



Using Social Reinforcement in School Settings

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Bruce M. Gale, PhD
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Behaviorists are typically quite skilled at implementing effective reinforcement strategies. Preferred activities, games, objects, or choice-making are frequently identified to serve as useful rewards. However, the importance of tailoring social reinforcement, either to be paired with other positive consequences, serving as a bridging stimulus, or being the sole means of reinforcement, may be overlooked or underutilized. Informing a child in a sincerely stated, concrete manner following a behavior that you approve of what he or she did, e.g., “I like how you’re paying attention,” conveys considerably more information than a ubiquitous “good job.”

But, such statements must be individualized. Students with externalizing versus internalizing characteristics may require vastly different social reinforcement approaches. Reinforcing an impulsive student publicly may work just fine, especially if it provides a sense of social status associated with the compliment. However, for the shy student, such a statement may actually be perceived as punitive. It may heighten the level of autonomic arousal or cause them to feel that unwanted public attention is being drawn to them. Handing them a written note or making the statement gently and quietly may prove more effective. Over time, this may serve as a means of systematic desensitization as the student habituates to being complimented.

Of course, the child’s intellectual and receptive language abilities must be taken into account. For children with significant impairment, using brief statements to avoid overloading their auditory comprehension and memory span capabilities is necessary. Also, verbal reinforcement must initially be delivered immediately following behavior and paired with tangible, meaningful stimuli that have proven reinforcing properties. But, when language comprehension and memory are reasonably intact, there can be greater delays between verbal reinforcement and tangible reinforcer delivery, especially as prosocial behaviors become more established.

Social reinforcement can play an even more important role, helping students learn to anticipate and avoid unwanted consequences. In this manner, information processing, informing them what will occur if they behave in certain ways, can foster self-monitoring and self-regulation, leading to an enhanced sense of self-efficacy. Once students begin to view themselves as being personally competent, it changes the locus of control from being externally mediated to an internalized process. This form of intervention is more closely aligned with cognitive behavior therapy, where the behavior of interest involves an individual’s thinking processes and emotions. These are private events that are not typically observable, although they can be measured through self-report and by observing facial expressions or body posture.

Development of observational learning skills can involve the entire class as a social learning environment. This requires multiple steps for success. The student must:

1. Pay attention to a peer who engages in the desired social behavior;
2. Accurately retain the information, developing a visual model of what they need to do;
3. Practice the skill to develop sufficient physiological/emotional control and fluidly engage in the necessary motor responses to develop competence.

This can apply to a range of social skills, e.g., conversations, paying attention, turn-taking, or navigating through areas in class without bumping into others. In this social learning “laboratory” it may be possible to “play” one student off the other. For example, the student who is shy may be well-behaved and attentive, serving as a model for more impulsive students. Conversely, such impulsive students may readily raise their

hand and respond succinctly when a question is asked, modeling this behavior for the shy student. Using posted points, raffle tickets, or some other tangible means of rewarding students for social behavior can help them become more self-aware and take note of their peers' behavior. It is not necessary to have immediate prizes or tangible rewards. The anticipation that the tickets can be worth a "surprise," or holding monthly classroom raffles typically generates enough student interest to give the points/tickets sufficient "value." It is the anticipation of events, rather than the actual tangible rewards, that enhance motivation.

Such an approach can also be used as a means of differentially reinforcing behavior. Imagine a mildly impulsive child tells a joke in class at a time when other work is supposed to be completed. Saying anything to the child in that moment is likely to be unintentionally positively reinforcing, plus that child may gain the attention of his peers, further reinforcing the behavior. But, what if a teacher or behaviorist quickly, silently, handed out raffle tickets to those children who did not react, said nothing to the target student, and then simply moved on? Wouldn't that amount to extinction for that child? If the student repeated the unwanted behavior, which could occur as part of an extinction burst, the process of reinforcing others could be repeated as needed. If the target child asks why they didn't get a ticket, a teacher could respond with a compliment and then say, "Telling the joke was your reward. I gave tickets to those students who remained focused on their work. A student retort such as, "Who cares?" or "I didn't want one anyway" could be met with a calm comment such as, "Thank you for telling me. I'm glad you weren't bothered by it." However, and this is critical, as soon as that same student goes at least several seconds (increasing over time), without engaging in interfering behavior, they would be acknowledged for remaining in control. Helping them learn via such direct experiences throughout the classroom day can be a means for developing social competence across a broad range of behaviors.

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