Behavior Management: Praise in Schools

Teachers across the world have many interesting ideas and strategies as to how to persuade children to behave. Many of these strategies have been documented for the amount of success determined by the decrease in inappropriate behavior and also how popular promoting appropriate behavior has become. An article titled, “Using Teacher Praise and Opportunities to Respond to Promote Appropriate Student” states that the feedback of a teacher goes far beyond the activity. The praise a teacher gives to a student can change the whole environment of a classroom. Consistent and appropriate uses of an educator’s praise leads into an increase of opportunities to respond (OTR). This may serve as an important 1st step to establish predictable and positive classroom contexts that promote successful primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and intervention supports (Partin, 2010).

This article’s main point focuses on the overall praise of a teacher and the opportunities to respond to an array of questions, activities, and social aspects. From preschool to graduate school, praise can be used as an effective strategy that results in appropriate behavior and can be used as a domino effect. A student sitting in their assigned seat gets praised for sitting still and not talking; this behavior will then be seen and copied, influencing the other students who are seeing this exchange occur. Across age groups and irrespective of disability, a teachers’ use of contingent praise effectively reinforced, or increased, a variety of appropriate student behaviors and academic skills, including following directions, engagement in instruction, on-task behavior, correct academic responding, and work accuracy and completion (Partin, 2010). These facts are hard to ignore when the positive outcomes of praise also lead to the increase of academic success and student responses during tasks and academic questioning. In addition, the skilled use of contingent praise to increase positive behavior has been shown to simultaneously decrease
problematic behavior. Specifically, praise of positive behavior decreases disruptive behavior and inappropriate talk and turning around in seat, whereas praise combined with decreased attention to problem behavior lead to decreases in talk outs and arguing with teacher requests as well as other disruptive behavior (Partin, 2010).

Another point taken in this article that should be acknowledged is the quality of praise that is being given. Every individual can take praise or constructive criticism a different way. For that reason, teachers should provide praise that explicitly specifies desirable behaviors and provides sufficient feedback about the correctness of students’ behavior or performance (Partin, 2010). Teachers should consistently be aware of their praise and direction and whether it is actually reinforcing the goals and objectives of the class. In order for teacher’s to measure or assess their praise, seeing how many opportunities children have to respond is a good calculator. Teachers’ self-evaluation of their teaching behavior is necessary to increase the application of these tactics in the classroom (Partin, 2010). Ultimately, the students should have multiple opportunities to respond to questions and demands asked of them in order to learn. The more actively involved students are able to become, the more important they feel, and even appealing to their own ego’s and thought processes, they then can focus on activity and not inappropriate behavior. Because of its effectiveness for increasing students’ appropriate academic behaviors and decreasing inappropriate behaviors, educators should use curricular and instructional practices that increase the likelihood of students’ correct responses to academic demands (Partin, 2010). I absolutely loved this article and the study they conducted by having teachers tally how many times they praised a student. It proves that teachers must be constantly aware of not only what they are saying, but their body language and facial expressions. Even a smile can and shake of the head can ensure confidence in a child. Furthermore, the teachers that were trained in the
study when on to be constantly aware of the praise they gave, even after the test and there was a change in behavior in their own classes. I truly believe that giving praise and allowing opportunities for children to succeed, whether with questions or competitions, will forever change a child’s attitude and life.

Changing, Not Controlling

As previously stated, the emphasis on behavior management should not be centered on inappropriate behavior, but rather the overall benefits of the strategies used by teachers to maintain positive behavior. Barry Lavay, from the Kinesiology department at CSU Long Beach, is fully aware of the importance of focusing on behavior changes rather than punishments. The current philosophy has shifted to more positive behavior management practices that foster behavior changes through support and intervention to improve performance and learning (Lavay, 2007). The purpose of Lavay’s article, “A practical plan for managing the behavior of students with disabilities in general physical education: behavior management means more than controlling students to make them behave,” is to help describe a positive behavior plan that will motivate students rather than control and discourage their performance and learning (2007). Lavay describes two plans that help tremendously when deciding how to enforce behavior management: the comprehensive behavior management plan which incorporates all classes and also a behavior intervention plan which allows for direct understanding of an individual. He goes on to describe the specific steps that work toward a successful management plan and exactly how to set up an intervention plan, including other administration as well. Designing a formal behavior management plan or a BIP generally includes four basic steps: (1) identifying the behavior, (2) observing and analyzing the behavior, (3) developing and implementing the intervention to change the behavior, and (4) evaluating the plan (Lavay, 2007). This management
plan is astonishingly successful due to the personal level and efforts to the student. The level of analyzing and observing the negative behavior allows for understanding on the teacher’s end rather than committing to a punishment which leads to a dead end. Also, a very important factor is the teacher’s awareness of and patience with the plan; many interventions fail because the physical educator does not give the plan sufficient time to take effect or does not implement the plan consistently (Lavay, 2007). As always, each student is different and the severities of behaviors differentiate. The purpose of these management plans are to allow change in behavior and to understand the affects of this behavior on the classroom environment, not to control every single move of the student nor embarrass them.

Time is of the Essence

Behavior management is constantly being evolved and integrated into a classroom resulting in different behaviors, some for the worse and some for better, but ultimately these strategies that are being apply only focus on positive change. Of course, positive change is what we want, but along with these effective strategies how much time learning and instructional time is being erased? John Downing’s article, “Effective Reinforcement Techniques in Elementary Physical Education: The Key to Behavior Management,” not only highlights the important factors effecting behavior management but also discussing how the overall plan disrupts or advances the lesson. Research indicates that reinforcement strategies are more effective than punishing strategies for increasing and shaping positive behaviors in any learning environment, and such strategies tend to positively affect task performance and intrinsic motivation (Downing, 2006). This article presents a plan designed to decrease misbehaviors in elementary education while increasing available instructional time (2006). Along with the importance of time, considering most physical education classes around typically only 50 minutes how does
reprimanding students, or constantly stopping to check for appropriate behavior affect the environment and the students’ chances of learning? One example of successfully turning a behavioral problem into a positive learning experience is using reinforcement versus punishment. Reinforcement can both shape the teaching of a new skill and encourage its use, while punishment is usually ineffective as a teaching tool. For example, reinforcing procedures can teach a student to make positive statements to peers, try harder in cooperative or competitive play or stay on-task when engaging in a least favorite activity (Downing, 2006). Rather than pulling the student out to the side, not only taking him out of activity but also the other students, a teacher can turn this into a learning experience for the entire class. Once the other students witness what occurs with this specific situation, they can implement this new social skill into their game play. On a side note regarding punishment and reinforcement, as children grow and play together, there isn’t always a teacher or adult to enforce the rules or apply punishment, therefore why teach punishment in class? In addition, punishment will not affect long-lasting changes in student behavior, while effective reinforcement will (Downing, 2006).

In order to get the most out of an educator’s instructional time, having preplanned reinforcement is key. Downing states that there are two essential types of reinforcement that can change behavior dramatically: Situational reinforcement and structured reinforcement. The first is to use reinforcement in daily interactions with students in and out of the gymnasium, providing them with feedback about their skill improvement and behaviors (Downing, 2006). Structured systems are designed to affect behaviors that you have deemed untenable: those that have not responded to the use of reinforcement in daily interactions (Downing, 2006). These plans reflect the comprehensive management plan and also the intervention plan. Obviously, these plans are effective and allot for change and success.
Personal Philosophy of Behavior Management

My philosophy regarding behavior management is not exactly where I’d like it to be because I am not fully confident in which strategies I will be incorporating and exactly how effective I will be when applying them. However, after researching several strategies I now have an idea of how I will integrate positive behavior management in the classroom. After years of participating on many different sports teams and seeing a wide variety of coaching/teaching styles, each style affects every student differently. One of my top priorities is to get to know each individual on a first and last name basis, stressing to each student that I care. I never respected any coach or teacher more after I knew that they truly cared about my well-being and my overall progress. I believe that once a student knows that they are important to a teacher, they are more cooperative and have the willingness to learn and get better in order to satisfy their teacher. With this mutual respect comes appropriate behavior, not only during activities but also during lecture and rules. If a teacher didn’t care or even know your name, how would you have any motivation to succeed in his or her class? The number one goal of physical education is to motivate students to live an active and healthy lifestyle; showing interest in not only their school life, but also their personal lives, will only further the success of this goal. The simple act of caring affects a student’s behavior and also, their overall success and improvement, especially in physical education. I believe that the strategies used to diminish inappropriate behavior should not only focus on stopping the “bad” things, but also work on developing positive behavior, along with students’ being able to learn between the two and what it takes to be successful. If we as teachers focus too much on the negative behavior, it can disrupt our focus, personal positivity, and the whole reason we became teachers in the first place. Teachers must think well beyond the disciplinary actions and revert back to the happiness and success of a child, when they finally
grasp and concept for the first time. Also, along with getting to know a child and their background, proactive management is essential when beginning a new school year or even new activity. The rules and consequences must be clear and consistent. These proactive steps must be including the entire class and equally fair. When students hear and understand what is expected of them, they have little wiggle room to get around the rules.

When praising appropriate behavior, I could use a number of strategies but I have always been fond of token reinforcement. I believe this tactic is full of opportunities for both the students and the teachers, and maybe even parents. I recall in elementary school having to “change my card” or not receiving a sticker on my progress report for the week if I had a disciplinary issue; it felt as though my whole world had fallen apart if I failed either of those goals and I would feel horrible for the rest of the week. In contrast, we had several prizes that we could work towards earning as a class and also individually. Even today, playing collegiate volleyball we used token reinforcement this past season. Since we all have a skittle and M&M addiction, our head coach Sean Donahue challenged us to play for our obsession. Every point we received off of a kill we got 2 skittles and for every dig we tallied, we received 2 M&Ms. Almost immediately our statistics increased; whether it was actually the candy or a complete coincidence, the fact that there was something to work towards changed our focus on the overall goals for the season. This token reinforcement was obviously skill-based, but along with the change of our performance also came change in our attitudes, friendships, and work ethics.

Once again, I believe each student responds differently to every kind of management strategy, therefore I realize that I will need to have a comprehensive behavior management plan along with an individualized intervention plan. There will be students that have difficulty following the rules and it is my job to not punish them, rather guide them to understanding of
how they can channel their anger, boredom, or simply just a bad day towards success in my
class. Other than token reinforcement, I can set up a contingency contract with an individual
student and we can discuss personal weekly, monthly, and yearly goals. If I take the time to form
a special bond with a troubled student, I become more than a teacher but a friend as well.
Teaching certainly isn’t easy, but if I take the time to understand a child, my job will and can be
rewarding!