

12 Strategies for Supporting Student Behavior

By **Diane Myers, Ph.D.**, Senior Vice President, Integrated Support, Specialized Education Services, Inc. (SESI)

As the new school year begins, our aim is to foster a welcoming and supportive environment. It's important to be **proactive in supporting student behavior by promptly responding to both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors**. These strategies will assist you in effectively supporting classroom behavior.

Responding to Appropriate Behavior

Let's refocus our attention and preparation at the beginning of the year on fostering appropriate behavior and effective responses.

1 Clearly define our expectations for student behavior across different routines.

Example: "Being safe" (expectation) during "transition" (routine) = "keeping hands and feet to self" or "walking on the right side of the hallway."



2 Explicitly teach those behavioral expectations to students, and provide frequent reminders.

For example, before a transition, ask, "What does being safe in the hallway look like?"

3 Respond when students demonstrate those behaviors.

Acknowledge and reinforce behaviors that meet our expectations, as they are the ones we want to see repeated. By applying the principle of reinforcement, which states that behaviors followed by pleasant results are likely to be repeated, we can encourage students to continue meeting our expectations.



Strategies for Responding to Appropriate Behavior

Schools and classrooms can establish responses for responding to appropriate behavior. These strategies may include:

4 Specific and contingent praise.

When a behavior meets our expectations, respond with a verbal statement that includes the behavior and a positive comment. ("Josh, thank you for sitting quietly while waiting to begin.") Behavior-specific praise is an efficient, effective way to reinforce appropriate behaviors.

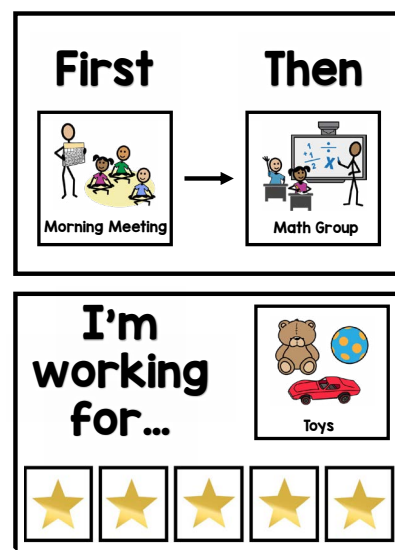


5:1 Aim for a ratio of 5:1 – five specific positive statements for every error correction.

5 Overt recognition of appropriate behavior.

This strategy can increase the likelihood of those behaviors occurring again and includes evidence-based practices such as:

- **Developing a token economy**, where certain behaviors result in a reinforcer (e.g., actual tokens, points, stickers, tally marks). Once a level is reached, those “tokens” can be exchanged for backup reinforcers that are valuable to the student (e.g., time with friends, preferred seating).
- **Creating a behavior contract** for students who may need more support to meet expectations. Identify what the student should do (not what they shouldn't do) and what they will earn when meeting those expectations.
- **Making a plan for fading** that involves requiring “more” behavior to earn rewards (e.g., longer duration, more sophisticated behavior) or transitioning to more natural reinforcers (e.g., praise, social rewards, leadership opportunities).



Responding to Contextually Inappropriate Behavior

While establishing, defining, teaching, prompting, and reinforcing expected behaviors can help prevent inappropriate behavior, students may still make mistakes. Here are ways to respond to such behavior:

- 6 Maintain a supportive and helpful mindset when addressing behavior errors. Avoid assuming that inappropriate behavior is due to a lack of willingness to engage in appropriate behavior.**

Consider that the student may need assistance in demonstrating the correct behavior. Instead of saying “Be quiet” or “No talking” when a student talks loudly, remind them of the desired behavior. For example, say, “Michael, paying attention means being quiet and focusing on your work.” When Michael complies, promptly acknowledge and express gratitude, saying, “Thank you, Michael. I appreciate your focus.”

- 7 Provide behavior-specific praise to those students who are meeting expectations.**

Behavior-specific praise should occur frequently.

5:1 Always keep in mind the recommended 5:1 ratio – five specific positive statements for every error correction.



Strategies for Responding to Contextually Inappropriate Behavior

We also recommend developing strategies for responding to inappropriate behavior.

Examples include:

- 8 **Name the expected behavior** rather than the misstep, give the student a moment to demonstrate it, then acknowledge them when they do.
- 9 **Stepping into the hallway** or waiting for a transition respects the student's privacy and lowers the odds of escalation.
- 10 **A short, structured break** gives a student room to reset before behavior escalates. Define in advance what a break looks like, such as where the student goes, how long it lasts, and how they signal they're ready to return.
- 11 **Pause access to earned privileges** (e.g., ability to access token economy). The student regains access as soon as they demonstrate appropriate behavior.
- 12 **Require the student to complete a restorative task.** The task should repair the specific damage they caused to the environment, others, or the student themselves.



Remember:

Always remain supportive and helpful. Offer to assist the student, and recognize appropriate behaviors when errors are corrected.



About the Author

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Diane Myers leads SESI's Integrated Support team, overseeing the organization's behavioral, academic, and therapeutic systems. With more than 20 years of experience as a special educator, professor, and researcher, she specializes in Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), staff development, and evidence-based practices that help schools create positive learning environments for students with intensive needs.

