

# 2

## UNDERSTANDING PRINCIPLES OF PREVENTION AND SUPPORT

### In a Nutshell

- Discipline means to teach. If you want a student to change a behavior or skill, you have to teach them how to do it.
- We reinforce and punish behaviors and skills, not learners. If the behavior keeps happening, it is being reinforced somehow.
- Universal and group approaches provide efficiency and incidental benefit to students who may be unidentified or at risk.

### Introduction

I (Hank) first started making a conscious effort to drive the speed limit when I moved to Chicago. I wanted to obey the law (I'm a rule follower by nature), decrease the wear on my car, and save gas. So, once I am on the highway and reach the legal cruising speed, I set my cruise control. For those of you who are beginning to sweat thinking about being behind me, I make sure I am in the far right lane. Even though I moved to the slow lane, angry drivers were sometimes so close I could see the whites of their eyes, or I could see them extend their middle finger (an insult in the United States). What's the point of talking about driving in a book about schools? The climate of the larger group (the rest of the drivers) can impact, for better or worse, an individual's learning and behavior. You can have the best individual plan in the world (e.g., my driving plan), but if the climate does not encourage the new behavior, it won't be sustainable. This chapter will include an overview

of some of the scientific principles related to learning and behavior as well as key systems components that will help you to implement interventions more effectively.

### Connection – Reinforcement

You may never have had the need to ask a student to leave your classroom for discipline reasons, but you may have seen it happen. For example, Cedric was a 9th-grade student who read at about the 3rd-grade level. In English, when his teacher asked him to get out his book, he would begin to bang on the desk, make noises, and talk to his peers. The teacher would try to correct him, but he kept refusing to follow directions. One day the teacher had had enough, and told Cedric in front of his peers to leave the class. Cedric said, “fine with me, I don’t care.” He then put up his hand and said, “talk to the hand because the man does not understand.” After slamming the door, Cedric walked to the chair outside the discipline dean’s office, known as “Cedric’s chair” due to the frequency with which he was sent to sit in it. After about a 45-minute wait, and missing his next class, Cedric met with the dean to review the events of the morning. The dean was concerned, listened to Cedric’s description of the problem, and encouraged him that he had a bright future if he could keep himself out of trouble. The next day, Cedric began banging his hand on the desk when the teacher asked the students to take out their books. It is important to analyze Cedric’s behavior through the lens of reinforcement.

### Point/Principle – Reinforcement

In general, *reinforcement involves adding something preferred or removing something aversive following a behavior*. The end result is that the behavior is maintained at its current level or increases. What can be added or taken away following a behavior (called stimuli) can include things you can touch (e.g., food, work, objects), and things you cannot (e.g., attention from peers, attention from adults, stimulation). Seeing behavior through the lens of reinforcement allows you to understand the payoff for Cedric’s behavior. If you think about your own behavior, we typically do not do anything that does not work at some level. For example, some of us shake our legs when we sit for a while (we get stimulation). Others speed to work to avoid being late.

Most behaviors, when you consider them, lead to some type of payoff (reinforcement), or we would not continue them. For academic skills, students are often given positive feedback, praise, the satisfaction of achieving the correct answer, or the “escape” of having the teacher and spotlight move on to the next student once a correct answer is given. At

the secondary level, we sometimes fail to build in these consistent types of reinforcement for social-emotional learning skills and behaviors, and in fact our practices sometimes work against successful outcomes when it comes to behavior.

Let's go back to Cedric now and look at his behavior through the eyes of reinforcement. When prompted to get out his book, Cedric was about to be asked to read content at a level he could not, which would likely cause him not only frustration, but embarrassment in front of his peers. Due to his disruptive behaviors, he not only escaped these negative stimuli (frustration and embarrassment), but also received attention, albeit negative, from the teacher, and likely his peers. When Cedric was sent to the office, he was able to have one-on-one time with a caring concerned adult.

Let's recap: Cedric was able to get away from work that was not easy for him, he received attention from his peers and teacher, and had a personal counseling session with an adult. Sounds like a pretty good day to me! The point is that if we see what the payoff is for Cedric, ***we might be able to help teach skills that have the same payoff as his problem behavior*** (e.g., asking for help, asking for a break when frustrated, academic remediation). We do not want to make the mistake that we think we are punishing students, when in fact, we are reinforcing their behavior.

### BOX 2.1 PONDERING ON PURPOSE

- How have you accidentally reinforced a student's undesired behavior in the past? Did you add something preferred or remove something aversive?
- Why is it so easy to overlook the truth behind why a behavior is happening?
- What do you think are some common examples of things that teachers and/or administrators do, thinking they are "punishments" when they are could be reinforcing students' inappropriate behavior?

### Application – Reinforcement

If you were Cedric's teacher, how might you try to address his needs? Are there long-term solutions that might address his reading level and need for attention? Are there short-term skills you could teach him to handle his frustration more appropriately? Would there be any accommodations you could provide to decrease Cedric's desire to leave the class? Whatever you choose, your solutions need to work as well or better than what Cedric is already doing to obtain attention and escape frustrating work.

### Connection – Correction, Feedback, and Punishment

Chris was in the 9th grade at a large urban high school. One evening his mother, his sole caretaker, left him with his baby brother alone all night. She was intoxicated when she returned the next morning as he was getting ready for school. Although Chris had taken care of his brother, he had neglected to take out the trash, which was beginning to smell. His mother called him into the kitchen. In a deafening tone, she asked him why he had not taken out the trash. When Chris said he was sorry, his mother slapped him across the face and told him to take the trash out now.

Later that morning, Chris was called in by his language arts teacher and she asked why he had not turned in his homework that week. At first, he said, he did not know he had homework to complete. When the teacher reminded him that he did have homework, he said, “If I had a dog, he would have eaten my homework.” At that point, the teacher gave him a detention after school for not bringing his work. He told her that was fine, and that “my friends are in detention anyway!” Why would giving Chris a detention not be an effective punishment for being late with his homework?

### Point/Principle – Correction, Feedback, and Punishment

We have to look at what punishment means in order to answer the question about Chris’ punishment. Punishment is an event that follows a behavior, which should make the chances of that behavior to occur again less likely, or for the behavior to stop altogether. Punishment does not necessarily mean yelling, scolding, screaming, or taking something away. It means to ***add something (typically not pleasant for that person) or take something away after a behavior, that decreases the chance that the behavior will happen again.*** We actually sometimes “punish” academic mistakes when we give corrective feedback and a student stops making the same mistake. When we correct students through giving feedback, we are trying to change the problem behavior. When we attempt to punish a student’s behavior, we are merely trying to make it stop.

For Chris, there is not much you could do to him that would be considered “aversive” enough to punish his behavior. He is effectively desensitized to anything you could do (yell, threaten, assign a detention). Also, thinking back to reinforcement, by giving him a detention, the teacher was actually helping him to avoid going home. The detention could increase the chances he might not bring his homework in the future. Sometimes we think we are punishing a student’s behavior, but in reality, we might be rewarding it.

For academic skills, we often see similar issues with punishing errors. For example, when grading essays, teachers sometimes give such detailed and specific feedback about mistakes that the student can blindly apply the edits and not actually make changes to their thought process or writing skills

on the next assignment (so the style of feedback has actually reinforced the mistakes). Or, when every type and instance of a mistake is pointed out throughout an essay, students may become desensitized to the feedback and stop reading the corrections halfway through.

Correcting students is important, but the over-reliance on corrective strategies that are intended to punish student behaviors has some side effects. In a geometry class, you would not allow a student to keep using the wrong formula (e.g.,  $a^2 + b^2 = c^4$ ) because you were afraid of hurting someone's feelings. Or, if a student was starting to run his hand toward the circular saw in a construction class, you would not say, well he just needs to experience the natural and logical consequences. In both cases, you would provide feedback in the form of some type of verbal correction, which would hopefully stop these behaviors from happening again. The key is that you would stop the mistake, and immediately add some instruction to teach the student what to do differently.

Unfortunately, in addition to the risk of accidentally reinforcing problem behaviors as described above, the overuse of traditional punishment strategies for behavioral infractions (e.g., yelling, detention, suspension) has side effects. These side effects include repetition of the same behaviors (repeat offenses) due to the fact that no skills were taught, or creating a sense of need for revenge towards the person delivering the punishment (which can lead to even more problematic behaviors). ***Think about correction as a bank account. You have to make more positive deposits than you make withdrawals, or you will get an overdraft statement.***

By finding the type of feedback most valuable to the student and providing more positive than negative feedback, your corrections will be more effective. However, even though you begin to rely on strategies beyond punishment alone, you also need to remember that change takes time. Framing this concept in terms of academics, think about how difficult it would be to teach students if your only instructional method was to point out their mistakes and insist they stop (with no explanation of what they should do instead of the mistake, or feedback about the skills they are demonstrating correctly). This would not be a very efficient instructional approach!

### Application – Correction, Feedback, and Punishment

Have you ever thought about the reinforcement involved in teaching an academic skill? Or the idea that what might be punishing for you could actually be reinforcing for someone else? Reflect on a time when you tried to help a student improve a skill or change a behavior and were surprised or frustrated by the outcome. Could the principles described above have come into play? If so, how?

**BOX 2.2 PONDERING ON PURPOSE**

- What are we doing to explicitly teach and support expectations (academic, behavioral, social)?
- How do we involve our students to encourage them to take ownership over their goal-setting?
- How do we teach students to evaluate their decisions?
- What schoolwide or classroom data do you have that could help inform you about what is working and what isn't in your school?

**Connection – Incidental Benefit**

Sometimes in secondary schools, people with expertise in supporting students most at risk have concerns about implementing preventative supports for all students. One of these concerns is that their time and focus really should be about helping students who have the most needs. While we understand their concern, their efforts at focusing on preventive, universal supports can help students most at risk. For example, Bailey and colleagues found that having friends exposed to an intervention around drinking and tobacco use decreased the chances of getting drunk or smoking for students even if they never attended the program. Schoolwide and classwide supports create sustainable environments for students with more intense needs, but often benefit many others.

**Point/Principle – Incidental Benefit**

Students without any disability or at-risk label can benefit from interventions not necessarily intended for them. In fact, some special education laws state that incidental benefit is welcomed. For, example, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States says that supports can be provided to all students, “even if one or more nondisabled children benefit from such services” Sec. 1413 (a)(4)(A). This means that resources and interventions that are designed to support students with intense needs can in some cases be applied to all students, even if others who are not at risk incidentally benefit from them.

Academic vocabulary instruction is a great example of incidental benefit. As researchers Margarita Calderon and Sean Slakk suggest, for students who are English Learners (ELs), a common recommendation is to provide explicit instruction on high-impact vocabulary words (e.g., verbs from the Common Core State Standards: determine, analyze, delineate, represent, etc.). Many high school teachers assume students know what it means to explain versus analyze, and feel like it is not a valuable use of time to teach these types of words to entire classes.

I (Kelly) recall a meeting with a large group of high school administrators when they first received access to the SAT data for their buildings. They were shocked by some of the words-in-context items that 30–70% of students had missed, even at a school with high levels of academic achievement, where very few students were identified as ELs. These administrators realized that targeting academic vocabulary; as recommended by the authors Harvey Silver, Thomas Dewing, and Matthew Perini, according to the recommendations for students who are ELs, could potentially have a positive impact, even on students who were generally achieving at high levels. Providing explicit vocabulary instruction would be especially beneficial if done with instructional routines that can easily be differentiated.

### **Application – Incidental Benefit**

Make a list of strategies you have tried or recommended for specific students who were struggling with a skill. For each one, identify another student or type of need that strategy may have supported. How could you provide this support to a larger group of students?

### **Connection – Schoolwide and Classwide Supports**

Have you ever been to a birthday party for a four-year-old at a pizza parlor with a gaming arcade? I (Hank) have nothing against these places, but they can be a little over-stimulating for me. However, one of my favorite games there is whack-a-mole. The point of the game is to bop the heads of as many plastic marsupials (moles) as possible in a given amount of time. Bop one on the head and another one pops up. While this is an engaging way to spend about two minutes at a birthday party, it is not a great way to handle your students.

Unfortunately, schools may take a whack-a-mole approach to supporting students. Sean is having trouble with reading in his English program and gets a one-on-one tutor. Sarah is acting out in Algebra I and is given a very effective individual plan. The problem is that there are six other students who are struggling to read in Sean's class and five other students in Sarah's class that have been sent out due to disruptive behavior. These plans are working well for Sean and Sarah. However, *the interventions might be more efficient if consideration was given about what could be done classwide, or even schoolwide.*

### **Point/Principle – Schoolwide and Classwide Supports**

Schoolwide approaches, sometimes called universal approaches, are strategies that are applied to every student in the building. These interventions can include teaching all students what is expected, using effective teaching

strategies and curriculum for all students, or teaching social and emotional skill sets. Regardless of what approach your education system takes, there is typically a focus on some type of standards related to college and career readiness. While these do typically include academic outcomes, they also include literacy skills related to speaking and listening (e.g., working in groups, sharing ideas).

***By thinking first about the quality of what all students are exposed to, you are saving time for the future.*** For instance, researchers Scott and Barrett found that every discipline action you write up takes approximately 20 minutes of the instructor's time, and about 45 minutes for the administrator to process. If you address some of the low-level problems (e.g., the student not having pencils), you would have more time to deal with more significant problems (e.g., fighting, the student who cannot read).

For example, Northfield Middle School and High School in Vermont was concerned that many of their students were having discipline problems, were not succeeding on core assessments, and were struggling socially and emotionally. They began teaching all the students in the school basic expectations for student behavior. Academically, they found that their students were struggling with the reading portion of their statewide assessment. They looked at their master schedule and created an intervention class that every student took, in addition to their English classes, that exposed them to an evidence-based reading program (Study Island). Additionally, they also began using social and emotional screening data (along with behavior and academic data), to identify students in need of more support. While this was not a short-term process, they found their teachers were eventually referring fewer of their students for discipline problems and more students were passing their standardized assessments.

### **BOX 2.3 PONDERING ON PURPOSE**

- Brainstorm examples of ways to determine whether a student “can’t” do something or “won’t” do something that do not involve speculation.
- Why is it important to consider incidental benefits?
- What “whack-a-mole” situations come up in your school?

### **Application – Schoolwide and Classwide Supports**

If you could choose one of your favorite strategies to help students succeed, that you wish every teacher in your school would implement, what would it be and why? What would be the impact if students experienced the strategy regularly in all settings throughout their day?



## Conclusion

Understanding the principles of prevention and support are key, we believe, to helping people understand why taking on these initiatives are so important. The importance of understanding why schoolwide approaches are needed including talking about the principles of reinforcement, and punishment; the meaning of discipline; the purpose of prevention; and why incidental benefit is relevant will help your teams move forward with future stages of buy-in. Taking time to discuss these components with your staff ahead of implementation may lead to increased understanding, buy-in, and fidelity of implementation.

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