

# Making the Three Ps Easier: Praise, Proximity, and Precorrection

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**M**r. Randall's first graders have trouble settling down and finding their seats after coming in from recess. Sometimes it takes him almost ten minutes to get their attention to start the next lesson of the day. This is what a typical transition from recess looks like in Mr. Randall's classroom:

As recess ends, the students line up on the playground and walk in a single file back to their classrooms. When Mr. Randall's students approach his door, they speed up and rush through the door in a jumbled fashion. As they spill into the classroom, several students begin to run to their desks as others wander around the classroom with no particular destination in mind. While the students were headed back to the classroom from the playground, Mr. Randall was preparing for their reading lesson, but as he hears the commotion, he gets up from behind his desk and makes his way toward the front of the room to direct students to their desks. The majority of the students cannot hear him over their own collective noise. Mr. Randall raises his voice and tells the students, "Freeze!" They freeze. He then directs them to go to their seats immediately to get ready for reading. The students follow directions and go to their desks, but by this point they are riled up and are having a hard time keeping quiet.

The above scenario is not only representative of the behavior after recess of Mr. Randall's first grade students, but it is also representative of many other classrooms as well. This example will be discussed in further detail later in the paper to illustrate positive methods of dealing with inappropriate student behavior.

Schools today are trying to include all students in general education. The educational trend toward including students with disabilities in classrooms has been on the rise over the last 30 years. Supporters of inclusion state many expected benefits of inclusion such as: (a) a reduction in the negative feelings toward labeling; (b) an increase in friendships between disabled and nondisabled students; and (c) the opportunity for students with disabilities to learn appropriate classroom behaviors from their peers. Along with the benefits of inclusion comes an unfortunate drawback: an increase in classroom behavior problems (Heflin & Bullock, 1999). Sutherland, Wehby, and Copeland (2000) stated that teachers today are faced with more challenging behaviors than their predecessors in regard to behavior management. Teachers themselves have stated that they are concerned with their ability to meet the needs of students with behavior problems in general education classrooms (Heflin & Bullock, 1999).

Many behavior management strategies are available to teachers, but few are proven effective through rigorous empirical research; at the same time, many evidence-based practices are overlooked (Sutherland et al., 2000). Lewis and Bullock (2004) identified four research-based practices that improve social behaviors in students with behavior disorders: (1) teacher praise; (2) high rates of opportunities for students to respond; (3) clear instructional strategies; and (4) positive behavior supports. This paper will specifically address student praise and two types of positive behavior supports: proximity and precorrection.

## Why Use Praise?

Praise is a useful classroom tool for several reasons. First, it is free. Teachers spend enough of their earnings on rewards, activities, and materials, so it is refreshing to make use of an effective form of behavior management that does not deplete teachers' savings. Second, when used correctly, praise functions to improve teacher-student relationships. Baker (1999) found that students generally like to receive positive feedback, and they rated their relationships with teachers higher when their teachers provided consistent and genuine praise.

Besides being free and improving teacher-student relationships, praise has been shown to both increase on-task behavior and reduce problem behavior (Becker, Madsen, Arnold, & Thomas, 1967; Ferguson & Houghton, 1992; Hall, Lund, & Jackson, 1968; Kirby & Shields, 1972; Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968; Thomas, Becker, & Armstrong, 1968). Researchers have investigated the effect of praise on problem behaviors such as out-of-seat behavior, noise-making, talking to neighbors, blurting out answers, noncompliance, disrespect, and aggression. Through studies in real classrooms, they found that all of these behaviors could be reduced through the appropriate use of praise. This means that since students spend less time causing classroom disruptions, they may spend more time engaged in academic learning.

Research suggests that praise not only increases appropriate behaviors but also prevents further deterioration of students with inappropriate

behaviors. Van Acker and Grant (1996) expressed concern over some teachers' failure to attend to desired social behaviors exhibited by students with behavior problems. They suggested that some teachers might unintentionally increase inappropriate behavior through the absence of praise following appropriate behaviors. Fry (1983) found that infrequent praise combined with high rates of reprimands led to a deteriorating cycle of worsening student behavior. Fry suggested that students with chronic behavior problems were in need of more praise than other students.

### How to Use Praise

Now that we have determined why praise is a necessary element in a classroom, we need to examine how to use praise for the optimal effect. According to several sources (Gootman, 2001; Hall & Hall, 1998; Mercer & Mercer, 1998), good praise involves a number of important features:

1. Praise should adhere to student preference for public or private recognition. Some students may be embarrassed by public praise, whereas other students love the spotlight.
2. Praise should adhere to the "if-then" rule. If the student is behaving in the desired manner, then the teacher praises the student. Teachers need to avoid providing praise in situations where the student has not met the requirements for praise.
3. Praise should frequently include student names. Using student names will provide a sense of personalization.
4. Praise should be descriptive and specific. Students are capable of performing more than one behavior at a time; therefore, it is important to be specific to avoid confusion about which behavior you are praising.
5. Praise should be genuine to convey that the teacher really means

what she/he says. Students are perceptive and will know when the teacher is not being truthful. False praise may actually cause the student to be distrustful of the teacher's opinion.

6. Praise should be varied. Students may tune out praise if it is always the same.
7. Praise should flow with the class or individual activities to avoid causing disruptions, which may lead students off-task.

### Why Use Proximity?

Teacher/student proximity is reported in the literature as an effective classroom management strategy for keeping students on task, making smooth transitions from one task to another, and decreasing playground problems at recess (Colvin, Sugai, Good, & Lee, 1997; Lewis, Colvin, & Sugai, 2000; McIntosh, Herman, Stanford, McGraw, & Florence, 2004). Teacher/student proximity has also been used as a way to effectively include students with emotional and behavioral disorders in general education settings (Conroy, Asmus, Ladwig, Sellers, & Valcante, 2004; DePry & Sugai, 2002; Gunter, Shores, Jack, Rasmussen, & Flowers, 1995). This

classroom management strategy not only heightens the teacher's awareness of the classroom but also increases the involvement level of the students.

There are a number of ways that proximity contributes to a well-managed classroom and decreases problem behavior in students. First of all, when a teacher is circulating around the room interacting with and monitoring her students, she is, by definition, more engaged and involved with her class. She can see if students are on task, if they are in need of help, and she can also see situations that are potentially volatile and prevent problems before they occur. By moving around the room and mingling with her students, a teacher shows that she is available to help if necessary and that she cares about them. It also conveys to students that the teacher is in control of the classroom (McIntosh et al., 2004).

Proximity is also helpful during individual seatwork when a teacher circulates around the room looking for students who are struggling or who may not understand their assignments and need teacher assistance. Furthermore, an attentive and engaged teacher who is always just a few steps away can decrease the occurrences of challenging behavior in a student with behavior problems (Gunter et al., 1995). For students with challenging behavior, a teacher can make her circulation patterns random, keeping her eye on the challenging students; because her movements are unpredictable, these students will be less likely to engage in inappropriate behavior (McIntosh et al., 2004).

Proximity is also an effective strategy to use on the playground to decrease problem behaviors and increase safety for students during recess (Lewis et al., 2000). When teachers and recess monitors use proximity as a playground-management strategy, they are more available for students because they walk around the playground, mingle with students, and avoid extended conversations with other adults.

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Proximity also creates smoother transitions from recess back into the classroom as teachers accompany students to their rooms, prompting them and preparing them to settle into their seats quickly.

### How to Use Proximity

Proximity is essentially using one's presence to discourage inappropriate behaviors. The following is a list of important features to remember when using proximity:

1. Teacher/student proximity should limit the amount of time that teachers spend seated behind their desks. Walking up and down the rows or around desk groupings makes students aware of the teacher's presence in the classroom.
2. Teacher/student proximity works best when the teacher knows which students are most likely to act out in class, which students are likely to daydream, and which students provoke their peers. Teachers need to know their students so they can tailor their classroom circulation to prevent problems before they occur.
3. Teacher/student proximity should target potential problem locations. For example, if problems happen in the reading corner at the end of a math lesson, the teacher needs to increase her circulation of that area during math instruction.
4. Circulation of the room should be unpredictable so that the same route is not followed every time. This will help keep students on task more because they never know when the teacher is going to walk their way to check their progress.
5. Teacher/student proximity should bring a sense of order to the classroom as opposed to a sense of oppressive supervision. Excessive circulation around high-risk students may make them feel uncomfortable if the teacher is hovering over them.

6. Pair proximity with other effective behavior management strategies like praise (e.g., catch students behaving appropriately and reward them with praise). Stop by a student's desk and say, "Thank you, Ashley, for working so hard and staying on task. You are doing an excellent job!"

### Why Use Precorrection?

Precorrection is the opposite of correction in that it is proactive. Precorrection is associated with what happens directly *before* an expected behavior, whereas correction is associated with what happens directly *after* an inappropriate behavior (Colvin, Sugai, & Patching, 1993). For example, if the expected behavior when lining up for lunch is for students to stay in their seats until called, then a correction would occur after students performed the inappropriate behavior of getting out of their seats before they were called. The teacher would correct the students by telling them to return to their seats. When using precorrection, the teacher would remind students of the appropriate behavior before announcing lunchtime.

The proactive nature of precorrection has several associated positive outcomes. First, precorrection decreases the amount of time teachers spend in redirection and correction after mistakes and inappropriate behaviors have occurred. Once students get off track, it takes significantly more of the teacher's time and energy to get them back on task than it would have to remind students of the appropriate expectation at the beginning.

Second, precorrection prevents repetition of the wrong behavior. In order to promote good behavior, students should be practicing the appropriate behavior. Repetition of inappropriate behaviors only increases the chance that the inappropriate behavior will occur again. Instead of the corrective attitude of giving directions and then waiting to see if

students make mistakes, precorrection preempts inappropriate behaviors by stopping them before they happen.

Third, precorrection sets up situations in which teachers can use praise to reinforce the appropriate behavior (Colvin et al., 1993). As mentioned earlier, praise increases the chance of appropriate behavior in the future; therefore, any opportunities to set up the use of praise should be taken.

Finally, precorrection creates a more positive climate in the classroom because less punitive methods are required. The downward spiral of inappropriate behaviors and corrections leads to more inappropriate behaviors and more corrections; on the other hand, the upward spiral of appropriate behavior and reinforcement leads to more appropriate behaviors (Fry, 1983).

### How to Use Precorrection

Precorrection is the artful use of reminders and prompts *before* setting students to completing a task. According to Colvin et al., (1993) there are seven steps to precorrection that are necessary to ensure its effectiveness:

1. **Identify when and where the predictable behavior occurs (context).** If the teacher is unfamiliar with the context in which the problem behavior occurs, she/he should take some time to observe the student and take notes on the behavior to determine when and where the behavior occurs.
2. **Specify the appropriate behavior the student should use in place of the inappropriate behavior.** For example, if a student calls out to get teacher attention, an appropriate alternative behavior would be for the student to raise his/her hand. (Remember, when choosing alternative behaviors: First, the new behavior must be observable; in other words, it must be something that the

teacher can watch the student do. Second, the new behavior must be incompatible to, or the opposite of, the current behavior. Finally, the new behavior must fulfill the same purpose as the old behavior.)

3. **To enhance the effects of precorrection, change the environment or classroom routines in which the inappropriate behavior occurs.** For example, if a student plays with the pencil sharpener on the wall beside his desk, move the pencil sharpener so that he cannot access it when seated.
4. **Practice the appropriate behavior to teach the student what is expected of him/her.** Precorrection will not work if the student does not know what the appropriate behavior is.
5. **Reward the appropriate behavior.** One important thing to remember is that the new, appropriate behavior is in competition with the old, inappropriate behavior; therefore, you need to praise the new behavior to ensure its continuation.
6. **Provide prompts for the appropriate behavior.** Prompts provide students with reminders about what is expected of them before they act. A teacher might use prompts such as "Remember to raise your hand" or "When you get in line, remember to keep your hands to yourself."
7. **Monitor student progress.** It is important to collect data regularly to determine the effectiveness of precorrection plans. The data collection can be as simple as making tick marks on a piece of tape that represent the inappropriate behaviors and the appropriate behaviors.

### How Do the Three P's Work Together?

Praise, precorrection, and proximity all work in isolation, but they are even more effective when

used in tandem. For example, the use of proximity allows a teacher to prevent classroom problems not only by virtue of her/his physical presence, but also by being in the position of offering individual praise or precorrection to students (Gunter et al., 1995). During large-group discussions where hand-raising is the preferred indicator for readiness to answer questions, a teacher who is walking around the room can gently and unobtrusively remind students—who might otherwise talk out—to raise their hands. A gentle reminder of, "What do we do if we want to answer a question or talk in class?" can prompt a student to raise his hand and decrease undesirable behavior. Furthermore, the use of teacher/student proximity is an excellent way for teachers to "catch" students who are on task, doing their work, and behaving appropriately. This is an important part of maintaining a well-run classroom in which students get rewarded with praise for good behavior.

The opening scenario provided an example of a typical classroom problem. Mr. Randall was having trouble organizing his first graders so that they were ready to move on to their reading lesson. Mr. Randall decided to correct the problem by teaching his students how to make smoother transitions.

First, he explained the problem to his students and gave them a rationale for why smoother transitions were more desirable. Then, he showed the students what a smooth transition from recess to the classroom looked like and described and modeled the behavior he expected from them. Finally, he had the class practice making smooth transitions from recess to class.

The next time the students went to recess, Mr. Randall walked around the playground and stopped and talked to his students, reminding them of how they were going to make a smooth transition back to class. When the class lined up to come in from recess, he walked up and down the line and asked, "Who can tell us how we enter

the classroom after recess and what we do when we get inside?" A couple of students raised their hands and explained to the other students what was expected of them and how to make the smooth transition from recess to class. Mr. Randall thanked the students who contributed answers and agreed with their description of how to make a smooth transition. While the students filed quickly and quietly to their seats into the classroom, Mr. Randall stood next to the line. After the students had all taken their seats, Mr. Randall thanked the whole class for following directions and making the transition a success.

Before employing any of the discussed techniques, Mr. Randall first taught his students the expected behavior so that they would know what to do when entering the classroom after recess. In order to ensure that the students used the newly learned pattern of behaviors when entering the classroom, Mr. Randall combined the three discussed techniques of praise, proximity, and precorrection. Mr. Randall used precorrection at two points before class time: he walked around the playground offering individual precorrective statements, and he also carried out a quick, whole-class precorrection while walking up and down the student line before returning to class. Then, Mr. Randall stood next to the line and used proximity to help keep the students on track while they entered the classroom. Lastly, Mr. Randall offered individual praise to students who answered his questions about how to enter the classroom, and he also gave praise to the entire class for transitioning smoothly into the classroom.

The recent push to include all students with disabilities into the general education setting has led to an increased need to effectively curb problem behaviors. The primary emphasis in the general education classroom is often placed on academics. However, to be able to focus on academics, teachers and students must



confront behavior-related issues. The combined use of praise, proximity, and precorrection can: (1) reduce problem behaviors; (2) prevent the likelihood of recurring problem behaviors; (3) increase academic engagement time; and (4) increase the number of positive interactions between students and teachers. The result is an overall improvement in classroom climate, which is beneficial for *both* students and teachers.

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