

National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Teacher Behavioral Strategies: A Menu

Teachers are always looking for additional ideas for managing challenging student behaviors. This menu contains strategies that teachers can use proactively to head off behaviors before they occur. It also provides a range of consequences that teachers can select from after a student misbehaves. Here is a sampling of strategies that teachers can use either to head off or to provide consequences for low- to medium-level student misbehavior:

Prior to Occurrence of Behavior(s):

Break student tasks into manageable 'chunks': Students may misbehave to escape activities that they find too hard or tedious. Consider breaking a larger task into smaller or easier 'chunks' that the student will more willingly undertake. If the student must complete a large number of subtasks, include an occasional 'fun break'.

Increase adult supervision/surveillance: When the student's misbehavior is 'covert' (hidden), increase the adult supervision in the area. Be sure that all adults supervising a particular school setting agree on what behaviors to single out for positive or negative consequences and know how to get additional assistance if student behaviors get out of hand.

Increase 'reinforcement' quality of classroom: If a student is acting out to be ejected from a classroom, it may be that student does not find the classroom setting and/or routine to be very rewarding. The teacher can make the classroom environment more attractive in a number of ways, including by posting interesting instructional materials (e.g., bulletin board displays), boosting the pace of (and degree of student interaction in) class lecture or discussion, and including additional instructional activities of high interest to students.

Offer choice: When students are offered opportunities to make simple but meaningful choices in their classroom routine, their behaviors can improve. Examples of choice include permitting students to select who they work with on a project, negotiate when an assignment will be due, and choose what book to read for an assignment.

Offer help strategies: Misbehavior may occur when students are stuck on a work assignment and do not know how to quickly and appropriately request help without drawing undue attention to themselves. Teachers can address this problem by teaching the entire class how to request assistance in a non-disruptive way. A teacher may, for example, instruct students with questions during seatwork to post a help-signal and continue working on other assignments or approach a peer-helper for assistance.

Preview rules/behavioral expectations: Some students misbehave because they are impulsive and do not always think through the consequences of their misbehavior before they act. These students can benefit from having the teacher briefly review rules and/or behavioral expectations just before the students go into a potentially challenging situation or setting (e.g., passing through the halls; going to an assembly). If the instructor has a classroom reward system in place, he or she can strengthen the rules preview by reminding students that the class can win points for good behavior.

Preview schedule: Having the teacher preview a student's schedule daily (or even more frequently) can help those children who seem to misbehave because they do not respond well to unexpected changes in schedule or cannot remember what their schedule is.

Provide skills instruction: If the teacher determines that a child engages in inappropriate behaviors because the student lacks alternative, 'replacement' skills, the instructor should set up a plan to provide the child with the necessary skills. Any skills instruction should include plenty of examples to illustrate the skill-set being taught, demonstration (e.g., modeling, role-play) and a 'checkup' (e.g., student demonstration and verbal 'walk-through' of steps to skill) to confirm to the teacher's satisfaction that the student has acquired the skill.

Rearrange student seating or classroom setup: If elements of the classroom setting appear to contribute to the student's behavior problems, consider changing the student's seating or the classroom setup to reduce these problems. For example a student who is distracted by peers may benefit from having his or her seat moved to a more private corner of the room.

Teach student to take 'calm-down' break: Students who frequently become angry at peers or who may be set off by the excitement of large groups may be taught to (1) identify when they are getting too tense, excited, or angry, and (2) take a short break away from the setting or situation until they have calmed down sufficiently.

During and After Occurrence of Behavior(s):

Apology: Apologies are one way that humans repair the social fabric after a conflict. The student may be asked to apologize to the offended party (e.g., teacher, student, principal) in writing or in person. It is important, though, that the offending student accept blame for the incident and demonstrate authentic regret in offering the apology, or neither party will be satisfied with the outcome.

Behavioral contract: The student and teacher hammer out a written agreement that outlines: specific positive behaviors that the student is to engage in (or specific negative behaviors that he or she is to avoid), the privileges or rewards that the student will earn for complying with the behavioral contract, and the terms by which the student is to earn the rewards (e.g., staying in his or her seat during independent reading period for three consecutive days).

Ignoring: When the student displays a problem behavior, the teacher 'ignores' the behavior (that is, the teacher does not give the student attention for the behavior).

Loss of privileges: The child is informed in advance that he or she can access a series of privileges (e.g., access to games to play, the opportunity to have 5 minutes of free time) if his or her behavior remains appropriate. The instructor instructs the student about what kind and intensity of problem behavior may result in the loss of privileges, and for how long. After this introductory phase, the instructor withdraws privileges as agreed upon whenever the student misbehaves.

Modeling (Vicarious Learning): While the target child is observing, the teacher gives specific public praise to children other than the target student when they show appropriate behaviors. When praising these behaviors, the teacher clearly describes the praiseworthy behaviors. When the target child 'imitates' the same or similar appropriate behaviors, the teacher immediately praises him or her.

Office referral: The instructor writes up a referral documenting the student's misbehavior and sends both the referral and student to the principal's office for intervention.

Over-correction: The student is required repetitively to practice a skill that will 'replace' or improve upon an inappropriate or problem behavior. For example, a student who wanders the halls without permission when taking an unsupervised bathroom break may have to stay after school one afternoon and take multiple 'practice' trips to the school bathroom. In this example, the instructor might accompany the student to monitor how promptly the student walked to, and returned from, the bathroom and to give the student feedback about how much this target behavior has improved.

Parent contact: The teacher calls, sends a note home to, or e-mails the student's parent(s) regarding the behavioral problems. The parent may be asked for advice on how the teacher can better reach and teach the child at school. The teacher may offer suggestions for appropriate parent involvement (e.g., "You may want to talk with your child about this incident, which we view as serious.").

Peer Consequences: If the teacher finds that classmates play (or could play) an important role in influencing a target child's behavior(s), the teacher may try to influence the target child's behaviors indirectly by providing consequences for selected peer behaviors.

For example, if classmates encourage the target student to make inappropriate comments by giving positive social attention (e.g., laughing), the teacher may start a group response-cost program and deduct points from the class total whenever a peer laughs at inappropriate comments. Or a teacher who wants to increase the social interactions that a socially isolated child has with her peers may reward selected peers with praise each time that they approach the isolated child in a positive manner.

Praise: When the student engages in a positive behavior that the teacher has selected to increase, the teacher praises the student for that behavior. Along with positive comments (e.g., "Great job!"), the praise statement should give specifics about the behavior the child demonstrated that is being singled out for praise (e.g., "You really kept your attention focused on me during that last question, even when kids around you were talking!").

Private approach to student: The instructor quietly approaches the student, points out the problem behavior and how it is interfering with classwork or interrupting instruction. The instructor reminds the student of the academic task in which he or she should be engaged. The student is given an opportunity to explain his or her actions. The student is politely offered the choice to improve behavior or accept a negative consequence. Privately approaching a student can help him or her to save face and reduce the likelihood that the student will become defensive or defiant.

Promise: The instructor approaches the misbehaving student and informs him or her that the student has behaved inappropriately. The teacher asks the student to state an appropriate alternative behavior that he or she should have followed. The teacher then requests that the student promise the instructor (verbally or in writing) that he or she will not engage in this misbehavior again.

Redirection: The teacher interrupts problem behavior by calling on the student to answer a question, assigning him or her a task to carry out, or otherwise refocusing the child's attention.

Reflective Essay: The student is required to write and submit to the teacher a brief composition after displaying behaviors. At minimum, the composition would state: (1) what problem behavior the student displayed, (2) how the student could have acted in an alternative, more acceptable manner, and (3) a promise from the student to show appropriate behaviors in similar situations in the future. NOTE: Some teachers use a pre-printed structured questionnaire containing these 3 items for the student to complete.

Reprimand: In the typical reprimand, the instructor approaches the student, states that the student is misbehaving, and instructs the student to stop the misbehavior immediately. Reprimands should be used sparingly, as students may become defiant if confronted by an angry teacher in a public manner. When used, reprimands should be kept short, to avoid arguments with the student.

Response Cost: Usually, response cost programs first award a student a certain number of tokens with no conditions attached. Throughout the monitoring period, the student has a token withdrawn whenever he or she displays a behavior that is inappropriate. (These behaviors would usually have been agreed upon in advance.) The student is permitted to 'cash in' any points that he or she still retains at the end of the monitoring period or may be allowed to 'bank' the points toward a future reward or privilege.

Restitution: The student engages in an activity that actually or symbolically restores the environment, setting, or social situation that his or her misbehavior had damaged. For example, a student who marks up a wall with graffiti may be required to work afterschool under supervision of custodial staff to wash the wall and removing the offending markings.

Rewarding alternative (positive) behaviors: The instructor calls on the student or provides other positive attention or incentives only during those times that the student is showing appropriate social and academic behaviors. The same positive attention or consequences are withheld during times when the student misbehaves or does not engage in academics.

Rules review: The teacher approaches the misbehaving student and (a) has him or her read off the posted class rules, (b) asks the student which of those rules his or her current behavior is violating, and (c) has the student state what positive behavior he or she will engage in instead.

Timeout/Detention/Inschool suspension: The student is removed from the classroom because of a behavioral infraction. In timeout, the student's exclusion from the classroom may be very short (3-5 minutes). With in-school suspension, the student may be removed from instruction for longer periods (e.g., half a day). Detention may require that the student spend time in a non-rewarding setting but that consequence may be deferred until after school to prevent loss of learning.

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