The Best Time to Establish a Consequence Is Before You Need It

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Why a positive, predictable classroom is often more effective than punishment.

One of the most important things to understand about managing challenging behavior in a classroom is that the strategies we need when things become difficult must be established long before those difficult situations occur. If you are working with a student who frequently refuses directions, argues with adults, or engages in disruptive behavior, the middle of a behavioral crisis is not the best time to begin teaching that student what happens when they follow your directions and what happens when they don't. Those are lessons that need to be learned through experience, over time.

Make Ordinary Classroom Life Worth Participating In

One of the keys to avoiding behaviors that tend to be reinforced by escape or avoidance of planned activities or learning activities is to develop an environment that is rich with exciting opportunities to participate in things that are fun and interesting.[2] There should be enthusiasm from the instructors. The results of learning should be enjoyable. Students should have reasons to want to participate in the ordinary routines of the classroom. Sometimes you accomplish this by having rewards built into the system. You might gamify the classroom, for example, or create a points system in which students earn positive consequences for participating appropriately. But those kinds of systems are not always required, as long as life, as usual, is a good life.

I think that is an important principle. We don't necessarily need to make every ordinary expectation into a task that requires an extraordinary reward. Sometimes the reinforcement is simply participating in an enjoyable classroom environment.

When students are participating in activities that are interesting, engaging, and reinforcing, they are experiencing positive consequences for doing what they are supposed to do. And when students engage in behaviors that require them to step away from those activities, they naturally miss out on some of those experiences. The behavior being reinforced is simply participation in ordinary activities. It is not necessarily effortful behavior, and we don't always have to frame it as work.

Teach Students How to Approach Difficult Work

Another important part of preventing escape-maintained behavior is teaching students how to approach activities that they find difficult or nonpreferred.[3] Before those situations arise, we need to teach students that some work is challenging. There will be times when learning something new is uncomfortable, when they feel anxious about an assignment, or when they would simply rather be doing something else. We want them to learn how to recognize those feelings and understand that they are not necessarily a reason to stop. We can teach students to identify their anxiety about difficult activities, to ask for help when they need it, and to stay positive by remembering that the discomfort they are experiencing is temporary.

They don't have to know how to do everything before they begin. They don't have to complete difficult work without assistance. And they don't have to feel confident every moment they are learning. But they do need to learn that they can get through challenging activities, and that the adults are there to help them succeed.

This is especially important for students whose experiences of instruction have historically been experiences of failure, rejection, or feeling inadequate. We want to replace those experiences with opportunities to be successful, even when learning is difficult.

What Happens When a Student Engages in Problem Behavior?

When students engage in behaviors like provoking others, property destruction, or aggression, there are times when those behaviors need to be addressed before the student can continue participating in the ordinary activities of the classroom. But while those behaviors are being addressed, life goes on. The classroom schedule goes on. Other students continue participating in the activities they were doing. The teacher continues teaching, as long as it is safe to do so.

I do recommend consequences in some situations, including time-outs and sometimes task-based consequences, when those procedures are appropriate and part of a thoughtfully developed behavior plan. But much of the time, those kinds of consequences are unnecessary.

If you already have reinforcement systems in place for positive behavior, then when those positive behaviors do not occur, the corresponding reinforcers are not delivered. There is not necessarily an additional punishment in place. The student may simply miss an opportunity for reinforcement that would otherwise have been available.

Of course, we have to be thoughtful about this. A student should not lose access to basic needs, necessary support, or meaningful educational opportunities as a punishment. And when removing a student from an activity would actually reinforce escape-maintained behavior, that consequence may make the problem worse rather than better.[2][3]

The goal is not to make the student's life unpleasant. The goal is to maintain an environment in which positive participation is reinforcing, and where students can return to those experiences as soon as they are ready and it is safe.

Making Up Missed Work During Choice Time

In my classroom, students who missed work because of problem behavior were expected to make up that work during choice times. Now, this was not designed as a punishment. It was designed as an incentive to complete your work when it was scheduled so that your choice time would be unencumbered. Choice time was part of the ordinary classroom routine. Students who had completed their work could participate in activities they enjoyed, often without needing much assistance from adults. But students who still had work to complete used that time to finish what they had missed.

This accomplished several things. First, it meant that engaging in problem behavior did not eliminate the expectation that the student would learn. The work was still important, and we were still going to make sure that the student had an opportunity to complete it.

Second, it meant that the positive reinforcers available during choice time remained valuable. Students who completed their work during the scheduled instructional period had the opportunity to enjoy choice time without having unfinished work hanging over them. And third, it provided an opportunity for more individualized instruction. Because many of the students who were participating in choice activities were engaged in things they could do independently, adults were often available to provide additional help to the students who needed it.[2]

I think there was another important lesson in this approach as well. It emphasized the value I placed on my responsibility to teach these students, even when they sometimes made teaching difficult. They deserved to learn. And if a student had struggled with an assignment, avoided it, or engaged in behavior that interrupted instruction, I did not want that to mean the student simply missed the opportunity to learn what we were trying to teach. I wanted the student to understand that I was committed to helping them learn, even when doing so required additional time and effort.

Of course, the work itself needed to be appropriate for the student, and additional support or adjustments might be necessary. The purpose was not to make the student struggle through something they could not do. It was to make sure that a difficult experience did not become the end of the learning opportunity.[3]

Returning to Ordinary Life

One of the things I particularly value about this approach is that the student does not have to remain separated from the ordinary activities of the classroom after the problem has been addressed. As soon as the student comes back to himself, acknowledges what has happened, or is willing to learn a better way, we want to help that student return to the ordinary activities that are naturally and intentionally reinforcing. We don't want to prolong the disruption unnecessarily. We want to help the student return to participation. And the positive activities of the classroom should still be there.

This is why adults need to plan ahead. They need to determine what positive things are going to happen when students are participating and then intentionally create those opportunities.

They can develop games, reinforcement systems, enjoyable routines, and opportunities for students to experience success. Students who are simply doing what they are supposed to do, not necessarily putting forth extraordinary effort, but just staying on the bus, so to speak, should have opportunities to experience positive reinforcement.[1] When a team of adults makes a decision to consistently use a system like this, they don't have to keep questioning whether they should reinforce appropriate behavior. They don't have to wait until problem behavior occurs to decide how the classroom is going to operate. The system is already in place.

Consistency Gives Our Directions Meaning

There is another reason that these systems are important. When we give a student a direction, we want that direction to mean something. And what gives our directions meaning is not simply the words we use or how firmly we say them. It is the history that the student has experienced with us.

If you have developed a consistent behavioral history with a student, that student has learned what happens when they cooperate with you. They have learned that you recognize positive behavior and that your expectations are reasonably predictable.[1][4]

This is why I don't think it is particularly helpful to continually invent new rewards or consequences in the middle of a behavioral crisis. Promises of rewards can be helpful when we are teaching contingencies or explaining how a behavioral system works. But contingencies become valuable when they are learned, and they are learned through experience over time. We don't want to create new contingencies all the time for behaviors that are happening moment to moment.

We want to establish a pattern of behavioral consequences, rewards, and expectations so that when difficult moments occur, we don't have to explain everything again.[1][4] And when we do need to address problem behavior, we can do so calmly, knowing that the ordinary activities of the classroom will continue and that the student will have opportunities to return to them.

The best time to establish these expectations is before you need them. And one of the best ways to make those expectations meaningful is to make ordinary classroom life something that students genuinely want to participate in.

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About the author

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