher approval (Brophy, 1981; Burnett, 2001). The power of praise in changing student behavior is that it both indicates teacher approval and informs the student about how the praised academic performance or behavior conforms to teacher expectations (Burnett, 2001). As with any potential classroom reinforcer, praise has the ability to improve student academic or behavioral performance—but only if the student finds it reinforcing (Akin-Little et al., 2004). Here are several suggestions for shaping praise to increase its effectiveness:

- **Describe Noteworthy Student Behavior.** Praise statements that lack a specific account of student behavior in observable terms are compromised—as they fail to give students performance feedback to guide their learning. For example, a praise statement such as "Good job!" is inadequate in itself because it lacks a behavioral description (Hawkins & Heflin, 2011). However, such a statement becomes acceptable when expanded to include a behavioral element: "You located eight strong source documents for your essay. Good job!"

- **Praise Effort and Accomplishment, Not Ability.** There is some evidence that praise statements about general ability can actually reduce student appetite for risk-taking (Burnett, 2001). Therefore, teachers should generally steer clear of praise that includes assumptions about global student ability (e.g., "You are a really good math student!"; "I can tell from this essay that writing is no problem for you."). Praise should instead focus on specific examples of student effort or accomplishment (e.g., "It's obvious from your grade that you worked hard to prepare for this math quiz. Great work!"). When praise singles out exertion and work-products, it can help students to see a direct link between the effort that they invest in a task and improved academic or behavioral performance.

- **Match the Method of Praise Delivery to Student Preferences.** Teachers can deliver praise in a variety of ways and contexts. For example, an instructor may choose to praise a student in front of a class or work group or may instead deliver that praise in a private conversation or as written feedback on the student's assignment. When possible, the teacher should determine and abide by a student's preferences for receiving individual praise. It is worth noting that, while most students in elementary grades may easily accept public praise,
evidence suggests that middle and high-school students actually prefer private praise (Burnett, 2001). So, when in doubt with older students, deliver praise in private rather than in public.

**Tips for Use.** Praise is a powerful motivating tool because it allows the teacher to selectively encourage different aspects of behavior or work production based on the individual student's needs. For example, the teacher may seek to boost a student's academic performance by praising effort, accuracy, or speed on an assignment. Or the teacher may focus on increasing student responsibility by praising that student for attaining self-selected academic goals. The table below presents examples of praise-statements, with each linked to a different student outcome goal:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Praise: Goal</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic effort.</strong> Praise can motivate students in the beginning stages of learning, by focusing on indicators of student effort (e.g., 'seat-time') rather than on product (Daly et al., 2007).</td>
<td>• &quot;Today in class, you wrote non-stop through the entire writing period. I appreciate your hard work.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic accuracy.</strong> Praise can encourage students in the acquisition stage of learning by praising improvements in accuracy of responding (Haring et al., 1978).</td>
<td>• &quot;This week you were able to correctly define 15 of 20 biology terms. That is up from 8 last week. Terrific progress!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic fluency.</strong> When the student has progressed beyond the acquisition stage, an appropriate next goal may be fluency—the speed of accurate responding (Haring et al., 1978).</td>
<td>• &quot;You were able to compute 36 correct digits in two minutes on today's math time drill worksheet. That's 4 digits more than earlier this week—impressive!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic quality.</strong> When the student's completed assignment clearly meets or exceeds quality standards (e.g., writing rubric), praise focuses on the excellence of the work.</td>
<td>• &quot;This essay is well-written. I can see that you defined a specific audience for the piece and had a clear purpose in mind as you were writing.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal-setting.</strong> A motivating strategy that promotes student responsibility is to have a reluctant learner set a performance goal before undertaking an academic task and then to report out at the conclusion of the task about whether the goal was reached. The student is praised for successfully attaining the goal.</td>
<td>• &quot;At the start of class, you set the goal of writing an outline for your paper. And I can see that you actually completed the outline. Good job!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Risk-taking.</strong> Students may be reluctant to show ignorance or make mistakes in class. To counter this natural reluctance, praise for risk-taking celebrates students' good-faith attempts to answer teacher questions or participate in discussion—even when the response is incorrect or otherwise falls short of the mark.</td>
<td>• &quot;Thanks for your response, Mark. Even though your initial answer was incorrect, it forced us to think through several ways to solve this math problem. Mistakes are a powerful way to learn!&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Planned Ignoring

Description. The teacher chooses to ignore minor behavioral infractions that do not negatively impact the classroom.

Procedure: The teacher identifies low-level misbehaviors (e.g., minor talking-out) that do not significantly distract other students or otherwise interfere with classroom routine. The teacher makes a commitment to ignore such behaviors and continue with instruction. Planned ignoring potentially serves as a form of extinction, as it removes teacher attention that may be supporting a low-level problem behavior (Hester, Hendrickson, & Gable, 2009).

Tips for Use. Planned ignoring is useful for minor behavior problems—especially in situations where a teacher response to such modest misbehaviors would result in more time lost from instruction than can be justified. However, if the teacher finds that ignoring a student's behavior regularly results in escalation of that misbehavior, planned ignoring should be discontinued.

References


Contingent Instructions

**Description.** The teacher redirects a misbehaving student using contingent instructions: (1) a description of the behaviors to STOP; (2) directions about behaviors to START; and (3) a concluding PRAISE statement for compliance.

**Procedure:** When the instructor observes that a student is engaging in behavior that is significantly distracting, disruptive or potentially unsafe, the teacher delivers contingent instructions in a 3-part format to replace the problem behavior with a positive replacement behavior (Curran, 2006; Gable. Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009):

1. **STOP statement.** The teacher directs the student to STOP a specific problem behavior, e.g., "Joshua, put away the magazine."; "Annabelle, return to your seat."

2. **START statement.** After a brief (1-2 second) pause, the instruction describes the appropriate replacement behavior that the student should START, e.g., "Open your book to page 28 and begin the end-of-chapter questions."; "Work with your partner to solve the math problem on the board."

3. **PRAISE for compliance.** As the student begins to engage in the desired behavior, the teacher concludes by PRAISING the student for compliance. e.g., "Thank you for starting your book assignment, Joshua.", "I see that you and your partner are solving the math problem, Annabelle. Good!"

**Tips for Use.** Contingent instructions are most effective (and most positive) when delivered privately rather than in front of the entire group, presented a neutral rather than negative tone, and kept brief. For maximum effect, the teacher should also be sure to praise the student soon after compliance with the START statement.

**References**


**Precision Requests**

Teacher requests are an important everyday tool for behavior management. The *precision request* structures communication with the student in a concise, predictable, respectful format that preserves adult authority and increases the likelihood of student compliance. Here are guidelines for using this communication tool (De Martini-Scully, Bray, & Kehle, 2000; Musser, Bray, Kehle, & Jenson, 2001):

**Preparation.** In preparation for using the precision request:

- the teacher selects appropriate consequences for student non-compliance. Examples of appropriate consequences include loss of free time, phone call to a parent, loss of a point or token, or restriction of activities at recess.
• the teacher meets with the student to reinforce the need to comply with adult requests and to inform the student of the consequences for non-compliance.

Procedure. When making a precision request, the teacher follows these steps:

1. **Make first request: "Please...".** The teacher states a brief request that starts with the word 'Please' and -- whenever possible--frames the request as a goal behavior rather than as a behavior to stop (e.g., "Rick, please open your math book and begin the assignment written on the board"). The teacher then waits 5 seconds for the student to comply. If the student complies, the teacher praises the student (e.g., "Thank you for starting your math assignment").

2. **Make second request: "I Need...".** If the student fails to comply with the first request within 5 seconds, the teacher repeats that request. This time, the teacher starts the request with the phrase "I need..." (e.g., "Rick, I need you to open your math book and begin the assignment written on the board"). Again, the teacher waits 5 seconds for the student to comply. If the student complies, the teacher praises the student (e.g., "Thank you for starting your math assignment").

3. **Deliver consequence for non-compliance.** If the student fails to comply to the second request within 5 seconds, the teacher follows through in delivering the pre-determined consequence for non-compliance.

**Integrity Check.** It is very important when using this strategy to preface the first request with "please", to start the second request with "I need...", to praise the student for compliance, to wait a full 5 seconds after each request for student compliance before advancing to the next step, and to deliver consequences consistently for non-compliance.

**References**
