

Simple, Evidence-Based Interventions for Classic Problems of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders

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There is no doubt among professionals in the field of emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) that students identified with, or at risk for, EBD demand qualitatively different instruction and behavior management interventions if they are to succeed in school (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013). Put simply, students with EBD are identified as such precisely because the general education program and its systems of instruction and management have not proven sufficient to meet their needs. In the language of positive behavioral intervention and supports (see www.pbis.org), universally applied classroom and behavior management systems—even those based on the most sound evidence currently available—will be insufficient to meet the needs of all students, and for most students with EBD, Tier II and Tier III (i.e., secondary and tertiary) supports will be needed (see Scheuermann & Hall, 2012).

In describing the types of supports and interventions students with EBD most likely need, Landrum, Tankersley, and Kauffman (2003) proposed a model in which educators are advised to think of targets for intervention, which are based on the classic characteristics generally associated with EBD. The most classic characteristics, or at least those that are probably most evident and pressing to classroom teachers, are (a) noncompliance, (b) inattention, and (c) disruption. Accordingly, Landrum and colleagues argued that intervention priorities should be those that encourage compliance, increase students' attention to task, or result in greater rates of task

engagement (which by default ensures lower rates of disruption). These targets are naturally very much related to one another, and teachers charged with working with students with EBD should approach them as combined elements of a simple but very challenging set of goals that are getting students to (a) comply with teacher requests, (b) attend to the right things (e.g., the teacher, the Smart Board, a text), and (c) maintain effortful engagement with appropriate tasks, thus reducing opportunities for off-task behavior and disruption.

In the sections that follow, three simple interventions that can move teachers toward accomplishing these goals are described. They are behavior-specific praise, behavioral momentum, and choice (see *Table 1*). Interventions were chosen for three reasons: (a) they are simple to implement; (b) they require very little in the way of advanced training, preparation, or the development of elaborate materials; and (c) each is associated with a growing body of empirical evidence that they positively affect the targets for intervention previously described. *Table 1* also includes references for where to find more information on each.

Behavior-Specific Praise

The concept of using praise to increase desired behavior has been around for decades (e.g., Brophy, 1981), but data suggest that teachers do not always use it efficiently or effectively. Perhaps most troubling is that students with EBD, who arguably need praise even more than typical students, may receive less

praise than their peers even when they engage in positive behavior (Wehby, Symons, Canale, & Go, 1998). Although praise has been criticized by some (e.g., Kohn, 1993), the evidence for providing praise or positive teacher attention to increase desirable behavior is overwhelming. Alber and Heward (1997), for example, concluded that “the systematic application of praise and attention may be the most powerful motivational and classroom management tool available to teachers” (p. 277). Similarly, as early as the 1980s, Strain, Lambert, Kerr, Stagg, and Lenkner (1983) noted that “literally hundreds of classroom based studies have shown that teachers' delivery of social reinforcement can result in improved academic performance ... ; rule-following and good school deportment ... ; improved cognitive and linguistic performance ... ; and increased social responsiveness” (p. 243).

Recent conceptions and examinations of the effects of praise have rightly focused more explicitly on the key elements of effective praise, and even the term now used most commonly identifies one such element: *behavior-specific praise* (the term *descriptive praise* is often used interchangeably with the term *behavior-specific praise*; see Hemmeter, Snyder, Kinder, & Artman, 2011). As should be obvious, generic praise (“good boy/girl!” “way to go!” or “nice job!”) is far less effective than praise statements that identify as specifically as possible precisely what the student did that is being acknowledged. Note that a motivational statement is surely important for most students, but

Table 1 INTERVENTIONS FOR CLASSIC PROBLEMS OF EBD

Intervention	More Information
Behavior-specific praise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conroy, Sutherland, Snyder, Al-Hendawi, & Vo (2009) Intervention Central: see http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/motivation/teacher-praise-efficient-tool-motivate-students <i>The power of behavior specific praise in schools</i>; see: http://essentialeducator.org/?p=13606
Behavioral momentum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lee, Belfiore, & Budin (2008) IRIS Module, Behavior and Classroom Management. Addressing Disruptive and Noncompliant Behaviors (Part 2): Behavioral Interventions. http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu Intervention Central: see http://www.interventioncentral.org/student_motivation_high_probability_requests
Choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Kern & Parks (2012); Kern & State (2009) Evidence-Based Intervention Network, see <i>Choice Making</i> and <i>Choice of Task Sequence</i>: http://ebi.missouri.edu/?cat=30 IRIS Module, Behavior and Classroom Management. Addressing Disruptive and Noncompliant Behaviors (Part 2): Behavioral Interventions. http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu

evidence suggests that praise is likely to be effective in maintaining or increasing a behavior only when it is paired with a specific informational statement (Chalk & Bizo, 2004). Examples include, "Nice job, Alex! You finished all 10 sentences with correct punctuation!" or "Thank you, Thomas. You kept your hands to yourself all the way from the cafeteria to the classroom." Language may be adjusted based on the age or developmental level of the student, but the message must be the same. Specifically, the teacher must communicate to the student in clear, concise language exactly what the student did that was appreciated.

Additional key elements of effective praise include timing. To be effective, praise must generally occur in very close proximity to the occurrence of the behavior, particularly during acquisition of new skills (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). If possible, teachers should strive to praise a student's effort or accomplishment as soon as it occurs; the longer the interval between the behavior and its acknowledgment, the less powerful the praise will be. This is of particular concern for teachers of students with relatively

high rates of negative or inappropriate behavior. Many behaviors—good and bad—may occur in the course of a lesson or class period. If a student engages in positive behavior for some period of time but then resorts to negative behavior later during a given class, it is very difficult for the teacher to meaningfully praise the student later (e.g., "Well, you were working very hard earlier today, and I really liked that, but then you got off task and started teasing Crystal and calling her names"). In such a scenario, the power of praise is seriously compromised, and indeed, the teacher may inadvertently reinforce negative behavior.

Although the origin of the specific ratio has proven hard to pin down, there is lore in the field of special education that praise statements should outnumber corrections, redirections, or otherwise negative statements by a ratio of 4:1 or 5:1 (e.g., Trussell, 2008). Regardless of the specific ratio teachers are encouraged to aim for, it is safe to say that in current practice, few teachers approach a desired ratio of praise to negative statements, and for many, the ratio may in fact be the inverse of

what is desired (Van Acker & Grant, 1996). Moreover, students with EBD in particular desperately need more praise for compliance and expected behavior than they typically receive (Sutherland, 2000). Guidelines for the effective use of behavior-specific praise are listed in *Table 2*, and most teachers in both general and special education roles should work to increase their rates of effective praise for students with EBD according to these guidelines.

Behavioral Momentum

Like praise, the concept and logic of behavioral momentum have been around for decades (e.g., Mace et al., 1988). Briefly, behavioral momentum suggests that momentum toward compliance can be enhanced when difficult tasks (tasks or requests a student is *not* likely to comply with) are preceded by one or more so-called "easy" tasks (tasks the student *is* likely to engage in successfully). In behavioral terms, behaviors (e.g., compliance, academic responding) that have been associated with more frequent reinforcement are more likely to persist when different conditions (such as more difficult

Table 2 CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE BEHAVIOR-SPECIFIC PRAISE

1. Praise must be immediate.
 - *Deliver praise to students as soon as possible after the occurrence of the behavior. Praise that occurs long after the fact may lose power, as the student may not connect the praise statement to the appropriate behavior.*
 - *For behaviors of longer duration (reading, writing), offer praise periodically during the activity to acknowledge and encourage effort.*
2. Praise must be specific, including details on the behavior being acknowledged.
 - *Praise effort and/or accomplishments, focusing on what the student did and what the outcome is (rather than "you're so smart!" or "you're such a good writer!" say, "I can tell by this grade that you studied hard for this test!" or "Your use of citations in this essay was fantastic. Nice job!")*
3. Praise must be contingent.
 - *Praise students when and only when the behavior occurs. Praise used as encouragement before the behavior occurs may be ineffective and inadvertently promote inappropriate behavior.*
4. Praise must be frequent.
 - *It is difficult to name a specific desired rate, but studies indicate that despite its positive effects on student behavior, praise occurs very infrequently in classrooms, especially for students with EBD.*

tasks) are encountered. Behavioral momentum relies on the predictability of behavior. That is, when teachers know students are unlikely to comply with a particular request, they can provide students with a series of simple requests that are likely to result in successful compliance. Repeated compliance creates a positive give and take between teacher and student before teachers make a difficult request, decreasing the likelihood the student will refuse (Lee, 2005). Consider the following scenario:

Teacher: "Carlos, will you please pass out these papers for me?" [Carlos complies.]

Teacher: "Thanks, Carlos, for giving everybody a paper so quickly and quietly. Now, can you also erase the Smart Board for me?" [Carlos complies.]

Teacher: "Terrific job, Carlos. The Smart Board is clean and ready for me to use. Now, please grab your math workbook and open it to page 22 and we'll be ready to start."

In this scenario, the teacher knows that Carlos is unlikely to take out his math workbook to begin math class without protest, so she begins with two requests for simple behaviors she is confident Carlos will engage in. Note, too, that the strategy as implemented allows the teacher the opportunity to praise Carlos for

compliance, and a very positive teacher-student interchange is established. Such a positive interchange with reinforcement quickly delivered following compliance on each occasion is critical to the success of the intervention (Zuluaga & Normand, 2008). It is important to note that the application of behavioral momentum is not a guarantee of success but simply a means of increasing the likelihood of compliance. In the scenario above, had the teacher simply started with, "Carlos, please take out your workbook," the odds would have been low that he would have complied. By beginning with much higher probability requests, she has increased the likelihood of compliance and importantly has been able to praise Carlos several additional times, thus enhancing his overall rates of positive feedback received.

Although the concept of behavioral momentum is simple, it is recommended that teachers use data to, first, validate their hunches about what requests students routinely do—and do not—comply with, and, second, establish whether the implementation of the strategy results in improved compliance. Moreover, it is important to develop a useful list of as many high-probability requests as possible so that these may be varied. In the previous scenario, although Carlos enjoyed passing out papers

and erasing the board, he may well tire of this if asked to do the same two tasks every day. Once a suitable list of high-probability ("easy") tasks or requests has been established and verified, the teacher can implement behavioral momentum by deciding which low-probability scenario she wishes to target (e.g., student consistently refuses to take out his materials when it is time for math; student refuses to line up when it is time to change classes) and then by randomly selecting two or three of the easy requests from her list to deliver immediately prior to asking the student to engage in the low-probability request. The specific steps to be used to implement behavioral momentum are listed in *Table 3*.

A final note about behavioral momentum is that a more specific application to academic tasks is also supported by a growing body of research (see Lee, Belfiore, & Budin, 2008). Referred to as high-*p* sequences ("high-probability sequences"), applications of behavioral momentum theory to academic tasks suggest that students be given one or more high-*p* problems or tasks as a lead in to more challenging tasks. Obvious examples include presenting several single-digit addition problems (the high-*p* tasks) at the top of a worksheet page before transitioning to more challenging problems (e.g., multiple-digit addition problems) further down the

Table 3 STEPS IN IMPLEMENTING BEHAVIORAL MOMENTUM

1. Identify problem tasks or requests (low-probability behaviors).
 - *What requests or tasks result in noncompliance?*
2. Identify easy tasks or requests (high-probability behaviors).
 - *What requests or tasks does the student regularly comply with or complete?*
3. Collect data to validate your problem tasks and easy tasks.
 - *Observe the student following each low- and high-probability request to validate your assessment of what the student will and will not do or comply with. Modify the list as necessary.*
4. Implement the intervention.
 - *Prior to giving the student a low-probability request, deliver one to three high-probability requests from your list, reinforcing compliance with each. After the series of high-probability requests, deliver the low-probability request.*
 - *Maintain data on rates of compliance with the low-probability requests.*
 - *Vary the high-probability requests used, and, if the intervention proves successful, gradually reduce the number of high-probability requests delivered.*

page or having students copy single letters or letter sequences before transitioning to copying words. Regardless of whether behavioral momentum is used as a strategy embedded within academic tasks or used to focus on broader issues of compliance with teacher requests, Lee (2006) suggested that the effectiveness of the procedure is enhanced when the high-probability tasks chosen have a clear and logical connection to the desired low-probability request. For example, although having a student run errands may be a high-probability request, it may be more effective to use a high-probability task such as passing out materials or workbooks prior to giving a student the low-probability request to take out his own math homework.

Choice

Choice (sometimes the term *choice and preferred activities* is used) is another example of a simple concept that can have a powerful impact on student behavior and compliance. The concept is simply this: When individuals make choices about what to do, or when to do it, their motivation and persistence are enhanced. In most classrooms, virtually all aspects of the school day are controlled by a teacher, including where to sit, what to do first, what to

do next, what assignments to do in what order, and what consequences follow student behavior. But according to a growing body of research, students are more motivated when they are allowed a choice regarding which task to work on (Dunlap et al., 1994), the sequence of completing tasks or items on a task (Kern, Mantegna, Vorndran, Bailin, & Hilt, 2001; Ramsey, Jolivet, Patterson, & Kennedy, 2010), where to complete the task, and what materials are used (Harding, Wacker, Cooper, Millard, Jensen-Kovolan, 1994; Rispoli et al., 2013; Ulke-Kurkcuoglu & Kircaali-Iftar, 2010). This can mean something as simple as allowing students to choose between completing a math problem set first or a vocabulary exercise first or allowing them to choose between completing their writing assignment at their desk with pen and paper or on a computer. Simple logic suggests that choice making can have a positive impact on compliance. For example, a student would seem far more likely to begin working on an assignment if he is asked whether he wants to do math or spelling first and then is allowed to choose which to work on, rather than simply being told, "time for spelling." But among the most validated outcomes of choice-making interventions is a reduction in problem behavior (see Shogren, Faggella-Luby, Bae, &

Wehmeyer, 2004), especially behavior maintained by escape from tasks (Romaniuk et al., 2002). And, as emphasized throughout this article, the interrelationship of the main targets for intervention (i.e., compliance, attention to task, engagement) likely means that choice positively affects more than just engagement. That is, complying with teacher requests and engaging in appropriate tasks by definition will result in a reduction in off-task and problem behavior.

Table 4 describes the steps involved in planning for and implementing choice, including some of the most common areas in which students might make choices. These include assignment order, assignment format, where to complete work or whom to work with, and even what consequences follow a given behavior. There are, of course, limits to choices that students are allowed to make, and choices are almost never open ended; rather, they are forced-choice options between two or more predetermined alternatives that the teacher is comfortable with and has planned for in advance. That is, a teacher would probably never ask, "What do you want to work on today?" Instead, she might review with students two (or more) tasks or assignments that are expected to be completed in a given day or block of time, and then ask,

Table 4 STEPS IN IMPLEMENTING CHOICE

1. Identify problem activities or contexts.
 - *When and where do noncompliance or disruption occur most frequently?*
 - *Collect data on engagement, disruptions, office disciplinary referrals, etc., as appropriate to validate the extent of the problem.*
2. Identify choices that might be possible in each context.
 - *Can students choose:*
 - Which assignment to do first?*
 - How to complete a given task (paper and pencil; on a computer; flash cards versus worksheet review)?*
 - Where in the classroom to work (at their desks, at a work table, on the carpet)?*
 - What reinforcer they will earn upon successful completion of the task (access to computer, gym time, library time)?*
 - *Establish a list of choices that are reasonable and acceptable to all students and staff involved.*
3. Implement choice in one context at a time.
 - *Prior to each problem activity, offer student(s) one choice from your list.*
 - *Collect data on task completion, disruptions, etc., to determine whether choice affects student behavior in this specific context.*
 - *Vary choices offered over time to prevent boredom or satiation.*
4. If effective, implement choice in different contexts as appropriate.

“Which would you like to work on first, outlining your essay, or working on your vocabulary notebook?” Similarly, students who are known to have difficulty getting along with one another should not be given a truly open-ended choice about whom to work with on a task or project. Even when all of the options of activities teachers offer to students are associated with a history of noncompliance and problem behavior, merely allowing students to choose the order of completion has been demonstrated to substantially reduce problems and increase engagement (Kern et al., 2001).

A final note about choice is that some examples may require preparation time on the part of the teacher, but evidence suggests that this may well be worth the effort. Suppose, for example, that a teacher routinely provides time for students to review recently learned material (e.g., vocabulary, spelling words, math facts, science concepts). There are a number of ways to accomplish this, including teacher-led review or work in small groups or pairs. Suppose further that the teacher prepares in advance a worksheet (e.g., crossword puzzle) and simple sets of flash cards, both based on a set of vocabulary words from the current science unit. Using choice, the teacher might then offer to her class two

options: (a) complete a worksheet on your own or (b) choose a partner to work with to review the vocabulary words using the flash cards. Again, although this requires some advance preparation on the part of the teacher, research on choice suggests that students are more likely to be engaged in an activity of their choosing.

Conclusion

The targets for intervention described by Landrum and colleagues (2003), which provide the focus for this article, are not the only targets of concern for teachers of students with EBD, and there are certainly more troubling forms of behavioral challenges in schools (e.g., extreme aggression). It is understandable that teachers and administrators may be more concerned about these more extreme, but also less frequent, behavioral outbursts. Yet the focus on addressing classroom noncompliance, inattention, and disruption may be important because they are the most common problems teachers face on a daily basis. Moreover, there is good evidence that the types of relatively minor noncompliance, off-task behavior, and disruption focused on here are precursors to more significant behavioral concerns (see Walker,

Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). It is imperative, then, that teachers intervene early in the cycle of acting-out behavior in a preventive way to break the pattern before behavior escalates to unmanageable levels. These interventions are suited not just for students already identified with EBD but also for any student who may be at risk for EBD or who has difficulty with compliance, attention, or engagement.

Likewise, the interventions chosen are but three among myriad approaches teachers might use with confidence. The Web sites listed in *Table 1* provide an excellent overview and resource for many such interventions, and many others exist (e.g., the What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide on reducing behavior problems in elementary school; Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver, 2008). It is hoped that the brief, simple intervention approaches described here, along with the resources provided where teachers can find more information about them, encourage all teachers to become familiar with these approaches and to implement them with some regularity with students whose challenging behavior presents an ongoing concern. Again, the procedures described here are easy to implement, and they focus on the most common behavioral concerns

teachers of students with EBD are likely to encounter. For these reasons, behavior-specific praise, behavioral momentum, and choice should be among the repertoires of every teacher.

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