



Against the Use of the Response Cost Strategy of the Red, Yellow, and Green Flip Charts

Written by

Laura A. Riffel, Ph.D.

Many people ask me how I feel about the red, yellow, and green strips where children flip their card if they produce misbehaviors. Typically, the set up is that all students start on green and every time they misbehave they have to flip their chart. Most of the teachers interviewed have the students miss their recess if they get flipped to red. Most of the time, the children who end up on flipping their card to red are the very children who NEED to go outside and run during recess. The teacher does not realize they have caused their own pain in this case.

I personally am against the use of these charts for several reasons: 1) Public Display, 2) Defeatism and 3) Punishment redemption.

Public Display

A public display of who is appropriate and who is not appropriate would be like posting grades in the hallway. In my opinion it is a gross violation of privacy. Any visitor to the room has instant access to private information.

Defeatism

Many children who are continually singled out as the “bad” student accept that role and provide supporting documentation to fulfill that role. If I feel like a zero; I will behave as a zero.

Punishment and Redemption

The United States houses 5% of the world population and 25% of the world population of incarcerated. If the threat of jail and loss of freedom does not stop 25% of the world population from engaging in criminal activities, then why do some teachers believe taking away recess will stop inappropriate behavior? Response cost and punishment work for 75% of us,

but for 25% of the world it doesn't work. Typically, the children whose behavior we wish to target for change are in the 25% so it is a futile attempt at changing their behavior.

Discussion

On numerous occasions, this researcher has been called into a school to assist with a child whose behaviors are impeding his or her learning or that of others. When observations were completed, it was discovered the root of continued behavioral issues stemmed from the child's perceived loss of a privilege and their negative reaction regarding that loss. Three cases will be discussed:

- 1) A sixth grade student who was basically known as public enemy number one in the school was engaging in many disruptive behaviors. These behaviors became so disruptive the school called in a behavioral specialist. After observing the student for a day and interviewing the staff, the behavior specialist interviewed the student. When the student was asked why he engaged in these behaviors his response was this: "I've been a student at this school since Kindergarten. When you enter Kindergarten here you know that the sixth graders get to go to the zoo on a class field trip in May. I've been looking forward to that trip since I was in Kindergarten. In October, I messed up and got in a fight with another student. The principal told me that I didn't get to go on the field trip in May now. So, I figure what else do I have to lose?" When adults take away the one thing kids have to look forward to like field trips and recess, they just gave the student permission to be as bad as they want to be.
- 2) A third grade girl had been a model student since preschool. Suddenly, her third grade teacher implemented the red, yellow, and green flip chart and was very stringent about behaviors earning yellow and red flips. The girl daily had to flip her chart for the following behaviors: 1) not having her feet flat on the floor, 2) erasing too much, 3) not putting her name on her paper. The mother reported having to take her daughter to the doctor for frequent vomiting, diarrhea, and weight loss. In this case the child was a "good" child as reported by more than three years of previous teachers, and became clinically stressed when unrealistic expectations were placed on her using a public display of her behavior.
- 3) The third case involves a mother contacting me and bragging about the successful implementation of the flip chart for her son. From August through April the student remained on green each day, thus the mother believing this was working for her child. In April, the distraught mother called proclaiming "help" her son was on yellow three days in a row. I asked her if she had asked him why he was on yellow, she replied no and told me she would call me back. She called a few minutes later and said, "You are not going to believe what he said." I said, "Oh, I bet I have a good idea." She went on to

tell me this, “He told me that he was tired of sitting and he figured out that if he had one behavior he could get up and walk around the room and yet still not miss out on recess so he was doing something to get himself to flip a card each day when he wanted to get up and walk around.” Bingo, the child had figured out the system.

Research

Same Results

The Porteus Maze Test was given to sixty children in the fourth grade (Porteus,1965). The first series was given as a baseline, and the second series was administered under one of four different experimental conditions: control, response cost, positive reinforcement, or negative verbal feedback.

Response cost and positive reinforcement, but not negative verbal feedback, led to significant decreases in the number of all types of qualitative errors in relation to the control group. The reduction of non-targeted as well as targeted errors provides evidence for the generalized effects of both techniques equally. If both work equally, then why employ the one with the potential for public display, defeatism, and punishment redemption? Positive reinforcement is just as effective and produces less stress producing protocols for children.

Decreased Critical Statements and Increased Praise Statements

Three behavior management strategies were investigated for efficacy as used in a Head Start classroom (Tiano, et.al, 2005). The three strategies included: (a) techniques currently used by the teacher, (b) response cost, and (c) the Level System (token economy). This study used an ABACA single subject withdrawal design with follow-up where all conditions were implemented until stability was reached. Classroom behavior was evaluated by both behavioral observation and teacher report. Children's and teacher's behavior were examined. No conclusions could be made concerning the efficacy (i.e., inappropriate behavior) of the techniques. However, Teachers used more labeled praise statements and lower critical statements during the Level System condition than all other conditions. Shores, Gunter, Jack (1993) indicate we can improve behavior by 80% by pointing out what one student is doing correctly.

Overgeneralization of a Special Education Technique

With the exception of the Salend and Henry study (1981), research on response- cost systems has been limited to special education classrooms (Spencer, et. al., 1988). The red, yellow, and green flip chart system is a response cost system applied to a typically developing class of which there is limited research on its effectiveness.

Conclusion

What does work? Token economies work with most children and allow the educational staff to label appropriate behavior; which increases appropriate behavior (Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993; Horner & Sugai, 2005). If a child exhibits behavior impeding their learning or that of others, the educational staff can then have a discussion with the child about the targeted behavior and have them earn extra tokens for the preferred payoff. In other words, if a child is working on a token economy and 5 tickets equals 15 minutes on the computer, a preferred activity, and then the child has a behavioral learning opportunity (a misbehavior), the staff should use the following intervention: “It’s a bummer that you chose to throw paper towels on the ceiling in the bathroom. We have discussed how this is not respecting others and property and we have a plan for how we will conduct ourselves in the restroom the next time. Due to this behavioral learning opportunity you will have the opportunity to earn six tickets instead of 5 to earn your computer time. I believe behavior change can be effectively mastered when we up the ante requirement for inappropriate behavior rather than taking away a previously earned privilege such as recess or field trips.

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