

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

What Every Teacher Should Know About Punishment Techniques and Student Behavior Plans

In everyday terms, people use the word punishment to describe negative consequences imposed on people when they misbehave. Often, the term has moral overtones, suggesting that those being punished 'deserve' that punishment because their actions violate a rule, law, or social expectation. In the field of behavior management, though, punishment has a more narrow (and morally neutral) definition: the presentation or removal of events that leads to a reduction in a target behavior (Kazdin, 1989). According to this definition, events that serve to decrease an individual's behaviors are considered to be punishers. Teachers should understand the pros and cons about using punishment in the classroom, as schools frequently build punishing, or aversive, consequences into plans designed to help manage student behaviors.

An important point about possible punishers is that they affect different people in different ways. Imagine a scenario, for example, in which a teacher uses time-out as a behavioral intervention for two students who frequently call out in the classroom. One student stops calling out almost immediately. For this student, time-out is clearly a punisher. The second student persists in calling out, despite being placed repeatedly in time-out. For that student, time-out has no effect and is not a punisher at all.

Punishment can take various forms in classroom discipline programs. Sometimes an event is presented whenever the student shows an undesired behavior. A teacher may reprimand a student, for example, each time that the student leaves her seat without permission. In another form of punishment, the student may temporarily be removed to a less-reinforcing setting (e.g., by being sent to a time-out room for a 10 minute period of seclusion) whenever she displays a negative behavior. In a type of punishment known as response-cost, a student has rewards, tokens, privileges, or other positive reinforcers taken away whenever he or she engages in a problem behavior. An example of response cost is a student who earns stickers for good classroom conduct having one sticker removed from her sticker chart for each episode of misbehavior.

Teachers sometimes find punishment to be effective as a classroom behavior management tool, especially in the short term. Because punishment tends to rapidly stop problem behaviors, the teacher in turn is positively reinforced for using it (Martens & Meller, 1990). On the surface,

then, punishment may appear to be a powerful and attractive behavior management strategy. But this power can come at a significant cost.

Research indicates that punishment is sometimes accompanied by significant negative side effects. Students who are regularly the object of punishment may over time show a drop in positive attitudes toward school (resulting in poor attendance and work performance), have a more negative perception of teachers, and adopt a more punitive manner in interacting with peers and adults (Martens & Meller, 1990).

What to Consider Before Using Punishment Techniques. Simply put, punishment techniques of any kind are strong behavioral medicine-and should be used with care and compassion. Before using any punishment techniques, the teacher should consider whether:

- *the student's behavioral problems are caused by a skill-deficit* - From an ethical standpoint, students should never be punished for behaviors that they cannot help. For example, a student who is chronically disorganized and always arrives late to class with no writing materials may well need to be taught organization skills--rather than be punished for his lack of preparedness.
- *positive techniques alone will adequately improve problem behaviors* - Instructors have a range of positive behavior intervention strategies to draw on when shaping student behaviors. These positive approaches might include the structuring of the student's classroom experience to avoid 'behavioral triggers' that lead to problems or the use of praise and other reinforcers to reward the student for engaging in appropriate, 'learner-friendly' behaviors. Punishment techniques, particularly 'strong' forms of punishments such as isolation/seclusion time-out from reinforcement, generally should be considered only when the range of positive strategies have not been successful in improving the student's conduct.

What to Think About When Setting Up a Behavior Program That Includes Punishment Techniques. Teachers who include punishment as one element of a behavior plan are most likely to experience success if their plan follows these guidelines:

Punishment is paired with positive reinforcement. The power of punishment techniques is that they can rapidly decrease a student's rate of problem behaviors. But merely suppressing unacceptable behaviors is not enough: The student should also be encouraged to adopt positive classroom behaviors to replace them. When planning a behavioral program, then, it is always a good idea to complement negative consequences for inappropriate behaviors with a positive-reinforcement system that rewards a child's positive behaviors. In fact, for some children (e.g., those with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), the positive reinforcement program (e.g., sticker chart) should be put into place first. Only when that positive program begins to show results should a mild punishment component (e.g., response-cost) be added.

The plan uses the mildest punishment technique that is likely to be effective. When selecting a punishment technique, start off with less intensive interventions. Consider moving to a more intensive or restrictive form of punishment only if the milder alternative proves ineffective. A teacher may first decide, for example, to try in-class time-out (with the student remaining in the classroom during time-out and watching but not otherwise participating in academic activities) before moving to a more intensive form of isolation time-out in which the student is sent to a special time-out room for misbehavior.

The student is not deprived of key opportunities to build social and academic skills. When selecting negative consequences to impose for student misbehavior, the teacher should carefully

consider possible harmful effects of that consequence before implementing it. For instance, reducing recess time as a consequence for misbehavior may not be the best approach if the student already has few friends and limited social skills. Missing unstructured free time with her peers may in fact only worsen the student's social isolation. Similarly, teachers may want to rethink placing students with academic deficits into seclusion time-out or in-school detention, as such a consequence would deprive those children of opportunities for academic instruction that they badly need.

The student provides input as the behavior plan is being developed. One potential unintended effect of punishment techniques is that the target child may feel powerless--a situation that could erode the child's investment in learning. Whenever possible, the teacher should give the student a voice in the design of the behavior management plan. For example, a teacher designing a response-cost program might ask the student to come up with a 'secret' sign that the instructor might use to signal a warning to the student that he is on the verge of having a point deducted from his 'Great Study Behaviors' chart.

The behavior plan is congruent with state regulations and school district policies and has parent support. The use of punishment procedures to manage student behaviors is an issue of growing debate in school discipline. Instructors should take care that all elements of a behavior plan, including punishment procedures, fall within disciplinary guidelines both of the state education department and their school district. Parents, too, should be informed of any behavior plan being put into place for their child and asked to sign off on it prior to that plan being implemented. (It is particularly important that parents approve behavior plans if those plans contain punishment procedures such as use of time-out.)

The teacher monitors the effects of the behavior plan. Because punishment procedures can in some cases lead to unintended negative effects on student performance and attitudes toward school, behavior plans that include a punishment component should be closely monitored. Monitoring should include collection of information both about whether the student's problem behaviors are improving under the plan and whether the child is showing any negative reaction to the behavior plan itself.

Troubleshooting Behavior Programs That Include Punishment Techniques.

Here are some ideas to think about if problems arise when using punishment techniques as part of a larger behavior plan:

The student reacts negatively to the behavior program. Whenever a new behavior plan is put into place for a student, teachers can expect that the student may initially 'test the limits' of the program. Such testing behavior may include loud complaining, or the student's refusing to follow teacher requests. Often, such behaviors subside when the program has been in place and consistently enforced for a short time.

If the student reacts to the program, though, with more serious behavioral outbursts that suggest a safety risk to self or others, the teacher should consider substantially revising or discontinuing the plan immediately. Also, if the student begins to show other negative reactions sometimes associated with use of punishment (e.g., reduced investment in learning, increased hostility toward teaching staff, etc.), the teacher should heed these potential warning signs and revise the behavior plan as necessary.

The student accepts the program but shows little behavioral improvement. If a student fails to show significant behavioral improvements within a reasonable amount of time, a plan that contains a punishment component should be revised or discontinued. (Teachers should be particularly careful not to regard a behavior plan as 'effective' merely because it makes the student easier to manage. While an instructor, for example, may like a time-out intervention because it offers her an occasional break from a problem student, that intervention should be regarded as useless or even harmful to the student if it fails to bring about a speedy improvement in that child's behaviors in the classroom.)

Punishment techniques gradually lose their effectiveness. It is not uncommon for punishment to lose its effectiveness over time as the recipient of that punishment becomes acclimated to it. In such cases, the problem is usually that the teacher has become overdependent on using punishment techniques alone to manage the student's behaviors.

An instructor may find after her intervention has been in place for a month, for instance, that she has to reprimand a student more often and more insistently to get that student to comply with a request. (Remember that reprimands serve as a kind of punishment.) Upon reflection, the teacher realizes that she has been overusing reprimands. Furthermore, she finds that her loud reprimands distract other students from their classwork.

So the instructor revises the behavior plan. She starts the student on a sticker chart for positive behaviors, giving the child a sticker each half-hour if the student completes and turns in all class assignments (positive reinforcement). The teacher also tells the student that she can have five extra minutes of free time at the end of each day to spend in the book corner, a place that the student likes to visit. However, whenever the student fails to comply with a teacher request within 5 seconds during the day, the teacher deducts a single minute from the student's extra free time (response-cost). The final behavior plan, then, combines both positive reinforcement for appropriate behaviors (sticker chart) and punishment for inappropriate behaviors (loss of free time for failure to comply with teacher requests). The teacher finds that this revised plan is actually easier to administer, since she no longer feels that she has to 'nag' the student. Furthermore, the teacher discovers that the new plan retains its effectiveness over time.

References

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