

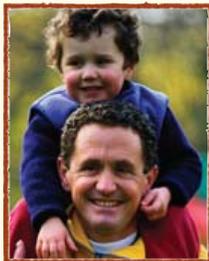


Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

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# Acknowledging Children's Positive Behaviors



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**K**athy was frustrated with how things were going in her classroom where she is the teacher of 3- and 4-year-old children. Several children were having difficulties with transitions. They wandered around the room, became easily agitated, and disrupted the whole class. Although Kathy had been teaching for 5 years, she was beginning to doubt her abilities as the right teacher for this group of children. Kathy talked about her challenges with Hank, the director of the center. Hank suggested that he videotape the class so that they could later watch the tape together and look more carefully at what was happening during transition times. Kathy agreed to have her class videotaped because she trusted that Hank would be supportive and his feedback would be constructive rather than critical.

A week later, Kathy and Hank watched the videotape and focused on the transition between center-time and lunch. Hank had suggested that they keep track of what Kathy said to the children and their responses. As they watched the tape, Kathy was surprised to hear her loud tone and to see her increasingly "aggravated" body language (e.g., tense, standing above the children, hands on hips). She noted how many times she heard herself say, "Stop that! What are you supposed to be doing?" "This room needs to be quiet." "We are out of time." The chaotic atmosphere in the room seemed to increase as Kathy's aggravation increased. Hank recommended that they work together to use a strategy to reduce inappropriate behaviors by focusing on children's positive behaviors. He gave Kathy some materials to read on acknowledging young children's positive behaviors.

## Acknowledging Positive Behaviors: How Does This Strategy Work?

Acknowledging positive behaviors is a strategy that educators, family members, and other caregivers can use to devote more time and attention to desirable child behavior than to undesirable child behavior. This strategy is based on four key findings from research involving young children and their supportive adults:

- Most child behavior is strengthened or weakened by what happens after the behavior occurs. For example, a toddler who receives laughter and applause for making a funny face is likely to keep making funny faces.
- Often adult attention is captured by child misbehavior; teachers and parents can be, in a sense, hypnotized by a child's misbehavior, seemingly unable to attend to appropriate behavior by other children.
- Attention from primary caregivers is so important to young children that they will continue a behavior that produces negative reactions. The result can be an

increase in the very behavior that adults wish to discourage. For example, think about a child who continues to run toward the classroom door over and over again as the teacher shouts, "Don't make me come over there; you know not to leave the classroom!" That kind of attention will reinforce and increase that behavior.

- Although a specific child behavior may be temporarily weakened by a negative response from the adult, there is no assurance that a more desirable behavior is being identified and encouraged in the process. For example, telling a child that she cannot go outside to play because she dumped her toys all over the floor does not teach the child how to put toys away. The "more desirable behavior" needs to be taught.

## How Can Teachers Use the Strategy of Acknowledging Positive Behaviors?

### **Give positive responses to the desired behavior and avoid responding when that behavior is not occurring.**

This approach requires that adults give positive responses to desired child behavior and do their best to avoid responding when that behavior is not occurring, unless safety issues arise. Positive responses involve communicating verbally and nonverbally with the child but also can include presenting favorite objects (toys or books), pictures, sounds, or other items. Kathy was worried that if she ignored inappropriate behavior the children might end up completely out of control. Hank listened to her concerns and told her about some of the problems that he ran into when he started acknowledging children's positive behaviors in a classroom setting. Hank told Kathy that behavior sometimes gets worse before it gets better when you withdraw attention and reward (the response extinction pattern). However, if you start rewarding positive behaviors, you should see an initial improvement, followed by some variability (i.e., good days, bad days), followed by more consistently good days. Hank said that he would help Kathy make plans for handling unsafe behavior and that he would work very closely with her once they actually started using this strategy.

### **Record the number of times the behaviors occur.**

A planned approach requires that adults record the number of times certain child and adult behaviors occur. Hank helped Kathy get started by developing a simple form with three columns. The columns were titled: (1) What happens before the behavior? (2) What is the problem behavior? and (3) What do the adults/child do after the behavior? Hank was encouraging and worked with Kathy on recording the information about the behavior. Kathy began to feel better when she could see the pattern and relationship between child and adult behaviors. For example, she noticed that when she commented on one child's attentive

behavior to a peer who was sharing a story with the large group, other children began to sit up and pay attention also. Being able to step “out of the classroom action” and look at the information gathered helped Kathy analyze what was happening in her classroom.

#### **Design a plan to meet your individual needs.**

The next step is for adults to develop a classroom plan. Hank advised Kathy that it is a good idea to initially select one desirable behavior and a just few children. After everyone has experienced some success, she could then move to a more challenging behavior. Kathy decided to start with cleaning up toys when center-time was over. Hank then asked Kathy to work on defining the behavior that she wanted to see increase; to consider where, when, and how often she would be looking for that behavior; and to think of situations that might increase the likelihood that children would engage in that behavior.

*At their next meeting, Kathy and Hank developed a list of expectations for picking up toys and plans for teaching the children the expectations. Together they developed a list of positive responses to use in the classroom. They decided to keep the responses simple and descriptive—“Thank you for putting the truck on the shelf”—and to make sure that they included nonverbal responses (like smiles, winks, thumbs-up). They agreed on the importance of not responding to the children’s unacceptable behavior unless someone was in immediate danger. Even then, Kathy would do her best to act quickly with minimum interaction. Hank helped Kathy by role playing a few situations during which she would respond to appropriate behavior by using positive, descriptive statements.*

*They reviewed the simple counting sheet that Kathy would start using in the classroom. They decided to target three children and record how they were doing with picking up toys, how many times they received positive reactions for desired behaviors, and how many times they received attention for undesirable behaviors. Kathy felt good knowing that she had a plan to address the difficult behavior and that Hank was supportive of her efforts.*

#### **What Resources Are Needed?**

The initial involvement of an experienced person (e.g., a colleague, supervisor, team member) from outside the classroom to assist in training and intervention monitoring is strongly recommended.

#### **Who Are the Children Who Benefit?**

Acknowledging positive behaviors has been used with a wide variety of children from 2 years of age to preado-

lescence, including children who are typically developing and children described as having conduct disorders, emotional disturbance, communication disorders, autism, and mental retardation. This strategy has been used effectively by teachers from a wide range of racial, ethnic, income, and educational backgrounds.

#### **What Behavioral Changes Can Be Expected?**

Acknowledging positive behaviors has been used to help increase and maintain a number of child behaviors including positive interactions with peers, following adult instructions, appropriate communication, and independent self-care skills (e.g., dressing, toileting).

**“Kathy began to feel better when she could see the pattern and relationship between child and adult behaviors.”**

Using this strategy results in decreases in aggressive and destructive behaviors, failure to follow instructions, and inappropriate communication. Use of this strategy by caregivers results in adults becoming purposeful in providing positive responses to appropriate child behavior, monitoring child behavior more closely,

and responding to child behavior more consistently. Fewer adult reactions to inappropriate child behavior, less reliance on punishment, and decreased levels of stress within the classroom also have been observed. This strategy is especially well-suited to increasingly informal use across behaviors, settings, and activities as adults become more familiar with the procedures.

*The next day, Hank stopped by Kathy’s classroom after the children had gone home. Kathy’s enthusiasm for her new approach to behavior was dampened by the children’s initial response. She told Hank that when she said something positive to the children during clean-up time they seemed shocked. “It was as if they were confused when I did not use a frustrated tone and scolding words.” Hank reminded Kathy that behavior changes take time for both adults and children.*

*Child behaviors did not improve overnight. Some children responded quickly to the descriptive praise and acknowledgment, while others continued to run around the room during clean-up time. Hank planned to give Kathy some extra hands during the first week of implementing her new strategy. She needed time to teach the expectations and for the children to become comfortable with the changes. In a few weeks, even parents were commenting on how Kathy and the children seemed less stressed and more like a team working together in the room. Kathy continued to chart her behaviors and the children’s behaviors, and felt increasingly competent in her role as a teacher with a plan to acknowledge positive behavior to decrease inappropriate behavior. ☼*

# Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning

We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel>) or call us at (866) 433-1966 to offer suggestions.

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## Where Do I Find More Information on Implementing This Practice?

See the CSEFEL Web site (<http://www.vanderbilt.edu/CSEFEL>) for additional resources. There are many books, articles, manuals, and pamphlets available that describe the use of this strategy. These include:

Hester, P. P., Baltodano, H. M., Hendrickson, J. M., Tonelson, S. W., Conroy, M. A., & Gable, R. A. (2004). Lessons learned from research on early intervention: What teachers can do to prevent children's behavior problems. *Preventing School Failure, 49*(1), 5-10.

Kaiser, B., & Rasminsky, J. S. (2005). Including children with challenging behavior in your child care community. *Exchange, 164*, 32-34.

Stormont, M., Lewis, T. J., & Beckner, R. (2005). Positive behavior support systems: Applying key features in preschool settings. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 37*(6), 42-49.

## What Is the Scientific Basis for the Practice?

For those wishing to explore the topic further, the following researchers have examined the short- and long-term effectiveness of adults' use of the strategy described here as *Acknowledging Positive Behavior*:

Campbell, S. B. (2002). *Behavior problems in preschool children: Clinical and developmental issues*. New York: Guilford Press

Howes, C. (2000). Social-emotional classroom climate in child care, child-teacher relationships and children's second grade peer relations. *Social Development, 9*(2), 191-204.

Strain, P. S., & Timm, M. A. (2001). Remediation and prevention of aggression: An evaluation of the Regional Intervention Program over a quarter century. *Behavioral Disorders, 26*(4), 297-313.

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HANDOUT 22



## ☀ Give positive responses to the desired behavior and avoid responding when that behavior is not occurring.

- Positive responses include telling the child what he or she did well.
- Positive responses can include presenting favorite toys or other items.
- Nonverbal responses might include smiles, thumbs-up, and pats on the back.
- Be prepared for the child's behavior to get worse initially in one or more areas before it begins to get better.
- Make a plan for responding to unsafe behavior.

## ☀ Record the number of times the behaviors of interest occur.

- Pay attention to child behavior and adult behavior.
- Write down what and how often the child engages in undesirable and desirable behaviors.
- Write down how often and what types of attention adults provide to the child (for desirable as well as undesirable behaviors).
- An example of a form might be:

| Before the behavior   | The behavior                     | After the behavior  |
|---|----------------------------------|---|
| <i>Asked to clean up and reminded of being responsible for their toys</i> | <i>Cade cleans up with peers</i> | <i>Teaching assistant smiles and gives Cade and his two peers a "high five"</i> |

## ☀ Design a plan to meet your individual needs.

- Individualize the plan for each situation.
- Select one desired behavior as a starting point.
- Move to more challenging behaviors after experiencing some success.
- Define the behavior you want to see occur more frequently (consider where, when, and how often).
- Think of situations or activities that might increase the child's opportunities to engage in the desired behavior.
- Develop a list of positive responses that adults can use when the child engages in the positive behavior (consider nonverbal as well as verbal responses).
- Do not respond to unacceptable behavior unless the child, someone else, or an important object is in immediate danger. If you have to react because of safety, do so quickly and with a minimum amount of interaction.
- Decide on a schedule to begin Acknowledging Positive Behaviors.

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