

Acknowledging appropriate behaviour: Practices for effective classroom management



School resources

Creating a safe, positive, supportive classroom environment is critical for students and teachers to achieve maximum benefit from the learning experience and must extend beyond simply posting and teaching the behavioural expectations, routines and procedures. Consequences such as acknowledging students' appropriate behaviour can have an effect on future behaviour and serve as a teaching tool by specifically highlighting what they are doing well, increase the likelihood of repeating desired behaviour, counteract negative peer influences and build teacher-student-family relationships¹. The purpose of this guide is to describe an evidence-based classroom practice to address performance deficits by motivating students to engage in appropriate behaviour as part of an effective classroom management system that promotes learning. Since students vary in their reward preferences, it helps to develop and teach a continuum or menu of reinforcers (e.g., social time with peers or adults, school activities or events, privileges, tangibles). Remember to keep it simple and easy, but also effective.

What does it mean to acknowledge appropriate behaviour?

Acknowledge, recognise, reward, praise, and reinforce are all terms that can be viewed synonymously when providing immediate feedback on a desired behaviour in order to strengthen the likelihood of reoccurrence. We all learn through reinforcement. In the same way that students earn rewards (marks, credits) for their academic behaviour, students should also be acknowledged for engaging in appropriate behaviour. Teaching a new skill, whether behavioural or academic, requires ample and sincere feedback and then motivation to be used again. Reinforcement occurs in various forms (such as verbal praise and behaviour contracting) which are all derived from the same behavioural principles², and works best when paired. Practices in acknowledging appropriate behaviour with examples are described below.

Behaviour-specific praise is one of the most common social reinforcers. Phrases like 'good job' or 'very nice' may make the recipient feel good, but they do not actually define why something was good or nice. Behaviour-specific praise is a verbal statement that names the behaviour explicitly and includes a statement showing approval. When teachers practice behaviour-specific praise, they name the exact behaviour observed and identify the alignment with the established expectation and procedure: for example, 'John, thank you for being **responsible** (expectation) by being **in your seat by the bell** (procedure)'. Describing the specific behaviour means that the student knows exactly what they did well and are better prepared to repeat the behaviour in the future, which leads to more frequent occurrences of appropriate behaviour in the classroom³.

Prompts and pre-corrections are evidence-based strategies useful in preventing inappropriate behaviour and helping set students up for success by describing expectations in understandable terms.

- A **prompt** reminds students what is expected during a normal routine or task. It describes the desired behaviour and is provided immediately before the behaviour is to occur in the form of gestures, visual supports, and/or verbal directives: for example, 'before you line up, remember to be responsible and push in your chair and walk quietly down the hall'.
- A **pre-correction** informs students how to respond in a new or challenging situation and teaches the expected behaviour for that situation: for example, 'Mr. Fox is coming to our classroom today

for the first time, so we will be respectful and listen attentively during his presentation and be active learners by participating in the activities’.

- The **5:1 positive to corrective statements** involves students being given at least 5 positive, supportive statements to every 1 corrective statement. This is a prevention tool that supports the expectations, routines and procedures, promotes a positive learning environment, and builds teacher-student relationships, and has shown to increase academic engagement and decrease disruptive behaviour.
- **Group contingencies** describe the ‘if-then’ relationships between student behaviours and classroom events where all students have the opportunity to meet the same expectation and earn the same reward. The award may be delivered:
 - to all students if all students meet the criterion such as being responsible and picking up around their area (inter-dependent)
 - to all students when one or a few students meet the criterion such as being respectful by sitting quietly during whole group instruction (dependent)
 - to each student if the student meets the criterion such as turning in a homework assignment (independent).

It is ideal when school leadership supports and endorses a school-wide system that establishes consistent practices within and across classrooms for a cohesive approach to learning that benefits all.

References

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2. Office of Special Education Programs. (2015). *Supporting and responding to student behavior: Evidence-based classroom strategies for teachers*. Washington DC: Office of Special Education Programs. Retrieved from www.pbis.org
3. Spilt, J. L., Leflot, G., Onghena, P., Colpin, H. (2016). Use of praise and reprimands as critical ingredients of teacher behavior management: Effects on children’s development in the context of a teacher-mediated classroom intervention. *Prevention Science*, 17, 732–742. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-016-0667-y>

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