Dealing with classroom management problems

Saul Axelrod explains how Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and positive reinforcement can help teachers successfully manage their classrooms

There is probably no issue more pressing for teachers than dealing with classroom management problems. Teachers wake up obsessing over a student’s behavior or even leave education. Here is what is so sad about this. It is unnecessary. For approximately 50 years, there have been available to teachers Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) interventions that can solve most classroom management problems in a quick and humane manner.

ABA is derived from the basic principles of behavior outlined by famed psychologist B.F. Skinner about three quarters of a century ago. Thousands of journal articles and books have demonstrated that ABA can be used to solve some of the most difficult behavioral problems. Yet, for reasons I have discussed in other articles, ABA is regularly used in special education, but seldom used in regular education. This is unfortunate. If ABA procedures were used more often in regular education, inclusion of children with disabilities would be more of a reality in regular education, and teachers’ lives would be much happier.

Positive reinforcement procedures

There are many complex principles in ABA. Yet, by knowing how to apply a relatively simple principle – positive reinforcement – teachers are able to produce large and desirable changes in the behaviors of their students.

The principle of positive reinforcement indicates that when a pleasant event follows a behavior, the behavior is more likely to occur in the future. For example, when teachers compliment students for behaving properly, it is likely that they will behave more appropriately in the future. If the teacher awards extra marks to students for handing homework in on time, the chances are that students will be more diligent in handing in their homework next time.

It is surprising to me that people have so many reservations and concerns about positive reinforcement procedures. The principle of positive reinforcement is a natural, not a contrived, process. People say: “Hello” to people who smile back at them. Salespeople make efforts to sell more products, because such activities increase their commissions. Athletes try hard to meet the incentive clauses of their contracts.

What is so wonderful about positive reinforcement procedures?

There are few things in life that produce only pleasant outcomes. Positive reinforcement comes as close to this ideal as any other process does. Positive reinforcement works and is humane. Children love being in a classroom where positive reinforcement procedures are being used. Teachers enjoy teaching with positive reinforcement procedures because the results are so gratifying. Positive reinforcement procedures create a loving bond between students and teachers.

How do I find out what children’s positive reinforcers are?

This is not hard to do. There are a number of things you can do to find out what a student’s possible positive reinforcers are. I italicized possible because you cannot be sure if an item or activity is a positive reinforcer until you try it out. Here are some things you can do. First, you can ask the child what they would like to work for. You can ask the same question to their parents. You can also ask them to pick from a list of possible reinforcers. Another way of identifying possible positive reinforcers is to note what a child spends a lot of time doing. If a student frequently runs to the computer, note what a child spends a lot of time doing.

What are some positive reinforcers I can use?

This is easy. The first one falls under the category of social reinforcement and consists of smiles, compliments, or a call home to a parent reporting how well their child behaved that day. It is helpful to compliment children when they walk into class each day. This prompts appropriate student behavior, which should also be praised. The best predictor I know of for successful classroom management is the number of compliments a teacher gives. The more, the better. Think of how you feel when someone gives you a sincere compliment.

Some teachers are admonished not to smile until Christmas. I say, start smiling on Labor Day and keep smiling until Flag Day.

There are also a number of activity and tangible reinforcers for students of all ages. These include having extra free time, collecting student papers, having lunch with the teacher, earning extra points toward a grade, and reading favored materials.

What are a few examples of successful ABA programs?

Here are a few examples. One first-grade teacher I know had a student who made animal sounds 45 times per day. The teacher divided the day into 15-minute blocks. For every 15-minute block without an animal sound, the girl earned a minute on the computer to be enjoyed at the end of the day. The girl then made animal sounds only four times a day.

A middle school teacher found that students were frequently out of their seats.

What we know

● There is a lot of evidence that ABA can be used to solve some of the most difficult behavioral problems.

● ABA interventions, like positive reinforcement, work well and are easy to implement.

● Students enjoy being in a classroom where positive reinforcement procedures are being used, and teachers enjoy teaching with positive reinforcement procedures because the results are so gratifying.
The principle of positive reinforcement indicates that when a pleasant event follows a behavior, the behavior is more likely to occur in the future.

She set a timer to ring three times a lesson at unpredictable intervals. If all students were seated when the timer went off, the group earned a point. Ten points meant a day without homework. Out-of-seat behavior became a rarity.

A high school mathematics teacher found that students were taking a long time to transition between classes. He solved this by putting bonus problems on the whiteboard at the start of each class. The problems were removed after five minutes. Most students arrived at class punctually, thereafter, in order to receive the bonus points on their grades.

What are some pointers for solving classroom problems constructively?

- Set reasonable goals. A small improvement in behavior is appropriate at the start. As student behavior improves, you can increase the requirements for positive reinforcers.
- Make adjustments in your procedures. As you use a procedure, you may notice better ways to apply the intervention. Make these changes. A small adjustment in an intervention can produce a major change in the outcome.
- Talk to other teachers. You have a lot of smart, skillful colleagues. Talk to them. Ask them what they have found helpful when they have encountered problems similar to yours.
- Read teacher-oriented ABA textbooks. They are filled with descriptions of interventions that have been successful with situations like the ones you are encountering.
- Use interventions that are easy to apply and are inexpensive. The best procedures are simple and powerful, and they exist. A visit to a dollar store is a good start for inexpensive rewards.
- Prioritize and work with only one or two behaviors at the start. There may be several behavior problems in your classroom, but it is too difficult to address all of them at once. Focus on one or two problems. When they come under control, you can add other behaviors to your program. A procedure that is effective with one behavior is likely to be effective with other behaviors.
- Be an optimist. The situation may be tough, but it is not impossible. Teachers like you have dealt successfully with more difficult problems. When your intervention does not work, it is not your failure. It is just a prompt to try something else. Giving up is the only failure.

About the author

Saul Axelrod is professor emeritus of special education and applied behavior analysis at Temple University. His research and writings have focused on devising and disseminating procedures that increase teacher effectiveness.

Further reading

