Understanding Positive Reinforcement and Replacement Behaviors Within the Classroom

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Educators utilize numerous behavioral strategies on a daily basis when working with students on academic skills. One effective, but simple strategy that is often overlooked is positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is a means of identifying and teaching a specific behavior to a student with the intention of seeing an increase in the desired behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2012). This strategy has been demonstrated as an effective strategy for students with learning disabilities (Harwell & Jackson, 2014).

Why Implement Positive Reinforcement?
Positive reinforcement is an effective way to identify and teach appropriate behaviors to students, utilizing encouragement and reward systems (Sigler & Aamidor, 2005). This behavioral intervention is beneficial for not only teaching individual students a desired behavior, but can be implemented as a part of a school-wide positive behavior support system (SW-PBS) (Lane, Kalberg, Bruhn, Mahoney, & Driscoll, 2008). Maag (2001) suggested positive reinforcement strategies can be applied for students of any age, gender, or disability and for any problem behavior. This specific behavioral strategy is accessible, in that it can be used across a wide variety of student populations including those with learning disabilities, and it is easily maintained. Many times only positive verbal feedback is needed to effectively implement positive reinforcement and it can be administered in multiple ways (Harwell & Jackson, 2014).

What Does Positive Reinforcement Look Like?
Several different behavioral analysis terms such as positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, punishment, response cost, and extinction are used to refer to the functional relationship between a behavior and a consequence. According to Alberto and Troutman (2012), positive reinforcement occurs

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when the resulting consequence of a specific behavior increases the occurrence of the behavior across time. Many people synonymously link the terms positive reinforcement and praise. However, Sigler and Aamidor (2005) noted the importance of distinguishing between the two phrases, suggesting that although praise is a form of positive reinforcement, the terms are not interchangeable.

Positive reinforcement may occur in the form of behavior specific praise, individualized reward systems (such as a sticker chart or token economy), edibles, or positive adult attention (Lalli et al., 1999). Defining the specific characteristics and components of positive reinforcement for a student requires knowledge of student preferences and attitudes. The most common way to determine student preferences for positive reinforcement can be through a structured interview of student likes and dislikes or through a preference assessment.

Gongola and Daddario (2010) explained that in order to effectively implement positive reinforcement, first, a behavior must be identified as the target behavior. To identify a target behavior to be increased, a teacher must first think about the problem behavior a student is displaying and determine why the behavior is occurring. Then a target expected/replacement behavior that meets the same function as the problem behavior, but is appropriate for the setting, should be selected and when displayed, followed by a positive reinforcer. For example, if a student were shouting out to gain teacher attention, an appropriate replacement behavior would be to teach the student to raise his or her hand to gain teacher attention.

Positive reinforcement can be given to students with seven simple steps (see Figure 1). The first step is to **I**dentify the problem behavior and times where it is most likely to occur. Next, **D**etermine why the problem behaviors exist and identify what the **E**xpected replacement behavior is. **N**ote what type, how often, and when positive reinforcement will be given to the student. **T**each and demonstrate the new expected/replacement behavior to the student. **I**mmediately reinforce positive behaviors. Finally, use **F**ading and generalization procedures in all of **Y**our identified environments.

Figure 1. Positive Reinforcement Guide: IDENTIFY

Step 1: **I**dentify the problem behavior and the times where it is more likely to occur.

- Ask yourself: "What does the behavior look like? How long does it last? How often does it occur?"

Step 2: **D**etermine why the problem behavior exists.

- Ask yourself: "Why does this problem behavior exist? What is the payoff for the student?" Think specifically about what the student is trying to get or escape.

Step 3: **E**xpected/replacement behavior.

- What behavior will give a student the same payoff, but is appropriate in the classroom?

Step 4. **N**ote what type, how often and when positive reinforcement will be given to the student.

- Consider administering a preference assessment to the student or conducting an interview of student likes and dislikes.
- Online resources for reinforcement surveys
  - http://www.jimwrightonline.com/php/jackpot/jackpot.php
  - http://www.escambia.k12.fl.us/pbis/fbadata/Student%20Reinforcement%20Survey.pdf
  - http://disability.publichealth.gsu.edu/files/2014/12/Forced-Choice-Reinforcement-Menu.pdf
  - http://www.sanjuan.edu/cms/lib8/CA01902727/Centricity/Domain/150/M%20RS%20C-Stu%20Fnctl%20Asmnt%20Inter.pdf

Step 5. **T**each and Demonstrate the new expected/replacement behavior to the student.

- Use examples and non-examples of what the problem behavior and expected behavior look like.
- Have the student specifically practice the appropriate expected/replacement behavior. Do not have the student demonstrate the problem behavior, only the teacher should model that behavior.

Step 6. **I**mmediately Reinforce!

- If the student performs the expected behavior, IMMEDIATELY give the student positive reinforcement and pair this with explicit and specific language about why the reward was given.

Step 7. **F**ading and generalization procedures in **Y**our identified environments.

- Once the student is performing the expected behavior consistently, consider fading positive reinforcement or giving reinforcement at a less frequent rate (e.g., every two times that the expected behavior is demonstrated).
- You may also help the student generalize the expected behavior across multiple environments by prompting the student to display the same expected/replacement behavior in new settings. Then immediately give positive reinforcement to the student for the correct demonstration of the behavior.

Step 1. Identify the problem behavior and the times where it is more likely to occur. When identifying the problem behavior it is important to use observable and measureable terminology to describe the behavior. Thinking about such things as "What does the behavior look like? How long does it last? How often does it occur?" can help depict the problem behavior. An individual teacher may want to collect specific data to answer these questions.

Step 2. Determine why the problem behavior exists. To maximize success it is important to consider why the problem behavior is occurring. Most problem behaviors revolve around a student trying to get or escape something. Common functions of

problem behavior include avoiding an academic or social task, obtaining or avoiding adult attention, obtaining or avoiding peer approval or attention, receiving a tangible item, or escaping sensory discomfort.

Step 3. **E**xpected/replacement behavior. It is critical to identify the expected/replacement behavior that will be taught to the student that meets the same function as the problem behavior. For example, if a student engages and disrupts peers during independent work time, it would be appropriate to think about an expected/replacement behavior as one that involves specific interactions with peers during work times such as a peer-tutoring model. This would allow the student's need of peer attention to be met, but in a more appropriate manner.

Step 4. **N**ote what type, how often, and when positive reinforcement will be given to the student. It is important to think about the type of positive reinforcement that will be given to a student, based on a student's preferences. Determining the context that positive reinforcement will be given is also important. Will positive reinforcement be given to a student all day long within all school contexts? Will positive reinforcement be given just during one time period when the problem behavior is most likely to occur until the appropriate behaviors are learned? Specifically describing the appropriate behavior in observable and measurable terms gives both the teacher and students a clear understanding of what is expected and what behaviors the students must demonstrate to earn the positive reinforcement.

Step 5. **T**each and demonstrate the new expected/replacement behavior to the student. After the expected behavior is identified and the context where positive reinforcement will be given is defined, it is time for one of the most critical components for implementing effective positive reinforcement strategies - the

replacement behavior and expectations must be taught to the student (Gongola & Daddario, 2010). For example, teach students how to raise their hands to appropriately obtain teacher attention in the classroom. It is important to show students both examples and non-examples of the expected behavior, leaving no room for ambiguity. Demonstrations of the expected behavior and using relevant classroom examples can be helpful for many learners to clearly understand what is expected. By describing the appropriate behavior in observable and measurable terms, the teacher will be able to collect additional data on student progress.

Step 6. **I**mmediately reinforce! It is critical that when a student demonstrates the expected/replacement behavior that the adult immediately gives the student the positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement should not only be given immediately, but also at a high frequency as the student is learning the behavior. It is important to immediately catch students demonstrating the expected/replacement behavior to make the expected/replacement behavior actually more reinforcing than the problem behavior. Pairing the delivery of specific positive reinforcement with verbal behavioral specific praise from the adult helps a student to associate praise with more tangible reinforcement. This pairing allows students to learn exactly what behaviors they displayed that "earned" them the reinforcement (Alberto & Troutman, 2012).

Step 7. **F**ading and generalization procedures in **Y**our identified environments. The final step to implementing positive reinforcement effectively is to work on fading and generalization. It is important that a student is able to transfer the use of the expected/replacement behavior within multiple environments. This concept is called generalization. The goal is that a student will generalize the behavior to other educational

settings and contexts. It is critical that the positive reinforcement is delivered within the new educational settings and contexts with the same steps that were used to originally teach and reinforce the appropriate behavior.

Once a student demonstrates the expected/replacement behavior across environments, fading of the positive reinforcement can begin. This means that positive reinforcement may be given at a variable rate (i.e., positive reinforcement may not have to be given after every demonstration of the behavior but at a high enough rate to still encourage the demonstration of expected/replacement behavior) for students based on a number of demonstrations, or after a specific time period where correct demonstrations of the behavior are shown. By lengthening the amount of time or increasing the number of demonstrations the behavior becomes less fixed on immediate reinforcement and more based on natural reinforcers (e.g., teacher praise, grades, acknowledgement of correct responses) within the school context of following the classroom or school expectations. If at any time problem behavior rates increase it may be important to increase the frequency of positive reinforcement for the expected/replacement behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 2012).

Why Choose Positive Reinforcement as a Behavioral Strategy?

Utilizing positive reinforcement as a behavioral strategy in the classroom is more effective and beneficial than other behavior management strategies such as punishment or negative reinforcement techniques (Lane et al., 2008). Research also indicates the problem behavior decreased when the positive reinforcement was immediate upon compliance therefore decreasing the undesirable behavior (Lalli et al., 1999). Positive reinforcement can also be applied easily and in many circumstances.

Final Thoughts

When problem behaviors are present the student is trying to communicate a desired need. Positive reinforcement of the replacement/expected behavior should first occur. Additionally, the teacher must also no longer deliver the previously desired consequence to the student following the display of the problem behavior. The problem behaviors should then fade out as the student no longer receives the same payoff for them. However, when the expected behavior is positively reinforced the student will most likely increase their expected behavior in order to receive the positive reinforcement, which is the desired outcome.

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