ABSTRACT
A single subject design was used to investigate the effectiveness of an increase in teacher behaviour-specific praise statements to address anti-social behaviours demonstrated by a student who displays aggressive behaviours. Researchers agree that praise is effective in improving problem behaviours. They also agree that training teachers to use behaviour-specific praise can increase the level of praise teachers give to students. Baseline assessment was carried out and used to examine the teacher’s use of behaviour-specific praise statements before intervention and the potential influences these statements had on the target child’s aggressive behaviour, participation and engagement. The results indicated that the teacher’s use of specific praise increased, and the child demonstrated positive changes with an increase in appropriate behaviour, and a decrease in aggressive behaviour.

Keywords: Behaviour difficulties, teacher praise

INTRODUCTION
Behaviour problems often begin at an early age, in some cases before entering preschool (Campbell, 1995). After early onset, it is not uncommon for the behaviour problems to remain stable over time (Campbell & Ewing, 1989). In many cases, students with behaviour problems do not receive intervention early enough to forestall problem behaviour patterns from developing. Thus students may go to school with behaviour problems which hinder their success in school. In other cases, student problem behaviours are not prevented with positive teacher interactions. Researchers investigating disruptive behaviours such as noise-making, blurt out answers, noncompliance, disrespect and aggression have found overwhelming evidence that these behaviours can be reduced through appropriate use of praise (Lampi, Fenty & Beaunae, 2005).

Teacher Praise
To praise is “to comment on the worth of or to express approval or admiration” (Brophy, 1981, p. 5). Praise consists of verbal or written statements that acknowledge desired student behaviour and are manifested in different ways, including making positive statements about a person or an idea that a person has come up with publicly or privately (Gable, Hester, Rock & Hughes, 2009). Praise can be general such as ‘Well done Tom’ after Tom has done something appreciated or it can be specific. Behaviour specific praise (BSP) specifies what is being praised, for example, ‘Awesome Mat for using your gentle hands.’ Researchers have examined the use of BSP in managing behaviour, and have found it to be very effective (Feldman, 2003; Reinke, Lewis-Palmer & Martin, 2007).

Methods for Increasing Teacher Praise
In a study, examining the effect of visual performance feedback on teacher use of BSP, Reinke, Lewis-Palmer and Martin (2007) concluded that teachers increased the amount of BSP, significantly decreased the amount of disruptive behaviours in the classroom, and reduced their number of reprimands of students. The findings were consistent with earlier conclusions that BSP is highly effective in reducing antisocial behaviour (Feldman 2003). Other researchers examined the effectiveness of training teachers to use BSP, as well as giving students the opportunity to respond to questions or demands (Moore Partin et al., 2010). They reported that both strategies were highly effective in reducing problem behaviours. They emphasised that teachers need to be reminded to use specific praise. Further, consultation and classroom support were recommended to keep teachers actively using praise.

Effects of Behaviour Specific Praise
Walker, Colvin and Ramsey (1999) have argued that the use of praise promotes a more positive relationship between teachers and students.
Fewer teacher reprimands towards students and increased positive praise statements can create a more positive and supportive learning environment (Walker, Colvin & Ramsey, ibid.).

Meaningful praise should be given immediately following the appropriate behaviour. By providing praise following the approved behaviour, children who find praise reinforcing will be more likely to engage in the praised behaviours in future (Freeland, 2003). Similarly, Martens, Hirallal, and Bradley (1997), carried out a study to discern the effects of immediate teacher praise on appropriate behaviours. They concluded that using praise immediately following behaviour increased teacher use of praise statements while also increasing students’ targeted replacement behaviours.

Brophy (1971) argued that children like it when adults recognise their efforts, particularly in their early childhood years. This is consistent with recent research which continues to report that specific praise increased appropriate behaviours and decreased antisocial behaviours in early childhood (Fullerton, Conroy & Correa, 2009; Stormont, Smith & Lewis, 2007).

Barriers to Specific Praise

Kalis, Vannest and Parker (2007), argued that specific praise was not commonly practised in the classroom despite its effectiveness. Lago-Delelo (1998) concluded that students with behaviour problems encounter a high rate of teacher commands and received more reprimands from their teachers for inappropriate behaviours while little attention was given for their appropriate behaviours. Even when the students appeared to comply with teachers’ requests most of the time they were rarely praised for their good work (Jack, et al., 1996; Van Acker, Grant & Henry, 1996). This would suggest that frequently teachers have not recognised children’s appropriate behaviour with positive feedback. Rather, preschool students often receive teacher attention dependent upon their aggressive and disruptive behaviours (McKerchar & Thompson, 2004). The attention the young students receive for antisocial behaviour could reinforce these behaviours, particularly if they only receive attention when they misbehave. However, these students are likely to lose out academically as teachers decrease instructional interaction to avoid triggering and escalating disruptive behaviours (Moore Partin, et al., 2010). Thus students are disadvantaged by lack of positive support for their behaviour as well as minimal instruction.

Use of specific praise has been indicated to be effective in providing positive support for children, particularly in early childhood (Brophy, 1971; Stormont et al., 2007; Fullerton, et al., 2009). Nevertheless, research has shown that as little as 5% of praise statements were behaviour-specific (Anderson, Everton & Brophy, 1979). The purpose of this study was to use behaviour-specific praise in an early childhood centre with a target student we will call Tich and his teacher, who we will call Mona, to examine, (a) teacher use of behaviour-specific praise statements toward a student with aggressive behaviour, (b) the effect of feedback intervention on the rate of the teacher’s behaviour-specific praise and,(c) the effect of the expected increased rate of behaviour-specific praise on Tich’s aggressive behaviour.

METHOD

Participants

The teacher-participant in this study was a female teacher (Mona). Mona is Māori and has more than twenty years of teaching experience in the early childhood sector. She is currently involved in early childhood teacher training. She was nominated by the team leader and centre manager as a teacher who would be suitable to take part in this study. The student-participant, Tich, is 3 years 9 months old. Tich is also Māori. He was also nominated by the team leader and centre manager as a student who display aggressive behaviours including pushing, punching or hitting. His behaviour problems are mild. He is a full time student at the day care.

Setting

The setting is an early childhood centre. It has a total roll of approximately 60 students with eleven teachers including the centre manager. The majority of the teachers are qualified registered teachers, however, some are in training. More specific information about the centre and the teachers has been withheld from this article to protect identities. The philosophy of the centre is that children learn through play and teachers plan according to the children’s interests. Physically, the centre has a huge inside area which consists of a baby area, older children’s area and a food area. A sandpit, climbing structures, swings, a slide, gardens, and a grass area where the children play sports make up the large outside area. Four teachers are assigned to the babies area, three assigned to the older children’s area and three assigned outside at all times. For the purpose of this study, Mona remained in the areas where Tich was playing.
Ethical Considerations

Written voluntary informed consent was sought from the centre manager, the secondary observer, the teacher, and the parents of the child participant through a letter which outlined the purpose of the study, the nature of the study, and the extent of their participation. Robinson and Lai (2006) state that the issue of free informed consent is extremely valuable, which had earlier been stressed by Winter’s (1996) assertion that permission must be sought before making observations on individuals. The participants were informed that their anonymity would be protected. Their permission was also requested to publish the results of the research.

Assessment

Baseline assessment took place over five days: Friday, Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday between 9:30 and 9:50 am. Data was collected through direct observation, note taking, and audio recording. Intervention assessment was carried out three days a week - Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday - between 9:30 and 9:50 am. Monday was left out because the centre seemed to have many teachers taking Mondays off every week, and Tuesdays were left out because Mona was not in the centre. During the observation time children had free play and were not restricted to any particular area unless it was raining and they all had to be inside. Thus, observations were carried out in different areas of the centre. The children usually had their morning tea between 9:00 and 9:25 am so the 9:30 time was chosen because there would be no disturbances to Tich’s food and sleep routines.

Topography of the Problem Behaviour

Baseline observations indicated that Mona frequently reprimanded the children and rarely used praise. Almost every time Tich acted aggressively or in an unacceptable manner Mona would reprimand the child. However, when Tich engaged in pro-social behaviours, Mona did not respond with praise. Tich’s aggressive behaviour included pushing, kicking and punching.

Function of the Behaviour

A functional behaviour assessment of Tich’s behaviours indicated that Tich would push, kick or punch so that he could have a turn or because he was frustrated about something. Tich would also behave aggressively if he was provoked. Tich was also gentle with the younger children, particularly crawling babies. He was also a very good helper.

Measurement

Observations of Tich and Mona were carried out for the duration of the 20 minute period. The observer used an A-B-C descriptive data sheet to record the frequency of the dependent variables during each session (Smith & Heflin, 2001). The frequency count was calculated in five minute intervals because of the mildness of the problem behaviour. An anecdotal record of the observations was kept.

Interobserver Agreement

In 30% of the observations across all phases, inter-observer agreement was assessed for the occurrence or non-occurrence of reprimands, BSP and pro-social behaviour. The secondary observer collected inter-observer agreement measures at the same time as the observer. During inter-observer agreement checks, the observer and the secondary observer positioned themselves in places where they could observe without disturbing Mona and Tich. Reliability was measured for recording reprimands, BSP, pro-social and aggressive behaviours by scoring an agreement when both observers recorded identical frequencies of the behaviours during five minute intervals. Inter-observer agreement was calculated for each category by dividing agreements by agreements plus disagreements and multiplying by 100%. The mean agreement was 86% for the occurrence of reprimands, 93% for occurrence of BSP, 83% for occurrence of pro-social behaviours, and 100% for the occurrence of aggressive behaviours.

Dependent Variables

Reprimands were recorded as a frequency count when Mona reprimanded Tich for indicated behaviours. For example, “Tich you are not listening so I am taking that toy off you.” Reprimands were recorded in order to measure the level used by Mona in her practice before and during intervention. Behaviour Specific Praise statements were recorded as frequency counts when Mona gave behaviourally-specific verbal praise directed to the pro-social behaviours of Tich, for example, when Tich asked for a turn instead of pushing to get a turn. Tich’s pro-social behaviours were also recorded as frequency counts. This was done to establish whether there was an increase in pro-social behaviours displayed by Tich during intervention. Pro-social behaviour was defined as behaviour that showed empathy, understanding and accommodated others during play without hurting them. If Tich displayed aggressive behaviour instead of pro-social behaviour, the observer recorded ‘aggressive’ behaviour for that
interval.

Independent Variables

BSP served as the independent variable for Tich’s behaviour. The number of BSP statements directed at Tich by Mona towards the replacement behaviours were recorded. Consultation and graphical feedback was given to Mona after baseline assessment. Feedback was repeated after every intervention session. Mona was praised for using BSP. Areas where she could have used BSP but missed that opportunity were also highlighted. Before every intervention session Mona was given examples of BSP statements.

Changing Criterion Design

The changing criterion design (Alberto & Troutman, 2003) was used to analyse the effects of intervention on Mona’s use of BSP statements and the effect of the increased rate of BSP statements on Tich’s aggressive behaviour. This design was chosen because the baseline assessment rate of Mona’s BSP was zero. Therefore, the first criterion was that Mona should give Tich at least two BSP statements when he displayed positive behaviour within the 20 minute session. This criterion was increased by two BSP statement every time the target criterion was reached.

Procedure

Baseline

During the baseline phase, no changes in Mona’s or Tich’s behaviour were made. The sessions consisted of ‘child initiated’ play. Direct observation data were collected on BSP and reprimands by Mona, as well as aggressive and pro-social behaviours displayed by Tich.

Intervention

The intervention consisted of the observer providing Mona with verbal consultation and graphical feedback on the observed rate of BSP recorded during the 20 minute sessions. Before the first intervention observation, the observer met with Mona to report on the rate of BSP observed during baseline. Ideas on how Mona could improve and some examples of BSP statements were provided. Mona was informed of the possible advantages of BSP to students with behaviour problems. A criterion level of at least two BSP statements to start with was set and agreed upon, with a target to increase to at least six BSP statements per 20 minute session. The first criterion was set because of the zero rates in BSP statements during baseline, and the target to six was set because the teacher believed she could reach that level. Before each observation session, the observer met with Mona to remind her of the goal and to provide her with some examples of BSP statements. After each 20 minute session, the observer met briefly with Mona to show her how much she had used BSP statements. Some examples of how Mona had used BSP statements are provided (Table 1). She was praised for her use of BSP.

RESULTS

Reprimands

The number of reprimands per session given by Mona to Tich is shown in Figure 1. The mean rate of reprimands during baseline was three. This rate decreased to zero during the intervention phase. During week one of intervention, reprimands were used only once and did not occur during weeks two and three.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of BSP Statements. Student Behaviour versus Effective Behaviour Specific Praise Statement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing toys</td>
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<tr>
<td>Giving a hug after bumping into someone accidentally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saying sorry after realising you hurt someone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping babies on the swing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gently touch</td>
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</tbody>
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Behaviour-Specific Praise Statements

The number of BSP statements per session given by the teacher is shown in Figure 2. The mean rate of BSP during baseline was zero. It increased to two during Week one of intervention. The mean rate increased to four during the second intervention phase and further increased to six during Week three.

Aggressive Behaviours and Pro-social Behaviours

During baseline, the mean rate of aggressive behaviours was two with a range of two to four within a 20 minute session (Figure 3). During the first intervention phase, the rate decreased to one. This decreased further during phase two of intervention with a rate of zero ranging from zero to one. For the pro-social behaviours, the mean rate of occurrence was zero during baseline, ranging from zero to two. This increased during the first intervention phase to a mean above two, with a range from two to four. During the second intervention phase, pro-social behaviours increased to a mean above four, and in the third week of intervention achieved a mean of six. During the third week of intervention, no feedback was provided because Mona and Tich had both reached target goals. Rather, this phase was used to assess if Mona would maintain the increased level of BSP and whether Tich’s behaviours would remain stable.
The teacher's use of BSP statements met each criterion throughout the intervention phase. During the last phase both the teacher and the student maintained their positive behaviours. Although a high level of aggression was displayed by Tich during baseline this was reduced to a mean rate of zero during the last sessions. The teacher's use of BSP statements had also increased from a mean rate of zero during baseline to a mean rate of six during the last session. Although Mona was unfamiliar with BSP prior to this study, she seemed to recognize its importance as a behavior management strategy. She expressed this during one of the consultation feedback sessions when she said, “It really works. I do not even want to go back to my old self. The children are listening to me and respecting me. I am using specific praise with all students now.” These results are encouraging and promising.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

There are some limitations to the present study which were evident. Firstly, even though the rate of BSP statements increased markedly after intervention, the teacher was also going to class once a week for her studies and during the second week of intervention she had a tutor visit. There is, therefore, a strong possibility that the rapid change might have been due to the fact that she was learning some of the positive methods in class as well as preparing for her lecture and this possibly contributed to her positive attitude. Secondly, this study focused only on a single teacher and a single student. Therefore, although the teacher did increase her rate of BSP and consequently the student decreased the rate of his aggressive behaviors and increased pro-social behaviors, the findings in this study cannot be generalized. Finally, the parents of this student were working hard towards minimizing the child's aggressive behaviors as well so this might have possibly influenced the positive behavior change.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical evidence on the effective use of BSP is overwhelming and it counters comments regarding the negative use of praise. It is recommended that teachers use BSP in the education system particularly as reinforcement for those students with behavior problems. Teachers skillfully and consistently need to use verbal BSP with young children as it has been proven to be effective for them (Brophy, 1971; Stormont, et al. 2007). The skilled use of contingent praise could increase positive behavior and simultaneously decrease problem behaviors (Moore Partin, et al. 2010). Evidence from this study shows that being specific about the action one is praising resulted in the behavior being repeated. For example, when Tich was praised for waiting for a turn, he repeated this behavior.

Given the focus in evidence-based practice, teachers should carry out more experimental research designs for students with behavior problems in an effort to find the solution through evidence-based practice. As evidence from this study, teachers may encourage pro-social behavior and decrease antisocial behavior problems in their classrooms through the use of behavior-specific praise. To reduce challenging behaviors, teachers should self-monitor on their use of behavior-specific praise. Teachers should form partnerships with parents so that they work together to minimize behavior problems. In addition, through self-reviews, teachers should investigate events in the research environment that contribute to the effective use of BSP or limit the use of BSP. This will provide for the ecological intervention in children's learning. This study examined the use of effective praise. It is recommended that schools and other early childhood centers try this approach in their settings to contribute to the positive behavior for learning in the environment.

In this study, an increase in the teacher's use of BSP statements resulted in a decrease in aggressive behaviors and an increase in pro-social behaviors for the student. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to use this evidence-based practice in helping students with behavior problems.

REFERENCES


Thecla Kudakwashe Moffat has a great understanding of young children and their families. She enjoys being involved in professional development alongside supporting the education of young children and their families, so that they can have a brighter future.

She is a registered teacher who has worked in the teaching field for 17 years both overseas and in New Zealand. Thecla has taught in schools and early childhood. She has a teaching diploma, a degree in education management and postgraduate diplomas in Early Years and Special Education.

Thecla is currently studying towards her Masters Degree with Massey University, while also working full time as a teacher and team leader at Apakura Te Kakano. Her passion is to see young children grow and develop their potential. She believes in inclusive education for all regardless of age or gender. She believes that educators can make a difference in individuals’ lives.

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