

# FOCUS ON POSITIVES, IGNORE NEGATIVES

## Focus on positives, ignore negatives

Research shows that the most commonly observed behaviour in classrooms is escape or avoidance and peer or adult attention. When teachers can identify the reasons for a particular set of behaviours, they are better informed and feel more confident that the chosen intervention is the most effective in response to dealing with those behaviours. For example, the function of a student's behaviour is to gain adult attention, the teacher might respond by shifting their attention by reducing attention towards the student during the times he is shouting out and increasing the adult attention during times when the student is showing appropriate behaviour.

Read the supporting theory from Jim Wright below and again, as you read, think about students you teach or have taught. How do the described behaviours relate to the students you work with?

In addition to the strategies mentioned in the reading, consider the additional strategies we have provided in the 'Focus on positives, ignore negatives' section of your workbook. Think about how each strategy might be effective in reducing unwanted behaviours in your setting and how you might plan to begin building these into your current practice. Using your toolkit, record the strategies you plan to use and your ideas on how you might begin to implement them.

## Breaking the attention-seeking habit: the power of random positive teacher attention

Some students misbehave because they are trying to attract teacher attention. Surprisingly, many students who value adult attention don't really care if it is positive (praise) or negative attention (reprimands) they just want attention!

Unfortunately, instructors with students who thrive on teacher attention can easily fall into a 'reprimand trap'. The scenario might unfold much like this: First, the student misbehaves. Then the teacher approaches the student and reprimands him or her for misbehaving. Because the student finds the negative teacher attention to be reinforcing, he or she continues to misbehave and the teacher naturally responds by reprimanding the student more often. An escalating, predictable cycle is established, with the student repeatedly acting-out and teacher reprimanding him or her. Teachers can break out of this cycle, by using 'random positive attention' with students. Essentially, the instructor starts to ignore student attention-seeking behaviours, while at the same time 'randomly' giving the student positive attention. That is, the student receives regular positive teacher attention but at times unconnected to misbehaviour. So the student still gets the adult attention that he or she craves. More importantly, the link between student misbehaviour and resulting negative teacher attention is broken.

Positive attention strategies can be done quickly and without disrupting classroom instruction. Here are just a few ideas for giving positive attention:

- Pat the student on the shoulder.
- Make eye contact and smile at the student.
- Check in with the student about how he or she is progressing with an assignment.
- Call on the student in class (when you are pretty sure that he or she knows the answer!)
- Pass the student a note with a cheerful comment, specific praise, or compliment.
- Give brief, specific praise about the student's work or behaviour (e.g., "I really like to see how carefully you are drawing that map, Joanna!")
- Give the student a few words of encouragement.
- Invite the student to summarise for the group the main points of a classroom discussion.
- Converse briefly with the student.
- Select the student to carry out a classroom task (e.g., passing out papers) that he or she likes.

There are just two simple rules:

1. Whenever the student inappropriately tries to get the teacher's attention, the instructor either ignores the student or, in a neutral manner, quietly and briefly redirects the child to task. The teacher then continues teaching.
2. If the student is not engaged in attention-seeking behaviour when the teacher glances at him or her, the instructor immediately approaches the student and briefly delivers positive attention. Then continue teaching.

How to deal with common problems in using random positive teacher attention.

The student's behaviour does not significantly improve when the teacher uses this intervention. If you discover that random positive teacher attention is not effective in 'turning around' a student's misbehaviour, there are several possible explanations:

- The student is not receiving enough random teacher attention. If possible, try increasing the rate (number of times) that you give the student random positive attention during a class session.
- The teacher continues to give the student attention for misbehaviour. Sometimes teachers don't realise how much attention they pay (even unwittingly) to students who misbehave for attention-seeking reasons. Reflect on your own classroom interactions with the student. If you discover while you are using random positive attention that you are still giving the student lots of attention for acting out, you should continue to use random positive attention and make an extra effort to

respond neutrally to, or simply ignore, the student's attention-seeking behaviours.

- The student generally does not find teacher attention to be rewarding. This random-attention strategy will work only if the child misbehaves to seek teacher attention. If, however, the student acts inappropriately for some other reason (e.g., to escape a situation that he or she finds unpleasant or to gain the attention and approval of classmates), you will need to select a different intervention strategy.

### Communication that supports the reinforcement of positive behaviours

Use I-centred statements. When we tell oppositional students that they are engaging in inappropriate behaviours, we run the risk of having them challenge the truth of our statements or of taking offense at being criticised for their conduct. An instructor's use of I-centred statements can reduce the potential that teacher criticism will lead to student confrontation. Because I-centred statements reflect only the instructor's opinions and viewpoints, they are less incendiary and open to challenge than more global statements that pin blame for misbehaviour on the student. For example, rather than telling a student, "You are always disrupting class with your jokes and fooling around!," you may say, "Zeke, I find it difficult to keep everybody's attention when there are other conversations going on in the classroom. That's why I need you to open your book and focus on today's lesson."

### Pairing of criticism with praise (adapted from Thompson, 1993)

Sometimes you have no choice but to let a student know directly and bluntly that his or her classroom behaviours are not acceptable. Many oppositional students, though, have experienced a painful history of rejection in personal relationships and lack close ties with adults.

No matter how supportively you present behavioural criticism to these students, they may assume that you are in fact rejecting them as individuals and react strongly to this perceived rejection. One strategy to reassure the student that you continue to value him or her as a person is to (a) describe the problem behaviour that you would like to see changed, (b) clearly outline appropriate behavioural alternatives (c) praise the student about some other aspect of his or her behaviour or accomplishments, and finally (d) state that you value having the student as a part of the classroom community.

Here is a demonstration of this communication strategy:

1. Description of problem behaviour: "Trina, you said disrespectful things about other students during our class meeting this morning. You continued to do so even after I asked you to stop."
2. Appropriate behavioural alternative(s): "It's OK to disagree with another person's ideas. But you need to make sure that your comments do not insult or hurt the feelings of others."
3. Specific praise: "I am talking to you about this behaviour because I know that you can do better. In fact, I have really come to value your classroom comments. You have great ideas and express yourself very well."
4. Affirmation statement: "You are an important member of this class!"

Remember, we have compiled a list of additional strategies which you can find in the 'Focus on positives, ignore negatives' section of this week's workbook.

## References

Thompson, G.J., & Jenkins, J.B. (1993). *Verbal judo: The gentle art of persuasion*. New York: William Morrow.

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