

Positive Peer Reports: Changing Negative Behaviors By Rewarding Student Compliments

Introduction

Some students thrive on peer attention—and will do whatever they have to in order to get it. These students may even attempt intentionally to irritate their classmates in an attempt to be noticed. When students bother others to get attention, though, they often find themselves socially isolated and without friends. In addition, teachers may discover that they must surrender valuable instructional time to mediate conflicts that were triggered by students seeking negative peer attention.

Positive Peer Reporting is a clever classwide intervention strategy that was designed to address the socially rejected child who disrupts the class by seeking negative attention. Classmates earn points toward rewards for praising the problem student. The intervention appears to work because it gives the rejected student an incentive to act appropriately for positive attention and also encourages other students to note the target student's *good* behaviors rather than simply focusing on negative actions. Another useful side effect of positive peer reporting is that it gives all children in the classroom a chance to praise others—a useful skill for them to master! The Positive Peer Reporting strategy presented here is adapted from Ervin, Miller, & Friman (1996).

Materials

- *What Is Praise* poster (from Wright, 2002)
- *Examples of Praise* poster (from Wright, 2002)
- *Classroom Reward Chart*

Intervention Steps

Step 1: *Select One or More Group Rewards.* In this intervention, students will earn a point every time that they successfully praise a peer when you call on them. Decide how many points (e.g., 100) the class must earn collectively in order to be able to cash them in for a group reward. (NOTE: You can use the *Classwide Reward Chart* planner form as a simple way to set up a classwide reward system and keep track of points that the class earns.)

Step 2: *Choose Students as Particular Targets for the Intervention.* Pick out at most two students in the room who appear to be socially rejected and who seek peer attention in negative ways. You will later include these students as 'regulars' on your list of students to be praised each day.

Step 3: *Teach Students to Praise Each Other.* Set aside 10-20 minutes to review the fundamentals of praise statements with your students. Before class, post copies of the *What Is Praise?* and *Examples of Praise* posters on the classroom wall.

- Begin the lesson by paying several compliments to students. Vary your praise. For instance, you might compliment individuals for effort (e.g., "Tom, you have the farthest to walk of anyone and yet you are always here on time. Thanks!"), behavior (e.g., "Angelina, I appreciated your helping me to straighten up the room yesterday after class."), and attitude (e.g., "Malik, it is

great to have someone with your upbeat personality in this class.”).

- Introduce the concept of ‘praise’ and define the term for students. You may want to use the following definition from the *What Is Praise?* Poster:

“Today we are going to talk about praise. Praise is when you say something nice about someone. People like to hear compliments about their good behavior, how hard they are working, or their appearance. When we praise others, we should always be positive and always mean what we say.” Ask students to volunteer positive statements that they know their friends like to hear.

- Present sample praise statements. Show students the *Examples of Praise* poster. Tell students that we can use statements like those on the poster to praise others. Read through the items on the poster. Call on students to give their own examples of praise, using items on the poster as a guide. Encourage discussion about when students might use these statements.

Step 4: Introduce the Positive Peer Reporting intervention. Tell students that they will have a chance to earn a group reward. Each day you will announce at the start of class the names of 3-5 students. Tell the students that some of the names will be changed each day, while some names will stay on the list. At the end of every day or class period, you will review the list of chosen students. For each student, you will ask for volunteers to raise their hands to offer praise statements about that person. If you call on a student and that student is able to offer a sincere and appropriate compliment about the person on the list, the class earns a point toward the group reward.

Step 5: Start the Positive Peer Reporting intervention. At the start of each day or class period, select 2-3 student names at random and add them to the names of your target students (from Step 2). Announce the list of names to the class and remind the group that they will be asked to come up with compliments for each student on the list at the end of class. (You may want to write the names of the selected students on the blackboard as an additional memory aid.)

At the end of class, review the list. For each name listed, ask students to raise their hand if they have an appropriate compliment for the student. Once an individual has received 2-3 genuine compliments, move to the next name on the list.

Tally the number of compliments given and add that number of points toward the class group reward. Post the point total earned by the class publicly to generate interest. When the class has met its cumulative point goal, give the group its promised reward and start a new group point chart.

Tips

Use Positive Peer Reporting to Improve the Whole Classroom Climate. As a teacher, you may want to adopt the Positive Peer Reporting strategy in your classroom even if you do not have students who regularly seek negative attention. All students can benefit from the chance to practice giving and receiving compliments. You may also find that, once the intervention is in place, your students begin to be more complimentary toward one another and use fewer putdowns.

Extend Positive Peer Reporting to Less Structured Situations. Once this strategy is in place and effective, you can experiment with extending it to school settings or situations in which there is less structure and direct adult supervision (generalization). You may announce, for example, that the class can earn a certain number of additional bonus points each day for each sincere compliment that you observe being used in cooperative learning groups, free time, while students are in the lunch line, etc. (Of course, you would also remind students that you are the sole judge of whether bonus points are to be given.) You can make this generalization strategy more effective by sharing specific instances in which you saw students giving praise or compliments. (E.g., “I am giving a point to the class because, on the playground, I saw Jacob teaching some of the younger kids how to play freeze tag. He also complimented them on how quickly they learned the rule. I bet it made them feel good to have an older student pay that kind of attention to them.”)

Have ‘Mystery List’ Days. To maintain interest in this intervention, you might occasionally have a ‘mystery list’ day. Tell students that they need to be very observant of their peers that day because you will not be announcing the list of students chosen to be complimented *until the end of the period or school day*.

Troubleshooting

Here are some possible problems that may arise with Positive Peer Reporting, with recommended solutions:

- *Your targeted student feels stigmatized.* Even students who thrive on peer attention may feel uncomfortable about having their name appear daily on the list of students to receive compliments. If you predict that this intervention strategy might be awkward for your target student, consider including his or her name on the list frequently (e.g. randomly on three of every five days) but not every day.
- *Students disguise unfriendly remarks as ‘compliments’.* As with any other intervention strategy, students may initially ‘test the limits’ with Positive Peer Reporting. Sometimes they may make cutting comments about others under the guise of complimenting them (e.g., “I want to praise Sally for taking a bath today.”). If you find that a student is attempting to undermine the program, meet with him or her in private. Share your concern that the student is contributing to a negative classroom atmosphere. Remind the student of the disciplinary consequences that await anyone who insults or belittles a classmate. If the student persists in making hurtful comments after your conference, avoid calling on that person to give praise and be sure to enforce appropriate consequences for any negative remarks.
- *Students offer only vague praise.* If students seem to struggle to give specific or meaningful praise, model for them. For instance, if a student says of a peer, “Joe looked like he was paying attention to what we were doing today”, you might follow up with more specific praise: “Yes, that’s right. In fact, Joe asked several good questions that got everybody talking about the topic. That’s the kind of class participation that gets us involved in learning!” Also, don’t be shy about letting students know when they have praised well. If you highlight and discuss positive student comments that you believe are terrific examples of praise, you can help the entire class to develop standards of quality for judging compliments.

References

Ervin, R.A., Miller, P.M., & Friman, P.C. (1996). Feed the hungry bee: Using positive peer reports to improve the social interactions and acceptance of a socially rejected girl in residential care. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 29*, 251-253.

Wright, J. (2002). *Kids as reading helpers: Peer tutor training manual*. Available: <http://www.interventioncentral.org/htmldocs/interventions/rdngfluency/prtutor.shtml>

What is Praise?

- Praise is when you say something nice about someone.
- People like to hear compliments about their good behavior, how hard they are working, or their appearance.
- When we praise others, we should always be positive and always mean what we say.



Examples of Praise:

- I really like the way that you...
- Thank you for...
- Great work today!
- You look nice this morning!
- You did a very good job of...
- It was great that you...
- I can tell that you are trying really hard. Thanks!



