



# Positive Reinforcement in the classroom

INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

June 2012

Despite the fact that reinforcement is a very powerful tool to use in terms of managing behaviour in the classroom, there are many teachers at the coalface who report that it doesn't work. But what are the principles of reinforcement, and how are they translated into the classroom in a practical way? Before we answer this question let's explore the use of punishment, and why it doesn't work.

## The case against punishment

Fair, firm and predictable boundaries or rules are an essential part of good classroom management, as well as healthy childhood development – there is no doubt about that at all. Apart from providing security to children, boundaries help them to develop internal limits in regards to their behaviour. Boundaries also lay the groundwork for good teaching and learning to take place.

But what about punishment? One of the unfortunate facts about punishment is

that, when it is done *incorrectly*, it doesn't seem to work all that well! In fact there are many empirical studies which suggest that punishment is the least effective way to change behaviour – particularly in the classroom (Walker, Steiber, Ramsey, & O'Neil, 1991). Corporal punishment in schools, for example, has very little effect on preventing negative behaviour (Martin, Linfoot & Stephenson, 1999), although it is quite common to hear some teachers reflect "if only they would bring back the cane – then they would learn!" Unfortunately, punishment *does not* teach more appropriate ways of responding, and is more likely to lead to an overall *increase* in negative behaviour (Australian Psychological Society, 1995).

What does punishment mean? In strict behavioural terms a punishment is something which *reduces* the likelihood of a behaviour occurring again. Certainly this is the unspoken goal of the teacher when punishing a child. But the question to really ask is – "does this punishment I am giving to the student actually lead to a *decrease* in the problem behaviour in the long term"? Some of the common punishments used in classrooms are:

verbal reprimand, long stares, moving the child closer to the teacher, name listed on white board with a cross or unhappy face above it, privileges revoked, extra work, loss of reward, detention, removal from class, sent to principal's office, note sent home to parent and so on (Little & Akin-Little, 2008). When we employ these tactics in the classroom they may make us feel like we are doing the right things, and they may lead to a drop in the unwanted behaviour in the here-and-now, but does it lead a reduction in the problem behaviour in the long term?

What makes the use of punishment even more dubious is the ease at which our own emotions can become entangled in our responses to the child – particularly anger, frustration or stress. Punishment can all too easily become our way of getting back "at that naughty kid", to show them that we have the power, or that we are in control. It is at these times that we are more likely to hand out the maximum punishment, but it's also these times that we are more likely to attend to and notice negative behaviours much more frequently, thereby possibly rewarding the student

with more attention – i.e. increasing the unwanted behaviour (Little & Akin-Little, 2008).

Punishments are a strain on the relationships that we have with students – and we know from anecdotal and research evidence that relationships are a critical factor in classroom management, engagement and learning. When teacher-student relationships become coercive, through the persistent use of punishment, the likelihood of the student-teacher relationship getting worse, and problem behaviour perpetuating is high.

What is misbehaviour? What an important question – all too often we react to misbehaviour, rather than thinking about the causes and meaning of it in the first place! An infant cannot start to manage (self-regulate) their own emotions until at least the age of three: parents do this for them. Self-regulation is a skill which continues to develop right through childhood and adolescence. What this means, is that for children “misbehaviour” or “out of control” behaviour may more likely be a representation of “out of control” feelings (Australian Association for Infant Mental Health, 2009). The child is certainly not choosing to be “naughty” – they simply have *no*, or *very limited* internal mechanisms to control their emotions, so they are exhibited through their behaviour. In fact, when teachers attribute naughty behaviour to causes that they assume *were* controllable by the child they are much more likely to respond with power-assertive discipline – a very ineffective form of behavioural management (Martin et al., 1999). All too often the child does not need punishment, but rather supportive attention and assistance in managing their feelings. *Misbehaviour is best considered by teachers in the same way they would consider academic problems – as opportunities to teach.*

When punishment is done correctly, it can show some positive effects in reducing problem behaviour. There are a number of key factors that go into a “good” punishment or consequence:

1. **The punishment should never be chosen in the moment:** they should be selected and explained to the classroom prior to the punishment – say at the start of the week, or when you set your class rules. This way our emotions are less likely to influence our reactions.
2. **A punishment that is too severe is likely to be less effective:** a careful balance must be maintained.
3. **Punishments that remove a positive reinforcer for a short period of time can be effective** (such as losing computer time, or having to sit out for a short time at recess or lunch).
4. **Punishments that are restitutive are effective in correcting behavioural difficulties:** an example would be picking up all the rubbish in the classroom if the student has been caught throwing paper around at other students (Little & Akin-Little, 2008).

As a final note: all care should be taken to avoid making the punishment about the child – the punishment should always be explicitly labelled as a response to the “behaviour” – i.e. they should in no way be made to feel that they are a “rotten apple”. For example, writing the child’s name on the board in a “naughty list”, or under a sad face is likely to indicate to the child that *they* are bad. Some kids may also gain peer attention or credibility from this, which undermines the punishment, making it a reward!

## Classroom management and positive reinforcement

Teachers who are most successful at classroom management maintain clear and appropriate rules and boundaries, address the antecedents of problem behaviour (as opposed to responding

with consequences) and provide an environment where rewards flow naturally. Actually making sure these practices occur day-in-and-day-out also requires that teachers have confidence in their own abilities, and are disciplined in managing their own emotions, taking care to manage their levels of stress.

### Managing antecedents:

What are antecedents? In the behavioural context, antecedents are the things which trigger or lead to specific behaviour. For example, boredom may be an antecedent to a child getting out of their chair and wondering around the classroom. Punishing the child for getting out of their chair is not going to address the issue at hand. Some practical ways to mitigate antecedents for misbehaviour can be:

1. **Keep them busy:** boredom is a major factor in classroom misbehaviour. Makes sure you have always got something up your sleeve for those times when kids may finish work really quickly, or when you can see frustration mounting over a particular task;
2. **Be amongst them:** walk around through the students, as opposed to staying out the front. When approaching children to redirect behaviour, come from the side or behind as opposed to the front, get down to their level and speak in a soft voice, as this may be less threatening
3. **Keep them engaged:** motivation, interest and curiosity within the students can be very difficult to maintain, and can be influenced by many factors other than your teaching approach and style! Speak to some of your educational colleagues about how they maintain engagement.
4. **Make sure there are lots of opportunities for students to participate in active ways:** this lessons the opportunity for

inappropriate behaviour and increases appropriate behaviour in the classroom (Sutherland & Wehby, 2001), as well as enabling active learning.

5. **Develop relationships:** there is a significant amount of research data to support positive teacher-student relationships. Taking an interest in those kids who you think may prove to be challenging and focussing on developing relationships with them is an important factor in classroom management.
6. **Structure the class:** the classroom environment can trigger certain behaviours from children – for instance if desks are really close together, physical contact between students may become an issue. Think about the classroom environment, and see what aspects you can manage.

### Positive reinforcement:

Students are more likely to do things they will be rewarded for than punished for (Grossman, 2004). But unfortunately, teachers often focus more attention on punishing poor behaviour, than on rewarding appropriate behaviour (Martin et. al., 1999). This is not to say that positive rewards are the be-all-and-end-all of classroom management – there are certainly instances when positive reinforcement will not be effective, and may even be counterproductive: for example, rewarding students who are already intrinsically motivated may actually reduce their motivation to continue doing the task in the future. So, it is very important to have a good understanding of the principles of reinforcement so that we can apply them in a way which will lead to good classroom management.

A reinforcer is something which leads to an increase in the desired behaviour. If it does not increase the desired behaviour then it is not a reinforcer – the teacher may have to find another reinforcer for the student. Some teachers report that

they have a problem with reinforcers because they are just “bribes”, and that students “should” do things in the classroom because they want to do them. There is evidence that contingent rewards (i.e. those that are promised in advance if certain conditions are met) do have a general negative effect on internal motivation (Mader, 2009). With this in mind we also need to be aware that a lot of students *do not want* to do certain tasks in the classroom and will avoid them, often being disruptive to the learning of themselves and their peers in the process! We also need to consider that reinforcement is a very normal part of human (and animal) motivation, learning and behaviour – we do things either because of the extrinsic reward, or the intrinsic yearning/desire to achieve something. So reinforcement is a very normal part of life and should be a normal part of the classroom. In fact, when we consider reinforcement which occurs *naturally* in any classroom, we begin to realise that it is a central component of the motivation of all students to achieve.

### MAXIMISING NATURALLY OCCURRING REINFORCERS:

Reinforcers which just occur naturally in the classroom are things like: positive attention from the teacher, good grades, feeling the effects of achievement, self-reinforcement that results from task completion, praise received for effort, a pat on the back, sitting with a friend, being first in line, doing a job for the teacher, achieving an early mark, listening to music in the classroom and so on. Maximising naturally occurring reinforcers is an important aspect of good classroom management, but we do need to consider that it won't necessarily maintain desired behaviour all the time. An example of using natural reinforcers would be to adjust the level of work expected for a student who was having some trouble getting through large amounts of work. The teacher thereby increases the opportunity that the student may experience self-reinforcement from actually completing a task, as well as presenting an

opportunity for positive teacher attention.

### USING MORE POWERFUL REINFORCERS:

At times it may be useful to use more elaborate forms of reinforcement to manage classroom behaviour. However rewarding certain behaviours is likely to be more effective when you meet certain conditions (Grossman, 2004):

1. **Reward students for behaviour that *you* think deserves to be rewarded** – not when students seek or ask for it.
2. **Students need to be *aware* of the specific behaviour that is being rewarded.**
3. **Your words and actions must be *congruent*:** i.e. – no point saying you're really pleased with little Johnny's effort if you have an angry look on your face, or are showing that you're not really interested.
4. **The reward must be rewarding to the student!**
5. **Rewards that are spontaneous and unexpected are more powerful.**
6. **Rewards that closely follow the behaviour are more reinforcing.**

### Shaping behaviour:

Shaping is a form of behaviour management which is really suited to the classroom. Shaping is essentially about having appropriate and realistic expectations for individual students. For example, if we expect a student who is disengaged from the classroom and acting out to sit quietly and do their work, there will be no opportunity for this student to receive any of the natural or structured rewards in the classroom. We need to actually think about “what is the next best step in the right direction for this student?” it may be that just sitting for 3 minutes is the next best step – so when the student does this we provide them with some appropriate reinforcement. When the student is doing this most of the time, we ask again – “what is the next best step in the right direction?” This time it might be

sitting for 5 minutes and doing some work – so we reward this behaviour when it occurs until the student is doing it most of the time. And this process goes on until the student is engaged and participating at a more appropriate level.

## Putting it all together

None of these strategies described above is a “magic solution” to the problem behaviour that is exhibited by students in your classroom. It may be that some students just do not respond to your efforts. But when we put all of these things together we are creating a classroom geared for teaching and learning. In summary:

1. Be mindful of and practice managing your own feelings – try not to react to situation from your emotions;
2. Have clear rules/expectations and use consequences/punishment in an effective manner;
3. Manage the antecedents of problem behaviour;
4. Maximise naturally occurring reinforcers;
5. Have some class wide or individually focussed reward systems, but use them sparingly;
6. Think about the next best “step in the right direction” for your students and reward that.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Australian Association for Infant Mental Health. (2009). *Position paper 3: Time out*. Downloaded from [www.aaimhi.org](http://www.aaimhi.org)
- Australian Psychological Society. (1995). *Punishment and Behaviour Change*. Downloaded from: [http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/punishment\\_position\\_paper.pdf](http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/punishment_position_paper.pdf)
- Grossman, H. (2004). *Classroom Behaviour management for diverse and inclusive schools* (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed). Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., Oxford.
- Little, S & Akin-Little, A. (2008). Psychology’s contribution to classroom management. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(3), pp 227-233.
- Mader, C. E. (2009) “I will never teach the old way again”: Classroom management and external incentives. *Theory into practice*, 48, pp 147-155.
- Martin, A., Linfoot, K., & Stephenson, J. (1999). How teachers respond to concerns about misbehaviour in their classroom. *Psychology in the schools*, 36(4), pp 347-357.
- Noguera, P., A. (2003). Schools, Prisons and Social Implications of Punishment: rethinking disciplinary practices. *Theory into practice*, 42, pp341-350.
- Sutherland, K. S., & Wehby, J. H. (2001). Exploring the relation between increased opportunities to respond to academic requests and academic and behavioural outcomes of students with emotional and behavioural disorders: A review. *Remedial and special education*, 35, pp 161-171.
- Walker, H. M., Steiber, S., Ramsey, E., & O’Neil, R. E. (1991). Longitudinal prediction of the school environment, adjustment and delinquency of antisocial versus at-risk boys. *Remedial and special education*, 12, pp 43-51.



## Joseph Degeling | Psychologist

BA (Psych, Edu), GradDipCouns, MHLthSc (ChldAdolHlth)  
Medicare Provider Number: 4141491A | PBA registration number: PSY0001161495

50 Murray Farm Road  
Carlingford NSW 2118

T: 02 8197 9627  
F: 02 8197 9628

joseph@josephdegeling.com.au

[www.josephdegeling.com.au](http://www.josephdegeling.com.au)