

Breaking the Attention-Seeking Habit: The Power of Random Positive Teacher Attention

Some students misbehave because they are trying to attract teacher attention. Surprisingly, many students who value adult attention don't really care if it is positive (praise) or negative attention (reprimands)--they just want attention!

Unfortunately, instructors with students who thrive on teacher attention can easily fall into a 'reprimand trap.' The scenario might unfold much like this: First, the student misbehaves. Then the teacher approaches the student and reprimands him or her for misbehaving. Because the student finds the negative teacher attention to be reinforcing, he or she continues to misbehave--and the teacher naturally responds by reprimanding the student more often! An escalating, predictable cycle is established, with the student repeatedly acting-out and teacher reprimanding him or her.

Teachers can break out of this cycle, though, by using 'random positive attention' with students. Essentially, the instructor starts to ignore student attention-seeking behaviors, while at the same time 'randomly' giving the student positive attention. That is, the student receives regular positive teacher attention but at times unconnected to misbehavior. So the student still gets the adult attention that he or she craves. More importantly, the link between student misbehavior and resulting negative teacher attention is broken.

Steps in Implementing This Intervention

Step 1: Select How the Teacher Will Show Positive Attention to the Student. The key to this intervention strategy is that the teacher will be giving the student regular positive attention at times of his or her choosing. It is important, then, for the teacher to put together a list of ways to deliver positive attention that (a) can be done quickly, without disrupting classroom instruction, and (b) the student actually finds rewarding. Here are just a few ideas for giving positive attention:

- Pat the student on the shoulder
- Make eye contact and smile at the student
- Check in with the student about how he or she is progressing with an assignment
- Call on the student in class (when you are pretty sure that he or she knows the answer!)
- Pass the student a note with a cheerful comment, specific praise, or compliment
- Give brief, specific praise about the student's work or behavior (e.g., "I really like to see how carefully you are drawing that map, Joanna!")
- Give the student a few words of encouragement
- Invite the student to summarize for the group the main points of a classroom discussion
- Converse briefly with the student
- Select the student to carry out a classroom task (e.g., passing out papers) that he or she likes

Step 2: Decide How Frequently the Teacher Will Give 'Random' Positive Attention to the Student During a Class. The teacher now needs to figure out how often during a class period he or she will approach the

student to give positive attention. Generally, this intervention works best if the teacher is able to give the student a fairly high level of positive attention, at least at the outset.

One good way for the teacher to estimate how frequently to provide positive attention is to observe a student across several class periods. The instructor keeps track of how frequently (e.g., once every 5 minutes) the student tries to capture the teacher's attention with problem behaviors. When the teacher has a good idea of how often the student typically seeks attention, he or she can plan to counter the misbehavior by giving the student 'random positive attention' at the same rate. Note: A teacher can simply estimate the student's rate of attention-getting behavior based on past experience with him or her.

Step 3: The Teacher Chooses the Time(s) and Setting(s) in Which to Use Random Positive Attention. If the target student engages in attention-seeking during only certain times of the day or in particular locations (e.g., just after lunch in math class), the teacher can limit this intervention to just those time periods. If the student seems to be attention-seeking most of the time and in most locations, however, the teacher may want to use the random attention strategy across a greater part of the school day.

Step 4: Start the Random Attention Intervention. Unlike some intervention ideas, random teacher attention does not require that the student be formally trained in its use. Just start the intervention! There are just two simple rules:

- Rule 1: Whenever the student inappropriately tries to get the teacher's attention, the instructor either (a) ignores the student or (b) in a neutral manner, quietly and briefly redirects the child to task. The teacher then continues teaching..
- Rule 2: During a given class session, whenever the student is 'due' for positive teacher attention, the teacher observes the student. If the student is not engaged in attention-seeking behavior when the teacher glances at him or her, the instructor immediately approaches the student and briefly delivers positive attention (using a choice from the list developed in Step 1). Then continue teaching. Otherwise, the teacher simply ignores the student's attention-seeking behavior and continues teaching.

Step 5: Fade the Successful Intervention Over Time. Once the teacher finds that random positive attention has significantly reduced or eliminated the student's attention-seeking behavior, the instructor can gradually 'fade' the intervention. Each week, the instructor reduces the number of times that he or she approaches the student with positive attention--until the teacher is only occasionally providing that attention. If at any point in the fading process, the teacher discovers that the student begins again to act in an attention-seeking manner, the teacher can temporarily increase the rate of random positive attention until the student's behavior improves. Then the teacher continues fading the attention.

Troubleshooting: How to Deal With Common Problems in Using Random Positive Teacher Attention

The student's behavior does not significantly improve when the teacher uses this intervention. If you discover that random positive teacher attention is not effective in 'turning around' a student's misbehavior, there are several possible explanations:

- The student is not receiving enough random teacher attention. If possible, try increasing the rate (number of times) that you give the student random positive attention during a class

session. (See Step 4: Rule 2 above.) Boosting the rate of positive teacher attention may be all that is needed for the student to act more appropriately.

- The teacher continues to give the student attention for misbehavior. Sometimes teachers don't realize how much attention they pay (even unwittingly) to students who misbehave for attention-seeking reasons. Reflect on your own classroom interactions with the student. If you discover while you are using random positive attention that you are still giving the student lots of attention for acting out, you should (a) continue to use random positive attention and (b) make an extra effort to respond neutrally to, or simply ignore, the student's attention-seeking behaviors.
- The student generally does not find teacher attention to be rewarding. This random-attention strategy will work only if the child misbehaves to seek teacher attention. If, however, the student acts inappropriately for some other reason (e.g., to escape a situation that he or she finds unpleasant or to gain the attention and approval of classmates), you will need to select a different intervention strategy.

A Method for Estimating Rate of Student Attention-Seeking

Pick several class times when your student is most likely to try to grab your attention. Keep track of the start and end times of these observations (e.g., reading group, 9:30 to 10:10 a.m.) Tally or estimate the number of times during each session that the student attempts to capture your attention (e.g., asking for assistance when not really needed, engaging in attention-seeking misbehavior that forces you to approach him or her to reprimand or redirect).

To figure out how frequently the student seeks your attention on average, add up the total number of minutes from all the observation sessions and divide that figure by the total number of times that the student sought your attention across sessions. For example, if you had observed a student for a total of 120 minutes (across 3 sessions) and the student had sought your attention 10 times during the observations, you would know that the student sought your attention an average of once every 12 minutes (120 minutes / 10 incidents of attention-seeking = one attention-seeking incident every 12 minutes).

Once you have estimated how often the target student is vying for your attention, you can 'match' this attention-seeking behavior by giving the student random teacher attention at the same rate.

References

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Jim's Hints

Teach Other Instructors to Use Random Attention. After you have experienced success with this strategy, teach other educators who work with the child to use the intervention. Share with them your list of positive ways to show random attention to the student.