



The Power of Your Attention

Managing student behavior can feel daunting and overwhelming in a classroom full of students. With students engaging in off-task conversation, another student wandering around the classroom, and others engaging in disruptive and distracting behaviors, it's difficult to know exactly where to start. With the many responsibilities teachers have to deal with on a day-to-day basis, let's simplify how to intervene by being mindful of the **attention** you provide to students.

Adult attention – whether it be *positive* attention or *negative* attention – reinforces student behavior. In other words, attention increases the likelihood that the student will repeat their exhibited behavior again in the future. So how can you intervene without accidentally reinforcing misbehavior?

Active Ignoring

The best way to minimize negative, attention seeking behaviors (e.g., whining, eye rolling, sass) is to completely ignore it. This is called *active* ignoring because you are not passively ignoring the child, but rather consciously removing your attention to their undesirable behavior. What does this look like in action? Avoiding any reaction – large or small – to the misbehavior. This includes making eye contact or a facial expression in response to the misbehavior or outright commenting on the misbehavior. Just behave as though nothing out of the ordinary is happening.

Active ignoring is incredibly effective in reducing annoying, *attention seeking* behaviors; however, it requires patience and distress tolerance. Why? Because if you choose to ignore a behavior you previously attended to, the behavior has the potential to get worse before it gets better. Think about a vending machine. What do you do when you put your money in and nothing happens? You might press the button 10 more times, start shaking the machine, or even raise your voice because what worked just about every other time isn't working in this very moment. So if you start ignoring your student's complaining behaviors, for example, the student might raise the volume of their voice or continually repeat themselves as a way to desperately get your attention. It is key here that the adult continues to ignore the misbehavior as long as the student is safe and not at risk of harming themselves or anyone else. This teaches the student that such misbehavior is not how to earn your attention.

Differential Attention

While you are disengaging from and ignoring student misbehavior, it is essential that you simultaneously give your positive attention to appropriate classroom behavior in the room. This is called differential attention. It is encouraged that you specifically attend to desirable behaviors that run counter to the misbehavior – these are called positive opposites. Be sure to immediately re-engage with the misbehaving student when they exhibit appropriate classroom behavior as this teaches the student the appropriate way to earn adult attention.

For example, if Michael is waving his arm at you, saying “*Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!*” to get your attention...

- provide positive attention to the student who is demonstrating the positive opposite behavior (e.g., *Thank you for raising a quiet hand, Jasmine.*)

Once Michael is raising his hand appropriately...

- re-engage with him using positive attention to his appropriate behavior (e.g., *Michael is raising a nice, quiet hand. What would you like to add?*)



There are a number of ways that teachers can provide positive attention to appropriate student behavior in their classroom:

1. **Labeled praise:** specific compliments to student behavior – the most effective way to reinforce appropriate classroom behavior
 - *The Blue Table is doing a great job of helping each other on their project.*
 - *Joaquin, I like seeing you concentrating on your work!*
 - *I'm proud of you for waiting patiently.*
2. **Unlabeled praise:** nonspecific compliments
 - *Excellent work, Angelina!*
 - *Thank you, class.*
3. **Nonverbal praise:** compliments via body language
 - high five, smile, positive eye contact, light touch on shoulder
 - warm tone of voice, laughing together, matching students'/class' energy level
4. **Behavior descriptions:** neutrally observing appropriate classroom behavior
 - *I see Samantha is looking at the board.*
 - *Xavier is following directions and lining up for lunch.*
 - *The Yellow Table is packing up.*

How to Redirect Behavior

While the above-described strategies will help to redirect many students towards appropriate classroom behavior, there are almost always going to be a student or two (or more) in your classroom that will require more direct instructions. For the redirection skills listed below, always keep a calm, neutral tone of voice and facial expression to avoid use of sarcasm or inadvertent attention to misbehavior.

1. **Information:** Start with a reminder or hint to the class of what is expected of them. Focus on the class materials, schedule, or behavioral expectations rather than the individual child. Remember to combine information with praise and descriptions of desired behavior!
 - *I'm looking for students seated at their desks... Lily, great heading to your seat.*
 - *I'll know you're ready when desks are cleared... I see Kevin putting his belongings away.*
 - *The class is working on number 11... Everyone at the green table is following along nicely.*
2. **Command:** Direct the child who is still off-task with a specific and positively stated command, telling them (not asking them) exactly what to do. It can help to pair it with an explanation. Remember to praise if they listen!
 - *It's time to start class. Brandon, please sit at your desk... Awesome listening, Brandon!*
 - *Class is over and it's time for recess. Sasha, please pack your things.*

Adapted from the *Parent-Child Interaction Therapy Protocol* (Eyberg & Funderburk, 2011) and based on Chapter 10: Older Children in *Parent-Child Interaction Therapy* (McNeil & Hembree-Kigin, 2010)



3. **Warning of Consequence:** It is only fair that we provide second chances to follow directions. Warnings are a great way to alert students that a consequence will be coming if they choose not to listen to instructions. Consequences must be meaningful to the student and implemented as immediately as possible. They can be positive (privilege or reward for complying) or negative (privilege loss for noncomplying). *When-Then* and *If-Then* statements are a great way of reminding students of the expectation and their potential consequence. Remember to praise if they listen!
 - *Sasha, when you pack your things, then you'll be able to leave for recess.*
 - *Sasha, if you don't pack your things, then you will lose 5 minutes of recess.*

4. **Follow Through on Consequence:** All the skills reviewed thus far will only be effective if you follow through on your stated consequence. Remember that limit testing is part of children's development; it helps them understand how the world works and learn that their behavior can impact others. So it is expected for middle school students to occasionally test their teachers. As such, it is critical that teachers follow through on their warnings.
 - *Sasha, you didn't do what I told you to do, so I cannot send you to recess.*
 - *Sasha, you didn't do what I told you to do, so you will lose 5 minutes of recess.*