DOINGWHATWORKS

Teaching and Rewarding Positive Behavior

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Topic: Reducing Behavior Problems
Practice: Teach Skills

Highlights

- Professor Marc Atkins, a member of the IES Expert Panel that authored the Practice Guide, "Reducing Behavior Problems in the Elementary School Classroom", explains the importance of teaching, modeling, and reinforcing positive behavior.
- Students benefit from explicit instruction that includes teacher feedback, modeling and guided practices.
- Positive reinforcement of individual students' appropriate behavior is an effective way to reduce classroom disruption. Rewards may be provided to the student or to his / her classroom.

About the Interviewee

Dr. Marc Atkins has a long-standing interest in the development of effective mental health services for children and families living in high poverty urban communities. He is an active researcher in the areas of childhood ADHD and aggression and on the development of innovative models for community mental health services for children and families, having authored over 75 papers

and chapters and over 100 conference presentations. He has been the recipient of numerous grants from the National Institute of Mental Health and private foundations, including a recently funded developing center grant from the NIMH to develop and study new models for mental health services in schools and communities. He has been a consultant to the Chicago Public Schools Office of Specialized Services since 1995, including the primary consultant on the development of their ADHD policy manual, and was the consultant on evidence-based practice for Systems of Care Chicago, a recently completed SAMHSA-funded project awarded to the Illinois Office of Mental Health and the Chicago Public Schools to develop a school-based mental health service specific to the needs of schools in high poverty urban communities.

Dr. Atkins is currently a consultant to the Illinois Division of Mental Health on a statewide initiative to advance evidence-based mental health practices, leading a series of workshops on Behavioral Parent Training for community mental health staff. He has served on the executive board of the Association of Psychological Science's Academy of Psychological Clinical Science, the American Psychological Association's Society for Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology, and CHADD's Professional Advisory Board. He has directed internships in clinical psychology since 1992, including currently at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychiatry, since 1994. In 2005, the Child Track of the UIC internship based at the Institute of Juvenile Research received the inaugural award for the Outstanding Internship by the APA Society of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology.

Full Transcript

Hi, I'm Marc Atkins. I'm a Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry at the Institute for Juvenile Research in University of Illinois at Chicago.

The first issue that we'll talk about is when is it important to understand that sometimes kids misbehave and it's because they really don't have the skills to manage the situation they're in. And one of the things we talk about in the Guide is that there are times when teachers can really kind of pick up on this a little bit. Teachers can do this probably about as well as anyone because they get to see kids in so many different situations. So, the one thing that might be apparent is that there's a certain period of the day when particular kids are very off-task or they're becoming disruptive, and the question that we might as is: Is that because they don't know how else to behave, or is that because they are trying to get out of doing some work?

There are times when kids have learned that certain ways of behaving are really going to get them what they want, and we've seen that when some kids are more prone to be aggressive than other kids. We get especially concerned about it in situations in which a very minor cue, or a very minor provocation, leads to a large eruption in a child, and we think, "Wow, what caused that?" And some of very important research that's been done over the years has shown that certain kids misinterpret those minor cues. For instance, in a game of basketball, a child is running up the court, and a teammate throws the ball, and it hits the child

in the back. Some people would look at that as an accident; other kids would look at that that he was out to get me. And those kinds of situations that are somewhat ambiguous, some kids misinterpret. There's been a lot of work done to sort of help kids understand that there are different ways of looking at those situations, and you don't always have to interpret them in a negative way.

Sometimes teachers will feel the need to intervene with certain kids or their classroom to sort of help them learn to get along a little better, and these have various names. So, a social skills training program, for instance, which could be a program that is delivered to the entire classroom, and lesson plans might break down the task of getting along with each other into some component skills, such as listening to each other well and sharing and talking to each other in a way that's acceptable.

An alternative, and one that is often given the same name is social-emotional learning, social skills training can be part of a social-emotional learning program. These programs as well can be done in classwide instruction where kids are given examples or lessons in how to talk to each other and listen to each other in the same kind of way. And what's helpful about that is that it can provide the kids and the teacher a common vocabulary.

Positive reinforcement or positive attention is probably the most powerful tool that teachers have to manage behavior. There's a wealth of research that's shown us that attending the positive behavior will increase that behavior, particularly with younger kids but also with older kids as well. Sometimes that attention will come from their peers, or often the attention will come from the teacher, but the one thing that teachers can keep in mind is that what they attend to is showing the kids what is important to them, and if they are attending the negative behavior, then that negative behavior tends to increase. If they are attending the positive behavior, that positive behavior tends to increase.

I think a nice example of a situation in which teaching skills can be nicely integrated into the routine of the day is teachers who have used group-administered classroom management programs, such as programs that give the entire class a reward for the behavior either of one particular child or a subset of kids, and there are also programs where everyone in the class is working for the same reward. We use the procedure in which all the kids in the class were working to get a 20-minute recess at the end of the activity. The way that this program worked, however, is if anybody in the class broke a rule, if anybody in the class violated it—for instance, they called out—everyone in the class lost one minute of free time. So, if this happened five times, the whole class would lose five minutes. These groups contingencies, you can imagine, can be very effective because the first student who inadvertently blurts out something will then have his/her peers say, "Ssh, be quiet. Sit down." And after a couple of these times, everybody in the class gets it. We're all working together.

I think we have a number of ways now, a number of opportunities for teachers to incorporate some new language in their classrooms, to give kids some new ways of understanding how to get along with each other. In an everyday world that can be so powerful for kids to learn, that they can actually manage their behavior

and be more effective either on the playground or making friends or actually getting their work done. That can have a long impact for kids by not only helping them learn to control themselves and have more pride in their work but also helping them feel engaged in school, which we know is a tremendously important activity for kids as they grow older.