Class-Wide Behavior Management Interventions

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Dealing with disruptive behaviors is a challenging task for many educators. These behaviors often lead to chaos in the classroom and negatively affect social functioning. Disruptive classroom behavior has been shown to be associated with declines in educational performance, reduced academic learning time, and diminished performance on standardized tests. Moreover, children who demonstrate consistent patterns of disruptive behavior are at an increased risk for antisocial behavior.

The most common disruptive behaviors in the classroom setting include noncompliance, aggression, inattention, and off-task behavior such as manipulating objects and doodling. Young children who exhibit disruptive behavior problems are likely to continue exhibiting those behaviors as they age. Although many interventions are effective in reducing disruptive behavior, most are designed for individual students. These individual programs are time consuming for teachers, often require extra resources, and do not reward students who are behaving appropriately. Given the negative implications of disruptive classroom behavior, it is important to reduce these disruptions and facilitate the process of learning. This handout provides interventions that address a wide variety of problematic classroom behaviors that disturb the learning process for grades K–12.

Group Intervention

Group contingencies are an attractive alternative for educators and are appealing for several reasons. First, the same goals, criteria for success, target behavior(s), and reinforcers are in effect for the entire class. This results in a more efficient method of classroom management, as the teacher is only supervising one contingency program. Second, students who exhibit appropriate behavior receive recognition for doing so. Third, socialization and peer interactions are often enhanced because the class as a whole is working toward a common goal. Group-oriented contingencies are categorized into three types: independent, interdependent, and dependent.

Independent Group Contingency

Independent group contingencies require the same criteria, target behaviors, and reinforcers for the entire class. However, reinforcement is based on an individual student’s performance, independent of classmates. Therefore, although the contingency is the same for all students in the classroom, reinforcement is delivered individually, based on the performance of each student. For example, a teacher may reinforce each student who refrains from calling out more than three times during math. Those students who demonstrate the inappropriate behavior (calling out) more than three times do not earn a reward while those students who call-out fewer than three times receive a reinforcer.

There are several advantages of this contingency: For instance, rather than having multiple behavior programs for different students, only one contingency program is in effect for the entire classroom. This results in a more efficient method of managing disruptive behaviors and distributing reinforcers. Another advantage would be if the classroom teacher is able to modify the behaviors of numerous children without singling out individual students.

It is recommended that the independent group-oriented contingency be used when a plan to target one or a couple of students may result in retaliation by other classmates. This strategy is also suggested if a wide range of individual differences exists in the classroom. Thus, children are able to earn reinforcement based on their own abilities. In addition, if targeting one student may result in threats or social punishment, an independent contingency is suggested.

Cautions related to implementing the independent contingency approach specifically concern reinforcement and method of delivery. In particular, the choice of reinforcer is important. Because the
reinforcer is the motivating force to modify behavior, it must be powerful enough to motivate change to meet the goal. An unappealing, weak reinforcer, or a reinforcer that is easily attained otherwise, will not promote success.

In addition, since some students earn reinforcement while others do not, tangible rewards are easier to administer than events or activities. While activity reinforcers have many advantages over tangible rewards (i.e., low or no cost, easy access, less like bribes), some activities are not appropriately withheld from students. Some students with significant disabilities, for example, may have a low probability of meeting the group contingency, yet should not be denied access to some activities owing to their disability. Some activity reinforcers may also require adult supervision or flexibility in scheduling.

To overcome these limitations the teacher may (a) employ a token economy whereby points or tickets are given for meeting the specified criterion and later exchanged for other objects or privileges, (b) randomize reinforcers, or (c) utilize an interdependent group contingency whereby the entire class either earns a reward or does not.

**Interdependent Group Contingency**

An interdependent group contingency rewards the entire class based on the group meeting a specified criterion. The performance of each student in the classroom contributes to meeting the criterion. Therefore, all students need to work together and modify their behavior in order for the class to earn a reward. There are several different ways of implementing an interdependent group contingency, including (a) computing the average of the class performance, (b) having each student in the class meet the criterion, (c) separating the class into teams, and (d) comparing the performance of the student with the highest or lowest performance with the set criterion.

For example, a common method of employing an interdependent group contingency is to divide the class into teams. The number of inappropriate behaviors for each team must not exceed the specified criterion (i.e., five or fewer inappropriate behaviors) during a specified period (i.e., reading) in order for the entire team to earn a reward. Another variation of the interdependent contingency is that all students must meet the specified criterion (i.e., five or fewer inappropriate behaviors) for the whole class to receive a reinforcer. Thus, if one student was noted to call-out seven times, then the entire class would not receive a reinforcer.

The interdependent contingency is particularly useful when teachers are seeking to improve the overall behavior of the entire classroom. It encourages collaboration and social interactions among students because all students must work together to meet a common goal. Further, it does not consume much teacher time because reinforcement is delivered on an all-or-none basis. Teachers are also able to use group activities since the entire class either earns the reward or does not.

There are concerns, though, with interdependent contingencies: (a) Some students who do comply with the contingency program may become frustrated if the class does not earn the reinforcer owing to the poor performance of classmates. This may result in threats or retaliation against students responsible for costing the group the reinforcer. (b) Some students may intentionally ruin the class's chance to earn reinforcement, giving those students an inappropriate sense of power and control over their peers. (c) Educators need to carefully select the reinforcer, because if the selected reinforcer is not motivating or is considered by some to be negative, students may not be motivated to change their behavior and may try to sabotage the program. (d) The criteria for reinforcement is critical. If students feel they are unable to meet the criterion, they may revert to their disruptive and inappropriate behaviors. (e) Students may exhibit inappropriate behaviors that have not been targeted for behavior change.

Solutions to these concerns include randomizing reinforcers as well as using components of the interdependent contingency.

**Dependent Group-Oriented Contingency**

A dependent group-oriented contingency provides reinforcement to the entire class based on *one or a few students* meeting a specified criterion. That is, the target student or students who exhibit disruptive behavior must meet a specified criterion (i.e., not calling out more than three times during math lesson) in order for the whole class to earn a reward. For example, the selected student(s) must not call-out more than three times during math. If the target student(s) do not call-out more than three times, reinforcement is delivered to the entire class.

One advantage of this strategy is that this contingency utilizes classmates to assist students in modifying their behavior, which may result in improved socialization and cooperation. Further, reinforcement is also delivered to either the entire class or not at all, requiring minimal teacher time. In addition, students who may be rejected socially have the opportunity to earn positive peer attention. The dependent contingency is recommended when only one or a couple of students' behavior is of concern.
Limitations of this strategy include the focus on one or a couple of students, which may result in threats and/or social punishment from peers when the criterion is not met. In addition, students may take pleasure in ruining the contingency program rather than working together toward a mutual goal. A solution to targeting one student is to randomly select a student from the class. The teacher puts the name of each student in a jar and randomly chooses one name and determines if that student's performance meets the criterion for reinforcement. If so, then the entire class is rewarded.

**Maximizing Effectiveness**

*Randomize criteria.* Teachers may randomize criteria for reinforcement, individual students, and reinforcers to maximize success and avoid some of the limitations of group contingencies. This will require each student to modify his or her overall behavior, since each student will not know specifically what or who will be chosen (i.e., criteria, student). For example, a student's name and criteria (i.e., class average, the student with the highest or lowest performance) can be written on a notecard for reinforcement and then the notecards can be combined in a jar. Alternatively, one jar can be used for "Names," one jar used for "Criteria," and another for "Reward." Any combination of jars can be used for determining reinforcement.

*Randomize reinforcers.* Teachers can poll their students to determine what types of rewards the students would like to earn for complying with the contingency program. Teachers can then incorporate all or some of the student suggestions and randomize them by, for example, placing each idea on a notecard and then placing the notecard in a jar. By combining and randomizing reinforcers that are enticing to the entire class it is less likely that the contingency program will be deliberately sabotaged because a student did not like the selected reinforcer. The rationale is that students are working toward an unknown yet desirable reinforcer.

*Employing randomization.* Implementation of the group contingencies with randomization may be used in the following manner: Students should be informed of behaviors that will be modified, the criteria for reinforcement (i.e., overriding criterion is five or fewer checks), and the reinforcers that they may earn. Reinforcers should include student suggestions. The new classroom rules, stated in a clear and positive manner, should be posted in order to serve as a reminder. The teacher should have a sheet of paper with each student's name written on it. At any point during the specified time period (i.e., math) that students fail to comply with the classroom rules, the teacher will place a check next to that student's name. At the end of the specified time interval (i.e., math), the teacher will randomly select one notecard from one of the jars. For example, if each component of the interdependent group contingency (i.e., class average, performance of the entire class) and names were combined in a "Criteria" jar and a student's name were selected, the performance of that particular student will determine whether the class will receive reinforcement. In other words, if the student met the overriding criterion (i.e., five or fewer checks), the class will be eligible to earn a reinforcer. The teacher will then randomly select a reinforcer from the "Reward" jar. If the criterion were not met, then the teacher should state that the student did not earn the opportunity to obtain a reinforcer.

**Modifications**

Group contingencies are fairly easy to employ, are time and cost efficient for teachers, and are effective in improving classroom behavior. However, what if a student continues to exhibit problem behavior despite the established classroom rules, limits, and behavioral expectations? If the behavior management strategy has been implemented for a considerable amount of time (i.e., approximately two weeks) and the behavior affects the academic and/or social functioning of the student or others, then the teacher may wish to alter the treatment plan. This could be accomplished by adding new intervention components to the already established group contingency. For example, the classroom teacher may consider communicating with the student's parents regarding the behavior of concern and collaborate on home/school strategies to improve it. Alternatively, an individual treatment plan (versus the group contingency) addressing the particular behavioral concerns may also be developed by the teacher or with the help of the school psychologist.

A particularly attractive aspect of group contingencies is that they may be implemented for the entire class regardless of whether some students also have individualized behavior plans. If the goal is to modify overall classroom behavior, then children with individualized programs may also engage in the group contingency.

**Resources**


Website
What You Need to Know About Special Education— http://specialed.about.com/cs/behaviordisorders

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession. www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety. www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance. www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation. www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAInformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics. www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics. www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites. www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html


Order online. www.nasponline.org/store


Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school’s website. www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit