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Behavior
Specialist



OH, Behave!

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Death to the Behavior Chart! 3 Reasons to Resist the Lure of Punishments and Rewards



We are delighted to have been granted permission by Justin Minkel to share his amazing article about the affects of using behavior charts in the classroom. Although Mr. Minkel teaches 1st grade, we think his observations about the perils of behavior charts are just as applicable to younger children. Follow him at @JustinMinkel
Thank you Justin!

Behavior Tip of the Month:

Try telling a child, "I love being with you!" Use some encouraging words and watch a child's behavior and attitude improve.




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Imagine this: You're sitting in a staff meeting, bored and tired. As your director talks, gesturing at PowerPoint slides, your mind starts to wander. You secretly pull out your phone and check facebook, just for a minute. Suddenly your director's voice rings out. All heads turn to look at you as she barks out your name. "Mr. Minkel! We do **not** check our phones during staff meetings! Go change your color." You stand up, your face flushed with heat and shame, and trudge to the front of the room to change the green square by your name to a yellow "Warning." Walking back to your seat, past the gauntlet of other teachers, you try to avoid their gaze. You jam your phone back into your pocket, where it stays for the rest of the meeting. Still, you find it hard to concentrate on whatever your director is talking about. It feels like everyone in the room is looking at you, whispering and snickering about what just happened. By the time the meeting ends, your director has probably forgotten all about the incident. But when you go to bed that night, you're still thinking about it. The next morning at school your director is exceedingly nice to you, but you feel awkward around her and try to avoid her in the halls.

Why Give Up the Behavior Chart?

During my first decade in the classroom, I used a behavior chart. I thought I had sound reasons. It helped correct behavior in a clear and visible way. It provided a release valve for my frustration, too—better to move that kid's clip down for talking yet again, rather than lose my temper.

Three years ago, though, I lopped off all the negative consequences on the chart. I made that decision because I finally thought to ask my students whether or not we should keep the chart, and I listened to what they said.

"We feel embarrassed when we have to get up and move our clip down in front of everybody."

I haven't gotten rid of class rules. I need the kids to freeze when the lights go off, so I can tell them what to do next. I need them to listen at the rug, and walk quietly in the hall on their way to lunch. I need them to be kind to one another, and respectful toward adults.

I haven't gotten rid of all consequences, either. If a child keeps bothering the kids around her during Writer's Workshop, I

may need to have her sit somewhere else for the next 20 minutes so the other students can get some writing done. At various points this year, I will need to call a child's parents or send a letter home about her misbehavior.

But there is something about the public shaming involved in a behavior chart that makes it loom large in many children's minds—including the "good kids" who almost never have to change their color. When you get reprimanded in front of everyone, it can ruin the next hour or even your whole day.

Back to that imaginary faculty meeting: What if my principal had quietly pulled me aside to remind me not to check Facebook during meetings? I would have felt embarrassed, and I would have apologized. I probably wouldn't have done it again. But that private conversation wouldn't mortify me in front of my colleagues. It wouldn't make future interactions with my principal fraught and uncomfortable.

The first day of class this year, I told my 1st graders, "I don't have a color chart like you had in kindergarten. A few years ago, my students told me that when they

had to change their color, it made them feel sad and embarrassed. I don't want you to feel sad and embarrassed in my class. I want you to feel happy. So you still have to follow the rules, but if you do something wrong, I'll just give you a look, like this." (I demonstrate my best teacher glare, and they giggle.) "Or I'll look for a student sitting near you who is doing the right thing, and I'll tell them they're doing a good job—that's a clue to look and see what you should be doing. If that doesn't work, you and I will need to have a conversation, but just the two of us will talk about it—you won't get in trouble in front of the whole class."

There are plenty of moments each week when I feel the pull and lure of the behavior chart. My class this year isn't easy. I have 25 6-year-olds, every one of whom speaks English as a second language. Most are poor, and two are autistic. This first week of school was exhausting, and their behavior wasn't perfect. But for brand-new 1st graders, they were pretty good. In fact, they were better behaved than my students from years when I used a behavior chart. Why?

I. I'm not doing anything to damage my relationship with each child.

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I didn't embarrass any of my students that first week. I had plenty of conversations, often the same conversation twice in an hour, about what they need to do and why. But in the years when I used a behavior chart, simply moving a child from "green" to "yellow" could trigger an outburst or tears. That color change often gave students the sense that I didn't like them, or that they were bad kids. A private conversation is different. It allows a child to keep his dignity.

2. I'm able to use my time for better things.

Teaching 1st grade feels like playing "Whack-a-Mole" at the county fair. Just when Alicia starts crying because she misses her mom, Carlos comes up to ask me for help with buttoning his too-small jeans. As I'm wrapping a Band-Aid around Jonathan's staple-pierced finger, Felipe barfs on the rug. Meanwhile, I'm trying to make sure the other 24 1st graders understand the math game I showed them a few minutes ago. I need to use every minute to teach, listen, observe, and take care of all the individual needs of a class of young children throws my way in any given day. I don't have extra time to waste moving down clips, bestowing and taking away fake money, or awarding table points.

3. I can focus on why the misbehavior is happening.

Here's the bewildering thing to me about the prevalence of behavioral systems: *They don't seem to work very well.* In April, the same kids are still getting their clips moved down and missing 10 minutes of recess every day. The same misbehavior is still happening class-wide. Students are distracted at the rug, talking when they should be working, and driving each other crazy on a daily basis. Why? Because kids are kids, and school isn't designed to let them move around as much as they need to. Because they

need to be taught *how* and *why* to do the right thing, not just bribed and threatened into doing it. We need to teach them how and why to listen, to resolve their own conflicts, to calm down when they're angry, to set specific goals and work toward achieving them. We also need to take a close look at our own teaching. When my students don't act right, it's often because I'm talking too much, expecting them to sit still for too long, or giving them work that is either boring, confusing, or too hard at this point in the year.

Long-Lasting Change Takes Time

Threatening a punishment or promising a reward will make a child behave for a few minutes. But helping them develop an intrinsic love of learning will last the rest of the year and the rest of their lives. We don't have to throw out all our systems to begin moving in that direction. We can keep our consequences, but stop imposing them in front of the other kids. We can hang onto the table points and treasure box, but make sure we're also doing all those things that will lead to longer-lasting change. It's not easy. At the end of the year, I'll still be drying tears, reminding kids to take deep breaths, and pulling them aside for one-on-one conversations. But over time, they become kinder and more capable. That change is gradual, like all true miracles, but it lasts. Being a teacher is incredibly hard work. But so is being 5 years old, or a 5th grader. These little humans in our class don't need more rewards and punishments. They need school to be a place that welcomes and nurtures their whole selves. They need our patience, our best teaching, and our love. They will get there, with time. We will too. We're all works in progress.

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LISTEN TO MUSIC

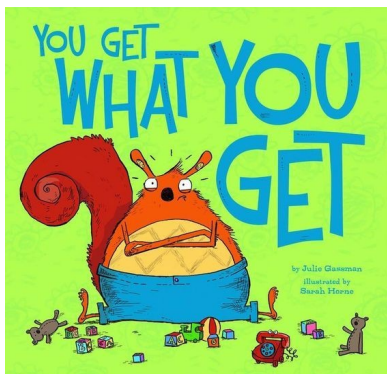


For durability and repetitive use, print on cardstock paper and laminate.

NEVER HELP A CHILD WITH A TASK AT WHICH HE FEELS HE CAN SUCCEED.

MARIA MONTESSORI

Social/Emotional Book Nook



In this delightful book, Melvin throws fit after fit when he doesn't get what he wants. He must learn how to deal with disappointment. Apparently this is tolerated at home and he always gets his way, but at school the rule is "You get what you get if you don't throw a fit." Melvin learns to control his behavior at school pretty quickly and when he spills the beans at home, his parents take on a new philosophy as well. Written by Julie Gassman, this book is most appropriate for ages four to six years of age.

Questions or Comments?



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