Reaching Out

A report series published by the Initiative for Child and Family Studies

Roosevelt University

Issue One

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In This Issue:

Editor's Welcome

Steven A. Meyers

Welcome to the first issue of *Reaching Out*. This report series is designed to summarize research in helpful terms for professionals who work with children and families. Sponsored by the Initiative for Child and Family Studies at Roosevelt University, our first issue focuses on the needs of elementary school teachers.

The first article, written by Wayne Jones, describes the effects of poverty on children. He not only outlines how poverty presents challenges in terms of children's basic needs and academic achievement, but he also suggests concrete ways in which teachers can help. This topic is especially important for teachers who work in the Chicago Public Schools system, given that 85% of their students live below the poverty line.

In the second article, Kristie Byers presents a wealth of research-supported techniques that teachers can use to prevent or handle student disruptions in class. She describes ways to structure classes in terms of constructive rules and routines, as well as how to use reinforcement, modeling, response cost, and time-outs.

We hope that *Reaching Out* provides you with relevant information and helpful ideas. Feel free to contact us to provide feedback or ideas for future issues.

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Poverty and Children: How Teachers Can Help

Wayne Jones

Summary

Children need help building the resilience needed to escape from poverty. Communities, institutions, families, and individuals must work together to provide health and safety, to value and encourage competence in education, and to help children develop strong character, flexible language, and varied coping strategies. Schools and teachers have a special role in assisting children in poverty. You can help students better their chances for sustaining physical and mental health, for training in valuable and interesting occupations, and for partaking in the rich social and cultural activities that often enhance life. Poverty has many effects on children – some visible, some not. This article identifies ways in which poverty may affect your students and suggests actions to take in light of this situation.

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Improving Problem Behaviors in Your Classroom

Kristie Y. Byers

Summary

This article describes a series of steps to improve problem behaviors. These include:

1. *Define the behavior to be changed*
2. *Specify a good, alternative behavior that you want the child to exhibit*
3. *Determine appropriate reinforcements to be used based on the child's surroundings, interests, and needs*
4. *Apply punishments after all else has failed*

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Poverty and Children

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Basic Needs

Students get little from school if their basic needs are not met. They need adequate health care, food, water, clean air, and sleep. They need the safety of shelter, clothing, and protection from injury and violence.

Health

Inadequate access to healthcare is one of the most serious problems associated with low socioeconomic status (SES). As a result, a child's well-being can be threatened by injury, disease, and other medical conditions.

The health and lives of students are at risk if they are not treated immediately for acute conditions and trauma. Children with untreated or infected wounds need immediate medical attention. Those with fevers, severe chills, sustained coughing, cramps, diarrhea, or vomiting also need immediate care.

Communicable diseases similarly need immediate attention to provide treatment and to prevent their spread to other students. These conditions range from flu to head lice and include measles, chicken pox, mumps, conjunctivitis ("pink eye"), and ringworm. Treatments vary by condition, but finding the safest way to isolate students is as important for affected students as for their classmates. Sending children home may not work if they lack good supervision or if there is little prospect for medical treatment. Usually schools have policies for such circumstances. If not, contact a hospital or the public health resources of the community or local government. If you are constrained and need to take temporary action, take an objective approach to isolating the student, help the rest of your class understand the issues, preserve the student's dignity and self-respect, and minimize any fears that arise.

Hunger

Hunger, poor nutrition, and dehydration can make students distracted, inattentive, or disruptive. If chronic, these conditions can lead to cognitive, behavioral, or emotional problems. A student's long-term memory can be affected by poor nutrition. Poor nutrition can also reduce a child's desire to master skills and knowledge.

Hunger and dehydration can be treated immediately with food and liquids. If you see a pattern of such conditions, supply the child's parents with information about good parenting practices and nutrition, or connect the family with an organization or agency that can help them solve problems with food aid, money management, or parenting.

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Sleep

Without sufficient sleep, students can fall asleep or be inattentive in class. The particular cause of a student's sleeplessness can include noise in the home, urban traffic, neighborhood disturbances, medical problems, or psychological problems such as nightmares or various fears. Ask the sleepy students, parents, or primary caregivers about the causes. Determine what resources are available and what approach can help can help the student get adequate rest. Sleeplessness, if chronic, jeopardizes a student's physical and mental health.

Safety

In general, matters of safety—adequate housing and clothing, freedom from belligerent threats, crime, and accidental or violent injuries—are beyond your influence at school. When inadequate housing or clothing puts a student at risk to hot and cold weather, you can help engage local agencies or social workers to help solve the problem.

Schools have an interest and obligation to provide a safe environment at school. Supervising and controlling access to facilities are important and usual methods of monitoring school safety. Cultivating respect and trust between staff and students can also help create a safe environment.

Sensitivity to students' disclosures helps build trust and strengthen the helping relationship needed for successful intervention in these dangerous situations.

Teachers can make a difference

Among the elements of your students' lives, your classroom is the one you can influence most. Your relationship with the class and your connection with each student can have a lifelong impact. You also serve the safety needs of your students by reporting signs of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Visible cuts, burns, and bruises of physical abuse are the evidence required in reports to the police, but asking about these signs of abuse is difficult when students are not forthcoming about the causes of injuries. The signs of sexual and psychological abuse are often physically invisible. Sudden negative changes in mood or academic performance might signal the start of such abuse. Withdrawal, depression, and uncharacteristic aggression are always worth looking into, and asking questions might uncover abuse that can be remedied by timely intervention. Threats of further harm are typical in all forms of abuse.

Sensitivity to students' disclosures helps build trust and strengthen the helping relationship needed for successful intervention in these dangerous situations. Your most useful deterrent against sustained abuse is to nurture that long-term, trust relationship. A student who trusts you may feel safe enough to talk about an abusive situation and seek your help.

Poverty and Achievement in School

Income, education, and occupation

Three demographic factors that pertain to poverty strongly correlate with cognitive development and academic

achievement: family income, parents' education, and parents' occupations. Your options for controlling family income are limited, unless you or your school participates in job referral or job training programs. The other two factors are more subtle.

For your current students, you cannot influence the past education of their parents. However, keeping children in school and encouraging further education can increase the likelihood of improving the SES of your students and their children.

You also have little influence over parents' occupations. However, one study has shown that mothers whose jobs had varied activities and required problem-solving provided increased positive emotion, support, and stimulating experiences and materials for their children. These children also had higher verbal skills. The parenting of people with challenging jobs reflects the expectations, values, and communication skills they use at work. To take advantage of this connection, you can invite parents with interesting jobs to share their experiences in job education programs or career-related study units.

Encouraging language competence

Another related, winning strategy is to demand verbal and written language competence in every school subject. No one escapes from the requirement of language competence for job advancement. Without it, applicants cannot qualify for many jobs with advancement potential.

Language training should not eliminate or disrespect social dialects, such as Black English/Ebonics, Spanglish, or pidgeon English. You can help students succeed by teaching them to use the cues in other people's speech as guides for word choice and sentence construction. Flexibility is the key. Adapting speech to specific situations requires fluency beyond what works in the neighborhood.

Stimulation with materials and experiences

In a world with so many factors beyond a teacher's control, you can still help students open their minds by providing materials and experiences they may lack. You can visit libraries, laboratories, government offices, and museums of art, science, and history, attend cultural performances (dance, music, theater, and readings), and participate in workshops, projects focused on environmental, political, cultural, or social programs. These activities help students see that education expands their experience and enriches their lives.

About the Author

Wayne Jones is currently enrolled in the MA program in clinical professional psychology at Roosevelt University. He also holds a PhD in English and American Language and Literature from Harvard University. His previous writings have included articles about the life and works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, books of poetry, and software technical documentation.

The suggestions in this article are based on the following resources. We recommend them for additional information on this topic.

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Improving Problem Behaviors

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In today's classrooms, teachers encounter students who are diverse in many ways. Students differ racially, ethnically, culturally, intellectually, and emotionally. One of the other areas in which children vary—behaviorally—can have a large impact on the overall effectiveness of instruction and the well-being of all students in a class. This article summarizes research-supported behavior management practices that can provide solutions for changing behaviors that interfere with the teaching process or disrupt the normal running of a classroom.

Structuring Your Classroom for Success

Typically, classroom management has focused on reducing negative behavior, but proactive classroom management strategies are generally more effective.

The first technique is to ensure that there are clear, appropriate rules and procedures for the classroom.

Students need to understand clearly what behaviors are expected of them. Rules and procedures of the classroom should be short and concise so that they are understood by all students. They should be introduced at the beginning of the school year and every effort should be made to include students in the rule making. It is also a good idea to make parents aware of the classroom rules so that they can be reinforced at home.

Second, teachers should employ predictable routines throughout the day in the classroom.

Teachers can often prevent acting-out behaviors in such situations by providing predictable routines. Based on the

nature of the school or classroom, this could mean different things. A teacher may only be able to provide daily, weekly, or monthly routines for students. To the extent possible, there should be something that is predictable and regularly available to students.

Third, classroom disruptive behaviors can be prevented through frequent monitoring.
Sometimes students misbehave because there is no one available to observe and correct the problem behaviors. Thus, these behaviors persist because the proper consequences are not given or the student is not taught acceptable, alternative behaviors. When teachers frequently monitor their students, they are able to observe the behavior of all students and address concerns immediately.

Finally, negative behaviors can be prevented when students are provided with consistent reinforcement for acceptable, positive behaviors.
Students generally like to please their teachers. If they are consistently rewarded for engaging in appropriate behaviors, those behaviors will most likely be repeated in the future. Even a child's attempt at appropriate behavior should be rewarded. Types of reinforcement for positive behaviors can include verbal praise, positive feedback, a note home to parents, a tangible object, or extra privileges or duties within the classroom.

The ABCs of Behavior Management

Behavior management is an approach for changing behavior, either by teaching new behaviors or changing existing ones. It utilizes rewards and punishments to reinforce or gradually decrease behaviors. Behavior management techniques have been proven useful in teaching children important life skills, social skills, academic skills, anger management skills, and vocational skills.

Defining problem behaviors

Defining problem behavior in concrete terms is necessary for changing it. For example, stating that "Melina is hostile" does not precisely explain what she does that is inappropriate. A more concrete definition of the problem would be "Melina hits other students in the classroom when she is angry." Problematic behaviors should be defined in observable, measurable terms so that if you were absent and another teacher took your place, that teacher would agree with you on the specified challenging behavior.

It is also generally a good idea to identify a positive behavior that will replace the problem behavior. Using the previous example, an alternative behavior to hitting others would be to allow Melina will draw a picture at her desk when she is angry. Melina will be unable to hit other students if she is busy drawing at her desk.

Increasing desirable behavior

You have probably heard the phrase, "Catch them being good" many times. This phrase conveys the idea of focusing on the positive to increase appropriate behaviors. For example, rather than saying, "Stop grabbing toys from Christen," state "I saw you share the toys with Christen, that was great." Also focus on obedience, not defiance. Instead of asking "Why don't you listen?" state "You put your books in your desk so quickly when asked."

Reinforcement

The overall goal of reinforcement is to lead children to develop internal motivation to behave appropriately. But before they can develop their own form of reinforcement, it is often necessary for adults sometimes to provide it for them.

Positive reinforcement involves strengthening a behavior by immediately following it with a reward or something that the student likes. For example, calling on a student with a raised hand or offering verbal praise could both be used as positive rewards. In general, teachers should try to reward a student immediately after the appropriate behavior.

Appropriate behavior can be rewarded through social reinforcers, special activities, and tangible reinforcers. Social reinforcers are used most frequently and consist of providing children with nonverbal or verbal praise. Giving a child a thumbs up sign or using an expression like "Good job!" are very effective ways to reinforce good behavior. Children have a way of discerning when adults do not mean what they say, so make sure verbal rewards are always genuine and not forced or artificial.

> It can be risky to implement a behavior plan without defining the specific behavior and the details surrounding the behavior.

Children can also be rewarded for engaging in appropriate behavior through special activities such as selecting a book to read, serving snack, or assisting the teacher in other duties. Tangible rewards such as happy faces or stickers also give students concrete evidence of their good behavior. Although effective, teachers should be careful not to use tangible rewards too liberally. If used too often, some students may come to demand rewards from adults in order to be compliant. Reinforcers used in behavior management can be identified through observing the child or by directly asking the child about his/her preferences.

Modeling

Modeling involves students learning desirable behavior by observing and imitating other students engaging in the behavior. Modeling can range from having one student observe another walking quietly in the hallway to a student watching a video on sharing. In order for modeling to be effective, the teacher must determine if the child is able to imitate the model, reward the child for modeling, and choose a model that the student admires and is likely to imitate. Overall, children are more likely to model behavior that results in positive consequences. Not only should teachers reward children after successful imitation of the model, but also continue to reward the model for the appropriate behavior as well.

Decreasing Undesirable Behavior

Traditionally, punishment has been the most commonly used technique to reduce inappropriate behavior. Punishment (e.g., reprimanding or removing a privilege) is unpleasant for the child, and as a result will reduce the likelihood that the child will engage in the inappropriate behavior in the future. If done incorrectly, there are several possible negative consequences, so punishment should be well thought out before being implemented. As such, we offer the following suggestions.

First, students should be forewarned about the negative consequences of their misbehavior and should be given opportunities to stop or avoid the misbehavior before any punishment is administered. Second, punishment should be appropriate to the child's developmental level and misbehavior. This ensures that children can make the connection between the punishment and the misbehavior. Third, to ensure effectiveness, especially with younger children, the punishment should immediately follow the misbehavior. Fourth, the intensity of the punishment should match the behavior. If the punishment is too mild, it will not be effective, but if it is too harsh, it has an abusive effect or may cause other problems. Finally, punishments should be consistent and predictable. The following types of punishments are listed in the order of their recommended use.

Ignoring

Ignoring can be a useful way to communicate to a student that you do not want him/her to do certain things. It avoids engaging in arguments and clearly shows that you are not pleased. Ignoring eliminates all physical, verbal, or eye contact. Undesirable behaviors should only be ignored if they do not threaten the health and safety of the children involved. For example, a teacher should never ignore a student who is physically harming another student. Ignoring is most useful for attention-seeking behavior such as whining or temper tantrums.

Response cost

Response cost involves students losing something that they have already earned. If a student has earned a privilege for good behavior he/she may risk losing that privilege if he/she engages in inappropriate behavior. In the classroom, chips, tokens, sticker charts, or point systems are used in response cost programs. When applying response cost: remove the item quickly and quietly, let the student know what he/she is losing and why, how he/she might earn it back, and what will happen if he/she continues to misbehave. Similar to other forms of punishment, the penalty should match the misbehavior.

Time-out

Time-out generally excludes children from the opportunity to participate with others and receive any kind of positive reinforcement. Although this is a well-known technique, it is often over-used and misused by classroom teachers.

Time-out is best understood as a continuum. The least restrictive forms of time-out consist of removing certain reinforcing materials or activities from the child for a short period of time. The next step involves moving the child to another part of the classroom where he/she is required to merely watch everyone else. The most restrictive version is time-out outside of the classroom where the child is not allowed to see the classroom or interact with others. In order to be effective, time-out should be boring or something the child definitely does not like to do. Time-out will be ineffective if the child prefers time-out to classroom activities.

The duration of time-out varies in accordance to their age. For example, a six-year-old would be placed in time-out for six minutes. If the child continues to misbehave at any time during time-out, the time is restarted.

Although helpful techniques and strategies have been provided in this article, *there are no solutions that fit every type of misbehavior*. It can be risky to implement a behavior plan without defining the specific behavior and the details surrounding the behavior. An effective behavior program may undergo several revisions before a behavior is learned or extinguished. Teachers have to be patient and persistent when implementing behavior management in the classroom.

The suggestions in this article are based on the following resources. We recommend them for additional information on this topic.

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About the Initiative for Child and Family Studies

The Initiative for Child and Family Studies draws on the expertise of faculty at Roosevelt University who have scholarly interests in children's well-being to:

- Encourage students to learn about child development from an interdisciplinary perspective in our certificate programs.
- Promote efforts to improve the lives of children by facilitating volunteer work.
- Deepen the connection between the University and our community by sharing information with professionals who work with children.

The work of the Initiative reflects Roosevelt University's historic commitment to social justice and its mission to serve as an intellectual resource to the community.

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