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Training Students With Behavioral Problems to Recruit Teacher Praise

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Abstract

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders exhibit high levels of inappropriate behaviors. Although many teachers are aware of the benefits of teacher praise, its use in classrooms remains low. Training students to recruit praise is a method to counter suppressing contingencies and increase praise rates for desired classroom behaviors. With minimal planning and training, students can begin recruiting the attention they seek while you begin delivering the praise needed to encourage and maintain appropriate behaviors.

Keywords

recruiting praise, teaching strategies, education/training

> Mr. Blackwell is a sixth-grade special educator in a self-contained classroom for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). For reading intervention, he is using the Read 180® program in which students are divided into three small groups and rotate through stations (independent reading, computer intervention, and teacher-led small group work). Celia is a female student diagnosed with EBD who was recently placed in Mr. Blackwell's class. He has noticed that her behaviors are most disruptive when she is supposed to be independently reading. During this time, she often talks with other students, walks around the room, or throws objects at other students to distract them. Mr. Blackwell has assessed her reading level and conducted a functional behavior assessment (FBA). He concludes that she is not causing disruptions due to insufficient reading skills. Rather, it appears her behavior is being maintained by teacher attention. He did some data collection which revealed Celia is disrupting the class about 10 times per 15-min session of independent reading. Based on Celia's FBA, Mr. Blackwell has tried to provide positive attention to Celia while she is independently reading, but because he is busy leading the small group he often forgets. As a result, he reacts to her disruptive behaviors by reprimanding which works for a little while, but a few minutes later, Celia is back to being disruptive. Mr. Blackwell is increasingly frustrated with Celia's behavior and does not know what to do.

Students with EBD exhibit high levels of inappropriate behaviors resulting in academic difficulties and poor social relationships with peers and adults (Kauffman & Landrum, 2012). Due to aggressive, disruptive, and defiant behaviors, students with EBD are often placed in more restrictive environments such as self-contained classrooms. Teachers of students with EBD, therefore, are faced with daily and prolonged contact with students who regularly behave in ways that teachers find aversive (Westling, 2010). A reciprocal interaction can develop between teacher and students known as Patterson's "coercive interaction cycle" (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992), which states that once aversive behaviors are directed at a person, the receiving person responds with behaviors more aversive to the initial person. A cycle of negativity between teacher and student can perpetuate, ensuing an environment not conducive to academic or social growth.

A second phenomenon occurring in classrooms that proliferates negativity is the natural contingency that strengthens teacher reprimands (Heward, 2003). When a student is disrupting the class, the teacher will often reprimand the student resulting in immediate cessation of the disruptive behavior. For example, Celia leaves her seat without permission. Mr. Blackwell forcefully says, "Celia, go back to your seat—Now!" And Celia complies. Based on principles of reinforcement, Mr. Blackwell will remember that reprimanding Celia was successful and will likely reprimand again in a similar fashion the next time she leaves her seat without permission. Unfortunately, overt reprimands have shown to be counterproductive, initiating more off-task and

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oppositional behavior in the long run (Gable, Hester, Rock, & Hughes, 2009). In addition, educators consistently rely on reprimands to maintain classroom discipline due to lack of knowledge about effective management techniques and failure to take advantage of positive reinforcement as a natural principle of behavior (Maag, 2001; Piscareta, Tincani, Connell, & Axelrod, 2011).

Classroom-based strategies that actively teach and reward positive behavioral expectations demonstrate efficacy at reducing behavior problems and, in turn, may improve the classroom climate (Sugai et al., 2000). One empirically supported, positive behavior management technique is teacher praise (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008). Teacher praise has evolved over the years with behavior-specific praise (BSP) identified as more effective than general praise. *BSP* is defined as a positive statement intended to reinforce the desired behavior of an individual by acknowledging the individual by name (or in a manner in which he or she knows who is being praised) and specifically identifying the individual's behavior (Praising Effectively, 2017). For example, "Kaila, great job helping your neighbor," is an example of BSP. Specific, positive feedback is given. Kaila is now aware that she is doing a great job by helping her neighbor. In contrast, "great job, Kaila," is an example of general praise. Kaila knows she is doing a great job, but does not know why. Did she receive praise for sitting in her seat, working with her neighbor, writing neatly, talking quietly, or some other behavior? BSP identifies which behavior received praise, thereby making the praise more effective in positively reinforcing that behavior. Yet, despite the empirical support of BSP on behaviors of students with EBD (Markelz & Taylor, 2016), its use in classrooms remains low (Jenkins, Floress, & Reinke, 2015).

Looking back at the natural contingency between Mr. Blackwell and Celia, occasionally praising Celia for staying in her seat does not result in any immediate behavior change from Celia; she continues to sit in her seat. Given Celia's FBA suggests she is seeking teacher attention, providing BSP for staying in her seat will likely maintain or increase this desired behavior in the future. However, not receiving an immediate response from Celia (i.e., no reinforcement for Mr. Blackwell) following praise leads him to overlook the desirable behavior and focus more on reprimanding when undesirable behaviors are displayed. These natural contingencies to reprimand, and forget to praise, are evident in research with negative-to-positive statements as high as 4:1 in classrooms with students having EBD (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001).

Researchers have sought to increase teacher praise rates with a variety of interventions targeting teachers including training, self-monitoring, performance feedback, and tactile prompting (Markelz, Scheeler, Taylor, & Riccomini, in press). Results are encouraging; however, many interventions require teachers to partake in extensive out-of-class training—sometimes up to 2 hr (Alexander, Williams, & Nelson, 2012; Simonsen, Myers, & DeLuca, 2010), while other interventions require complex implementation such as consultations, self-monitoring, and reflections (Briere, Simonsen, Sugai, & Myers, 2015; Reinke, Lewis-Palmer, & Merrell, 2008). Such complexities reduce practicality and adoptability by practitioners with finite resources (i.e., time, money, and access to interventionists).

The purpose of this article is to explore a promising method of increasing praise rates—training students to recruit teacher praise with electronic prompting. We first review the literature on interventions that have trained students to recruit teacher praise. Then, we present the components of our strategy to implement teacher praise recruitment. We continue to use Mr. Blackwell and Celia as our scenario for contextual application. We also provide a list of expert advice to ensure implementation is smooth and successful outcomes are achieved. With minimal up-front effort, you can establish procedures for the most disruptive students to recruit teacher praise. Consequently, increasing teacher praise will positively affect interpersonal relationships and promote academic achievement.

Recruiting Teacher Praise Literature Review

Training students to recruit teacher praise is grounded in earlier research where students self-recorded behavior and received contingent reinforcement from the teacher (Glynn & Thomas, 1974). In most studies, however, the contingent reinforcement was a token (e.g., points). Seymour and Stokes (1976) were the first to use teacher praise as the contingent reinforcement following student recruitment of praise for a desired behavior. Since then, several studies have systematically taught students to recruit praise for a range of learners completing a variety of academic, functional, and vocational tasks (e.g., Craft, Alber, & Heward, 1998; Harchik, Harchik, Luce, & Sherman, 1990; Rouse, Everhart-Sherwood, & Alber-Morgan, 2014). For example, Alber, Anderson, Martin, and Moore (2005) trained four elementary students with EBD to appropriately recruit teacher praise. Each student was selected for intervention based on his or her high rate of inappropriate teacher attention seeking behavior. The students were trained individually and included the following protocol developed by Craft and colleagues (1998): provide a rationale for appropriate recruiting, model and role-play, and train self-recording. During a daily math worksheet activity, students were told to recruit praise between 3 and 5 times by raising their hand and waiting until the teacher acknowledged them. The students would then recruit praise by asking a question (e.g., "How am I doing?"). Following a successful recruitment of praise, the students made a mark on a self-recording sheet to

monitor the amount of recruitments. Results showed substantial level drops of inappropriate teacher attention seeking along with level increases of appropriate recruiting. In addition, all students demonstrated academic gains on their mathematic worksheets over time.

Although most procedures for training a student to recruit praise closely follows Craft and colleagues's (1998) protocol of providing a rationale, modeling and role-playing, then self-recording, there has been ambiguity on when to recruit praise. Many studies have used task completion as an opportune time to recruit praise. For example, the study by Rouse et al. (2014) used a picture board as a prompt for students with mild to severe intellectual disabilities when completing prevocational skills. All students had their assigned tasks pictorially represented on a job board at their desks (e.g., sorting mail, bundling, measuring). After the completion of a task, the students recruited praise for completing a task. Results demonstrated that the intervention increased accuracy of prevocational task performance. Similarly, Alber, Heward, and Hippler (1999) trained students to recruit praise when they had finished half of a math worksheet, then again upon 100% completion. During intervention, participants received higher rates of praise as well as instructional feedback. In addition, math fact completion rates and accuracy both increased by about 25% for all four participants.

Recruiting praise upon task completion may be appropriate for academic behaviors; however, some behaviors (e.g., on-task, sitting in seat, keeping hands to oneself) do not necessarily have a definitive beginning and end time. Many behaviors are more fluid and are expected to be taking place continuously. Furthermore, a student may be engrossed in a task and not remember to recruit praise. Therefore, training a student when to recruit praise may be more difficult with certain behaviors. Electronic prompting utilizes a device (e.g., countdown timer) that can be set to continuously loop on a fixed-time schedule (e.g., every 3 min). Electronic prompting may be a novel and appropriate method to integrate into training students to recruit praise. Research suggests electronic prompting is an effective strategy to increase behaviors because the user does not have to remember to perform the behavior. The prompting device provides reminding cues (Markelz, Taylor, Scheeler, Riccomini, & McNaughton, in press). Electronic prompting can be auditory, visual, or tactile (i.e., a worn device that produces a vibratory cue). Whenever the prompting device's alarm triggers, that is the student's cue to recruit praise. In addition, the electronic prompting device allows for an increase or decrease in frequency of prompts by adjusting the interval timer schedule depending on individual needs.

Research supports the efficacy of electronic prompting in increasing a variety of appropriate student behaviors, including on-task behaviors (Finn, Ramasamy, Dukes, & Scott, 2015), social initiations (Shabani et al., 2002), and self-monitoring math fact fluency (Farrell & McDougall, 2008). For example, in the study by Finn and colleagues, tactile prompting devices were worn by four participants (Grades 3-4), and prompted on an interval schedule to self-monitor on-task behavior. Participants were prompted (i.e., reminded) every 2 min to record whether they were on-task or not. Results demonstrated immediate level jumps in participants' on-task behaviors which maintained above baseline levels following intervention fading procedures. The authors concluded that electronic prompting has many potential benefits for students with disabilities. Interval schedules can be individualized to students' needs (e.g., 2 min for one student and 5 min for another). Electronic prompting can be delivered discreetly with tactile prompts. Last, the authors suggested electronic prompting can be implemented with ease and not burden teachers as students are responsible for implementing the intervention on a daily basis.

Positive results of previous research on training students to recruit praise and the combination of electronic prompting introduce a novel, yet practical solution for teachers of students with behavior problems. We now break down the components of our strategy and return to our scenario with Mr. Blackwell and Celia.

Recruiting Teacher Praise Components

Components of our teacher praise recruitment strategy include electronic prompting, planning, and student training. We discuss the rationale and research behind each component starting with electronic prompting.

> Mr. Blackwell is tired of forgetting to praise Celia when she is reading independently and doing the right thing. He decides to train Celia to recruit praise. He first needs to select an electronic prompting device.

Electronic Prompting

Figure 1 is a list of resources for electronic prompting. Use professional knowledge to select the best suited medium for your classroom. Whether it is placing the target student near a desktop or laptop to use website-based timers, providing an iPad or tablet for app timers, or providing a physical device for tactile prompting, there can be benefits and drawbacks to each. A website-based timer is probably the most available resource; however, it is not as discreet as a tactile prompting device. Downloading an app on a student's phone will allow the student to more independently initiate electronic prompting, yet may cause objections from other students who wish to use their personal devices.

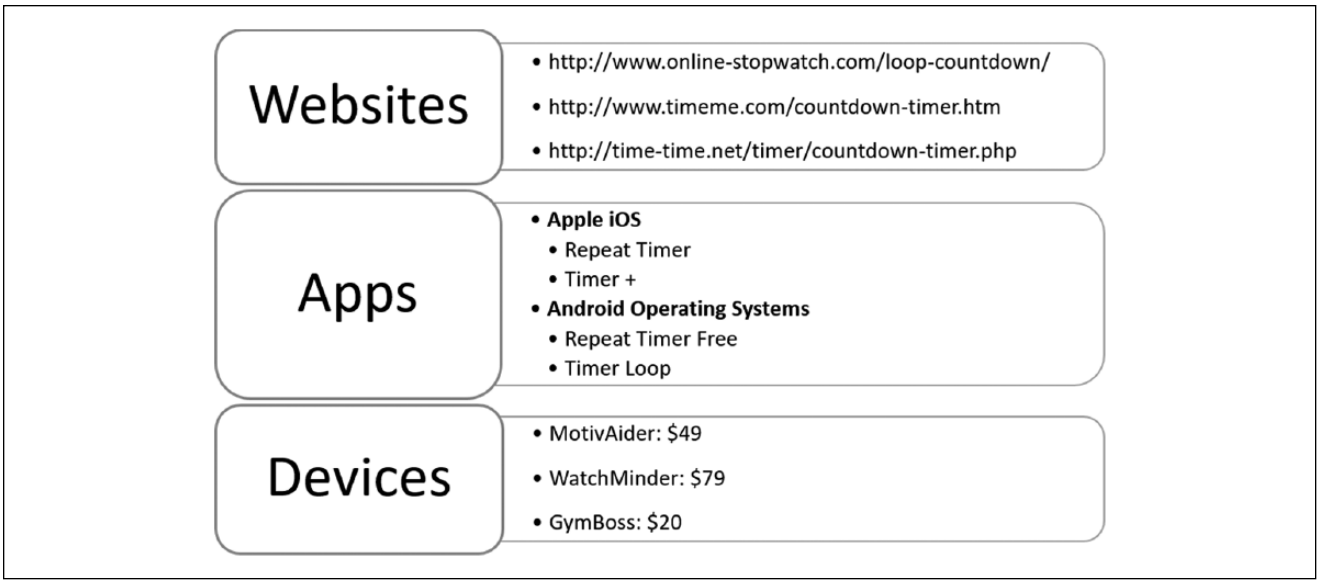

Figure 1. Resources for electronic prompting.
Note. Websites provide visual and/or auditory cues and can be typed into any browser search bar. Apps for tablets or phones provide visual and/or auditory cues and can be downloaded from the App store. Devices provide tactile (i.e., vibratory) cues and can be purchased online.

Selecting an appropriate prompting device and interval schedule is highly individualized based on context. We provide a list of suggestions to assist in your decision making.

Electronic prompting suggestions

- Keep the prompting device as discreet as possible so that only the target student can see, hear, or feel the prompting cue. Displaying a countdown timer on a smart board may draw unwanted attention to the intervention and target student.
- If using tablets, iPads, or phones, have rules and procedures in place. Other students may want to use electronic devices if they see your target student using a device.
- Select an electronic prompting procedure that the student can initiate individually. This will save you the time and effort of getting the prompting device running each day. For example, a younger student may have difficulty turning a computer on and initiating a web-based timer; however, grabbing the MotivAider out of a drawer, clipping it to their waist, and pushing start is a simple procedure that many first-graders could do.
- Identify an appropriate prompting schedule to recruit praise (e.g., every 4 min). Too much recruiting will saturate the effects of praise and may be too disruptive to your lesson (e.g., every 10 s), while too little recruiting will not have an impact on the target behavior (e.g., every 20 min).

Mr. Blackwell does not have access to tactile prompting devices or any iPads, and he thinks allowing Celia to use an app on her phone would cause too many problems. So, he decides on positioning Celia near his small group work area with a laptop and a web-based countdown timer.

Planning Stage

We recommend training one student until the procedures are more comfortable and familiar. Often, the student with the most disruptive behaviors will be the best choice. After selecting an appropriate electronic prompting device for your target student, determine the desired behavior for which you want the student to recruit praise. Next, choose a data collection method to use during baseline and intervention so that you can compare baseline data with intervention data. Collect baseline data on the targeted behavior so that you understand current levels. Following baseline data collection, you can set an appropriate goal for how much you would like to see the behavior change. Finally, you will need to identify a time to meet with the target student to conduct the training and introduce him or her to recruiting teacher praise. Figure 2 is a checklist for easy reference during planning and training and to ensure fidelity of implementation.

Planning stage suggestions

- Research suggests older students (e.g., high school) may find overt praise aversive because it draws unwanted peer attention (Markelz & Taylor, 2016); therefore, plan on positioning the student in an accessible location where you can provide discreet praise.
- Data collection does not need to be complicated. A simple tally sheet often works best. If you are moving around your classroom frequently, the penny-pocket

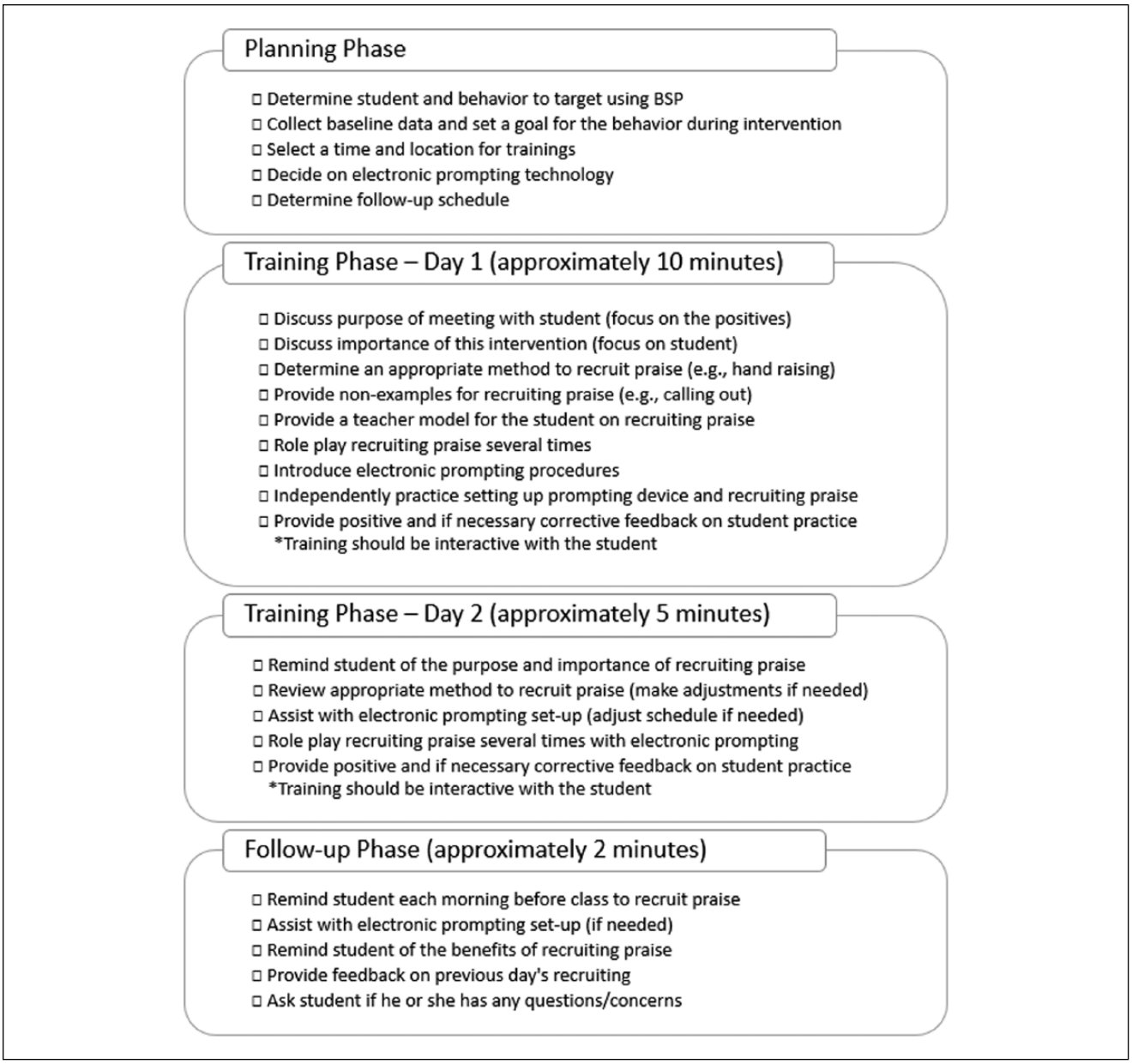

Figure 2. Training students to recruit praise checklist.
Note. BSP = behavior-specific praise.

strategy for data collection is useful. Start your lesson with a number of pennies in one pocket. When you observe the targeted behavior, move a penny to the other pocket. At the end of the lesson, you can count how many pennies moved and record the number.

Mr. Blackwell's goal is for Celia to independently read for 15 min without causing disruptions. He has already collected baseline data and believes that over the next few weeks Celia's disruptions should be at zero during independent reading. As he will be sitting at a desk with a small group, he decides to keep a daily tally sheet of Celia's disruptions so that he can ensure disruptions are decreasing. At the end of the day, he invites Celia to eat breakfast in his room the next morning so that he can provide the initial training.

Training

Effective training is implemented over time, linked to outcomes, explicit, and interactive (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In addition to these criteria, Figure 2 integrates the training protocols established by Craft et al. (1998) for a scaffolded training. To keep the trainings practical, we recommend no more than 10 min for the first day training, 5

min for the second day, and no more than 2 min on follow-ups. Not only do you have limited time, but trainings should be explicit and engaging for the student's benefit.

Most commonly, an appropriate example of recruiting praise is for the student to raise her hand when the electronic prompting device cues, then wait for the teacher to acknowledge her. After establishing an appropriate way to recruit praise during the training, be sure to review inappropriate ways of recruiting praise, such as calling out.

Next, model the appropriate way to recruit teacher praise and provide several examples. Teacher modeling is important because it demonstrates how and describes what skill the student is supposed to do (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Depending on the behavior to be praised, some examples may include: "I'm sitting in my seat," "I have been reading silently for three minutes," or "how am I doing?" After modeling, provide several opportunities for you and the student to role-play recruiting praise (i.e., guided practice). Deliver BSP and corrective feedback to ensure the student is proficient in recruiting praise appropriately.

The last step you will need to do during Day 1 is train the student to use the electronic prompting device and independently recruit praise. Explain that the device is there to help remind the student to recruit praise, and every time the device reaches zero, and alarms, that is the student's cue to recruit praise. Set the device on a quick schedule (e.g., 15 s) and have the student independently practice recruiting praise. Following this additional practice, the predetermined prompting schedule can be programmed into the device, and recruiting teacher praise can begin during class.

Training suggestions

- Hand raising to recruit praise may be too overt (especially for older students). A discreet signal could be established between the teacher and student if peer attention is a problem. Examples include flipping a color-coded notecard over, positioning a book on the desk a certain way, or folding one's arms.
- Role-play recruiting praise with the teacher in different locations around the room, as well as engage in different activities. What will the student do if she is cued to recruit praise, but the teacher is working one-on-one with a different student? Be prepared for various scenarios.
- The initial training of electronic prompting is a good time to adjust visuals, volume, or strength of vibratory cue.
- Although trial and error may be necessary to find the best procedures for your classroom, the quicker a routine can be established the greater chance of success.

The next morning Celia brings her breakfast to Mr. Blackwell's room. Mr. Blackwell has his checklist ready to ensure he does not skip a step. He talks with Celia about the importance of independent reading and how he wants her to succeed. He explains to Celia that he notices she has the most trouble focusing during independent reading, and although he wants to provide the attention she deserves, he is often preoccupied with small group. So, Mr. Blackwell explains that he would like Celia to recruit his attention (Note: Mr. Blackwell decided not to use the word "praise" when talking to Celia because he believes she would find the term belittling—something only younger kids want. He believes Celia will be more responsive to the word attention).

Mr. Blackwell then explains that during Celia's independent reading time, she can sit in a comfortable beanbag chair with her book and a laptop facing her that has a countdown timer. The timer will be set for 3 min and will loop. Every time the timer reaches zero and the alarm sounds, Celia is supposed to raise her hand to get Mr. Blackwell's attention. Because Celia will be positioned near Mr. Blackwell and in his line of sight, he explains that she does not have to extend her arm; rather, a simple hand gesture should do the trick, which he demonstrates (Note: Mr. Blackwell does not want Celia to draw too much attention from her peers by extending her arm). At this point, Mr. Blackwell also discusses some inappropriate ways to recruit praise such as calling out, or vigorously waving her arm to get his attention. Then Mr. Blackwell gets a laptop out and shows Celia where he bookmarked the countdown timer he wants her to use and shows her how to set it up to loop on a schedule. He sets the timer to loop every 20 s for them to practice. For the next few minutes, Mr. Blackwell pretends he is leading small group while Celia sits in her beanbag with a book and recruits praise every 20 s. During this time, Mr. Blackwell provides positive and corrective feedback until he feels like Celia is ready. He tells her that during reading today he would like for them to try this arrangement and for her to set the countdown timer to get his attention every 3 min.

Training on Day 2 is important for you and the student. Reviewing the benefits of recruiting praise and practicing through role-play will solidify the procedures for the student. Furthermore, this is a time for you to make any adjustments needed. Perhaps the prompting schedule was too slow and there was too much latency between prompts. Perhaps the method to recruit praise did not work as well as envisioned and needs adjustment. Was the student capable of independently initiating the electronic prompting device? Did other students notice and become distracted? There are many reasons why a revision may be necessary. Trial and error might be the best method until appropriate procedures are found between you and the student.

After reading class, Mr. Blackwell is pleased with Celia's efforts to recruit teacher praise. Although she had some disruptions, they were fewer, and she stayed in her seat the entire 15 min. He invites Celia to eat breakfast again in his room the next morning to review their arrangement. Mr. Blackwell decides to keep everything the same except for the prompting schedule. He felt like 3 min was too slow and that he

would be able to provide praise every 2 min without it interfering with his small group. Perhaps this increased schedule will help eliminate the remaining disruptions.

Mr. Blackwell's invested time and effort to diminish Celia's disruptive behaviors during independent reading are already showing benefits. Not only has their interpersonal relationship strengthened, but a more conducive environment has been established for social, emotional, and academic growth for all students.

Additional Suggestions

Here are a few more suggestions to keep in mind as you successively implement recruiting teacher praise in your classroom:

- Students who display inappropriate behaviors for attention seeking may attempt to get the teacher's attention anytime they want, rather than adhere to the prompting schedule. A maximum number of prompts can be set with data collection introduced to monitor over recruitment. For example, during the 15-min independent reading, Celia recruits praise every 3 min (totaling five recruitments). Along with data collecting disruptions, Mr. Blackwell establishes an eight-recruitment maximum, and every time he delivers praise, he puts a tally down. At the end of the 15 min, he can count how many times he was recruited to deliver praise along with the number of disruptions.
- Class-wide positive behavior systems should be included with recruiting teacher praise. If a token economy is in place, provide tokens after a successful day/class of recruiting praise. Positively reinforcing the student's recruiting behavior will maintain or increase its occurrence the next day.
- Be aware that other students may notice the increased attention to your target student and attempt to gain attention for themselves. As a solution, you could revisit your procedures for recruiting and delivering praise to make them more discreet. Or, this may be a good opportunity to teach/practice with your class how to appropriately gain positive attention.

Conclusion

Although many teachers are aware of the benefits of BSP, its use in classrooms remains low (Jenkins et al., 2015). Increasing praise rates is not simply a matter of teachers remembering to deliver it. Coercive interaction cycles and natural classroom contingencies suppress praise rates and encourage reprimands which damage interpersonal relationships and create environments not conducive to social, emotional, and academic growth. Training students to recruit praise is a method to counter suppressing contingencies and increase praise rates for desired classroom behaviors. The method put forth is designed to strategically, and systematically, target students in your classroom displaying the most disruptive behaviors. With minimal planning and training, students can begin recruiting the attention they seek while you begin delivering the praise needed to encourage and maintain appropriate behaviors.

Authors' Note

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