

Respond constructively to student behaviour

Summary

How teachers respond to positive behaviour can contribute to a positive learning environment and can help prevent inappropriate behaviour. Constructive responses to behaviour:

- use specific praise or reward systems
- avoid a punitive response.

Clear expectations and constructive responses to behaviour can help students who have difficulty staying on task, completing work, or regulating themselves in class.

Australian Professional Standards for Teachers related to this practice

- 4.1 - support student participation
- 4.3 - manage challenging behaviour

For further information, see [Australian Professional Standards for Teachers AITSL page](#)

Preparing to Teach

1. Identify behaviours you want to encourage or reduce

- Think about and plan how you will respond to these behaviours. Having a list of planned responses that suit your teaching style means you are more likely to use them authentically and efficiently.
- Explicitly outline reward systems for positive behaviour to students. This might be needed at the start of most lessons.

2. Choose strategies to reinforce appropriate behaviour

Strategies might include:

- specific praise – providing positive verbal feedback specific to the student and the behaviour, e.g. 'Thank you for raising your hand to ask a question, Jane'.
- token economies – giving students a token for positive behaviour, e.g. for persistence in completing a task. Once a student has a specified number of tokens, they can trade the tokens for items or activities.

3. Choose strategies to respond to inappropriate behaviour

Strategies might include:

- restating positive expectations – reminding students of the behaviour you want to see in the classroom



- differential reinforcement – reinforcing or praising only appropriate behaviours and removing or stopping reinforcements for other behaviours
- conferencing – one-on-one problem-solving with a student when they are calm, asking students to suggest strategies for the future.

NB: As you choose strategies, always refer to the student behaviour policy and guidelines within the relevant state or school system.

It works better if:

- you reinforce appropriate behaviour consistently
- you offer praise for students' efforts or for their use of specific work strategies rather than for intelligence or for the mastery of a skill, helping students to build a growth mindset
- the requirements for students to receive tokens gradually increases to avoid dependence on rewards
- students are collaborated with to create a list of reinforcing items or activities that may be traded for tokens. Providing choices will increase students' motivation.

When responding to inappropriate behaviour:

- use positive, constructive, and consistent responses
- give specific praise for positive behaviours (see the practice brief)
- give students a manageable task, once the student is calm, that focuses on their strengths or interests, i.e. a task they will succeed in.

It doesn't work if:

- reinforcement or response does not occur as soon as possible following the target behaviour. If reinforcement or response is delayed, the student may not understand which behaviour is being rewarded or is inappropriate.

In the classroom

1. Explicitly state expectations

At the start of each lesson, explicitly state expectations for behaviour in the lesson.

2. Observe

Before responding to a particular behaviour, consider why it has happened. What is going on with the student? The student may have experienced:

- confusion (even if you told them what to do)
- a sensory trigger
- miscommunication with a peer
- difficulty communicating
- a feeling of being overwhelmed
- a lack of belonging, respect, or self-efficacy.



3. Respond immediately

Respond positively and specifically using your chosen constructive response. If inappropriate behaviour continues, choose another constructive response from your list, e.g. asking the student to go to a designated space to calm down.

Example: If a student regularly has difficulty starting their work, when they do start their work in a timely manner, notice and comment on this behaviour. Sometimes, as a starting point, this may involve finding little things to notice and praise them for. If you are trying to manage specific behaviours, responding to behaviour could also involve a reward system.

4. Provide feedback later

If required, provide constructive feedback after the lesson without peers present. Sometimes this is as simple as restating the expectation of the student.

Materials informing this practice

Dwyer, C and Carlson-Jaquez, H (Last updated March 2015) 'Using Praise to Enhance Student Resilience and Learning Outcomes: Applications of Psychological Science to Teaching and Learning modules', *American Psychological Association*, <https://www.apa.org/education-career/k12/using-praise>

Organization for Autism Research (March 2013) *Understanding Autism: A Guide for Secondary School Teachers*, <https://csesa.fpg.unc.edu/sites/csesa.fpg.unc.edu/files/UnderstandingAutismSecondaryTeachersGuide.pdf>

[Understanding Autism: A Guide for Secondary School Teachers \(Part 3: Practices for Challenging Behaviour\) video](#), by Organization for Autism Research, YouTube.

[Understanding Autism: A Guide for Secondary School Teachers \(Part 2\) video](#), by Organization for Autism Research, YouTube. (reinforcement 11:10 to 12:00)