Catch Them While You Can: Monitoring and Increasing the Use of Effective Praise

KEVIN S. SUTHERLAND
VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY
SUSAN COPELAND AND JOSEPH H. WEHBY
PEABODY COLLEGE AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Teacher praise has been demonstrated to be an effective tool for supporting students’ learning and behavior. However, reported rates of teacher praise in classrooms for students with emotional and behavioral disorders are alarmingly low. The purpose of this article is to offer strategies that can help teachers not only become more aware of their use of effective praise, but also increase the frequency and effectiveness with which it is used in their classrooms.

“Raise your hand when you are finished with your math practice and I will collect your work; then I’d like you to get out your journal and begin writing on today’s topic.” Mrs. Johnson waits by her desk and watches as her students finish their independent math practice and transition into language arts.

Six minutes later James completes the last problem of his practice, checks to make sure that his name is on his paper, and raises his hand. After collecting two other students’ papers, Mrs. Johnson makes her way over to James and takes his paper while observing Mike’s progress. James reaches into his desk, removes his journal, and begins writing on today’s topic, “My favorite meal is …” He writes two paragraphs and waits for his classmates to finish.

After a couple of minutes he sees Mike, two rows over, asking a classmate how to spell “spaghetti.” James jumps from his seat and makes his way to Mike’s desk, saying “s – p – a – g …”

“James!” Mrs. Johnson is not happy. “Who gave you permission to get out of your seat?”

“How common is this scenario in classrooms for children with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD)? According to research, more common than one might think. For example, in a study of interaction patterns in classrooms for students with EBD, Shores and colleagues (1993) found rates of student compliance in excess of 60%. This rate is reflected in the scenario above, as James finishes his independent practice, raises his hand, and completes his journal entry, all in response to directions given by his teacher. More important, these behavioral responses were opportunities missed by Mrs. Johnson to praise James’s compliance. However, when he does not meet the classroom expectation of remaining in his seat, he receives a reprimand from his teacher.

Unfortunately, research indicates that teachers of students with EBD rarely use praise. Indeed, rates of teacher praise as low as one per hour can occur (Shores et al., 1993; Wehby, Symons, & Shores, 1995). Given the low reported rates of praise in classrooms for students with EBD, and knowing the long-lasting effects of praise, the question is: How can we become more aware of our praise rates and increase its use?

Why Praise?

Historically, teacher praise has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy in classroom management. As early as 1968 a relationship was found between teacher praise and the disruptive behavior of students. That is, when teachers praised appropriate behaviors, students’ disruptive behaviors decreased (Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968; Ward & Baker, 1968) and task engagement increased.
Effective Praise

(Ferguson & Houghton, 1992; Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000). Increases in appropriate student behavior, in turn, made available more instructional time in the classroom (Hall, Lund, & Jackson, 1968). Praise has also been shown to increase intrinsic motivation (Cameron & Pierce, 1994), as well as to promote a feeling of competence (Gottfried, 1983).

In addition to the effectiveness of praise as demonstrated by empirical research, our experience as teachers has illustrated other benefits. Through the use of praise, a positive classroom environment is established and sustained, and relationships between teachers and students are improved and maintained. The teacher who uses praise is seen by students as a fair, caring, trustworthy adult. Since many of the students we teach have had little success in school, praise from the teacher can be a valuable tool as we attempt to not only teach our students prosocial behaviors and academic tasks, but also to recognize the strengths they possess.

Given the evidence of the benefits of teacher praise, why then are rates of praise in our classrooms so low? Shores et al. (1993) suggest that teachers may not be aware of the power of praise. Perhaps teachers are using other systems (e.g., token economies or level systems) rather than praise to reinforce their students’ positive behaviors. Other explanations for the low reported rates of praise include teachers “reacting” to behavior and the assertion that some students may be so aversive to the teacher that the child has performed.

What Is Effective Praise?

Walker (1979) provides several guidelines for using praise effectively. These include:

- **Timing –** praise should be delivered immediately after the target behavior has occurred
- **Unobtrusiveness –** praise should be delivered during continuous stream-type behaviors, such as attending to a task or cooperating with others
- **Quality –** praise should be positively stated in a sincere tone of voice
- **Behavior descriptive –** praise should specify explicitly what positive behavior the child has performed
- **Varied –** the words used to praise should be varied to avoid monotony
- **Frequency –** in the early stages of learning, the child should be praised at least once every 10 minutes
- **Fading –** as the child acquires the target behavior, the frequency of praise should be reduced.

While all of these guidelines are important, we will discuss three in more detail: timing, fading, and behavior descriptiveness.

**Timing**

Given that students with EBD tend to exhibit inappropriate behaviors, it is critical to reinforce their prosocial behaviors. The timing of praise can be a crucial component of teaching these students. Often students are unaware that their behavior (e.g., on-task behavior) is positive, so a quick “I like the way you are working on your math, James” can go a long way towards increasing the rate, or strength, of that behavior. Immediately providing students with praise for desired behavior highlights for the student the connection between the desired behavior and the praise, and prevents inadvertently reinforcing an intervening, less desirable, behavior (Alberto & Troutman, 1999).

**Fading**

Thinking back to the introductory scenario, if Mrs. Johnson wanted to use praise more effectively, she would first determine what level of behavioral skills James is able to exhibit. Perhaps completing his assignment, raising his hand, and beginning his journal are tasks he has already mastered to some degree. However, when faced with “down time” James has difficulty remaining in his seat. Two strategies Mrs. Johnson might use to help James with this would be: (a) to avoid “down time,” and (b) to catch James when he is in his seat, saying “James, I like the way you are sitting patiently.” Over time, given James’s mastery of this expectation, the praise can be faded and remaining in his seat or leaving his seat only with permission may be added to James’s behavioral repertoire. At that point, Mrs. Johnson and James might identify another behavior challenge and concentrate on supporting behavior change with praise.

**Behavior Descriptiveness**

While both timing and fading are critical aspects of effective praise, the descriptiveness of praise may be the most powerful teaching tool at our disposal within the context of social reinforcement. In a review of the literature, Brophy (1981) determined that teacher praise was most effective when it was behavior descriptive. That is, through praise the teacher specifies to the student the behavior being reinforced (e.g., “Joseph, you did a great job helping Robert with his reading.”). Research has shown, however, that as little as 5 to 17% of teacher praise statements are behavior descriptive (Anderson, Evertson, & Brophy, 1979; Sutherland & Wehby, in press).

Recently, Sutherland et al. (2000) examined the effect of increased rates of a teacher’s behavior-specific praise on the on-task behavior of students with EBD. The students were divided into quadrants and observed to determine their levels of on-task behavior. Using an observation and feedback intervention, the teacher’s rate of behavior-specific praise per 15-minute session was increased from an initial rate of approximately one statement to almost seven statements. As the teacher’s behavior-specific praise increased, the students’ on-task behavior, as measured in this study, increased as well (from approximately 50% to almost 86%).

The findings of this study highlight the effectiveness of behavior-specific praise as a strategy for increasing and maintaining appropriate classroom behaviors, such as task engagement, of students with EBD. In addition, it is interesting to note that while the teacher’s initial use of behavior-specific praise was relatively infrequent, his use of this strategy increased during an observation session immediately following a physical altercation between two students. It seems, at least in this case, that the teacher recognized the value of behavior-specific praise and attempted to use it to manage a...
Increasing Praise

Two strategies, peer coaching and self-evaluation, have been suggested as means of increasing effective teaching practices in the classroom (Farmer, Farmer, & Gut, 1999; Gunter & Reed, 1997; Sutherland, 2000). Both of these strategies are described in the following sections, as well as two others: teaching students to recruit teacher praise and "subtle reminders."

Peer Coaching

Among other things, peer coaching has been demonstrated to be effective for increasing desired teacher behaviors while decreasing undesired teacher behaviors (Pierce & Miller, 1994). Peer coaching has been described as a teacher observing a colleague’s lesson and providing feedback and assistance based upon the observation; from this assistance, the goal is to improve instructional skills and strategies (Strøther, 1989). Hasbrouck (1997) identified three conditions under which peer coaching appears to be most successful: (a) structured observations using objective and descriptive recordings of teacher behaviors rather than more anecdotal, subjective evaluation; (b) training the peer coach to reliably code teaching behaviors; and (c) debriefing and goal setting, leading to goal-directed behavior, which is more likely to effect change and improvement.

The following steps have been demonstrated to be effective for helping teachers increase their use of praise (Sutherland et al., 2000; Sutherland & Wehby, in press) and providing some structure to peer coaches as they attempt to provide feedback to their colleagues. After two to three sessions of data collection (to provide a baseline of comparison), the teacher may select a goal of attempting to achieve a certain number of praise statements per 5 minutes based upon their rate during the baseline phase. Gunter and Reed (1997) determined that 5-minute vignettes of instruction provide insight into a teacher’s instructional behavior. The peer coach may then:

1. **remind the teacher of the agreed-upon goal of praise statements;**
2. **provide agreed-upon examples of effective praise (e.g., “Remember to be behavior-specific.”);**
3. **observe and record praise statements during a 5-minute instructional sample;**
4. **provide feedback to the teacher on his/her use of praise; and**
5. **graph the teacher’s use of praise.**

Self-Evaluation

If teachers don’t have access to a colleague to record their praise rates, self-evaluation might be helpful. Recently, the use of videotaped instruction has been advocated as a way to allow teachers of students with EBD to self-monitor their instructional behavior (Gunter & Reed, 1997). Videotaped instruction allows teachers to observe both their own instructional behavior and the behavior of their students. However, if teachers are primarily concerned with a specific verbal behavior, such as their use of praise, audiotaping is a simple alternative to videotaping. Recent research suggests that teachers may increase their use of praise through self-evaluation using audiotaped samples of their instructional language (Sutherland & Wehby, in press). Following are steps that teachers may use to self-evaluate their use of praise:

1. The teacher audiotapes two to three 5-minute samples of his/her instructional language.
2. The teacher makes a prediction about his/her use of praise per 5 minutes and writes the prediction on a sheet of paper.
3. The teacher listens to audiotaped samples and, with a frequency count, notes the number of times he/she praised students.
4. The teacher compares his/her prediction of use of praise with the data collected; the teacher may then use this information to set a goal for his/her use of praise per 5 minutes.
5. The teacher asks the students to state their goal of praise statements; and
6. The teacher compares his/her observed rate per 5 minutes with the goal he/she has set.

Subtle Teacher Reminders

If teachers of students with EBD want to increase their use of praise, perhaps "subtle reminders" can be used to increase their use of this commonsense and effective strategy. “Subtle reminders” may include:

1. **Attaching “post-it” notes to your desk that read “PRAISE”;**
2. **Placing cups on your desk with students’ names on them and dropping in a token when you praise each student;**
3. **If your students have personal goals that are evaluated regularly (e.g., daily), create a personal goal for yourself that involves increasing your use of praise and have...**

---

**Effective Praise**

---
your students evaluate you.

• Alderman (1997) recommends the “bean” method. Put a handful of dried beans in your left pocket at the start of the day, and each time you praise during the day transfer a bean to your right pocket. Examine your progress and attempt to increase the number of beans in your right pocket at the end of the day.

Summary

Teachers, particularly teachers of students with EBD, are faced daily with many challenges. Given the lightning-quick pace of classroom environments and the multiple demands placed on teachers, we often become reactive in our attempts to manage student behavior. Self-evaluation can be difficult as we become involved in long-standing habits of response. It is our hope that at least one of the strategies described in this article will help you become more aware of your use of effective praise within your classroom.

A final few words of caution are offered. First, we must recognize that praise may not work with ALL students; secondary-level students, in particular, may not be comfortable being singled out in front of their peers. However, a whispered “Congratulations” or a compliment from a trusted adult after class can go a long way towards strengthening relationships and increasing students’ feelings of accomplishment. Second, students with low self-concepts who have not received much social reinforcement in the past may not know how to react appropriately when praised. In fact, their resulting behavior may be so aversive to the teacher that he or she will avoid the use of praise. These students may need to be taught how to accept compliments, and accepting praise in an appropriate manner can be a target behavior for future praise. Finally, teacher praise is not effective within the context of a negative learning environment. A structured, consistent classroom environment must be established first; additionally, research has demonstrated that effective teaching strategies contribute to reduced disruptive behavior of students with EBD (e.g., Gunter, Shores, Jack, Denny, & DePaep, 1994).

These effective teaching practices, combined with a structured, consistent classroom environment, are essential to creating a positive learning environment. Within such environments, praise provides a nonintrusive, natural, free, and simple strategy for positively supporting students with EBD.

REFERENCES


