

Mentor handout 1.2

Using praise to reinforce behavioural expectations

Research has clearly demonstrated that delivering praise to students when they engage in appropriate behavior increases the likelihood they will continue to engage in appropriate behavior in the future (e.g., Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968). As an antecedent strategy, it is speculated that students of teachers who use high rates of praise may be more likely to engage in appropriate behavior because they perceive that more praise is readily available in that environment. Unfortunately, research has indicated that teachers rarely use praise with general education students (Beaman & Wheldall, 2000) and are even less likely to use it with students who engage in challenging behavior (Shores et al., 1993). Increasing the frequency of teacher praise is a simple strategy that can have a very large impact on student behavior. Further, there is some evidence of a relationship between teacher praise and student self-appraisal over time (Montague & Renaldi, 2001). Consequently, the beneficial effects for students may be long lasting.

Research has demonstrated that behavior-specific praise, or that which specifically identifies the particular desirable behavior the student is performing, is most effective in promoting appropriate behavior (e.g., Chalk & Bizo, 2004). Behavior-specific praise statements can be directed at individual students or at the entire class. For example, if a teacher notices a student is in his seat and is focused on his work, the teacher might say, “Josh, I love how you are sitting quietly and working on your worksheet. Great job.” Thus, the statement explicitly identified and praised the student for the appropriate behavior in which he was engaged, but it also provided a prompt to the rest of the class that in-seat, on-task work is expected, and that positive attention from the teacher is available for engaging in said behavior. Sutherland, Wehby, and Copeland (2000) examined the effects of increased behavior-specific praise statements with a class of students with emotional and behavior disorders. They found that as the rate of specific praise statements delivered by the teacher increased, so did the on-task behavior of the class.

Praise need not be directly delivered to a student to be effective. Research has illustrated it has a vicarious effect, in that students who observe others being praised for a particular behavior are more likely to model that behavior. For example, Kazdin (1977) demonstrated that as a target student was praised for attentive behavior, the attentive behavior of an adjacent peer increased as well; however, note that the effects of vicarious reinforcement through praise can be short lived if the peers (i.e., students who were not the subject of the praise statements) are not praised as well, at least intermittently (Ollendick, Dailey, & Shapiro, 1983).