



Managing Challenging Behaviors: Part 3

We have observed classrooms in which the teacher placed himself in a chair in front of the door in order to keep a child from “escaping.” This teacher obviously had better things to do with his class, teaching being one of them. How could he have used principles of behavior modification to discourage this “escape artist,” and what replacement behaviors could he have taught?

First, the child must know that leaving the classroom is not okay. For a child with a language disorder who may not understand the verbal admonishment, a “no exit” sign, or a sign with a red diagonal line drawn over a picture of a door, taped to the door, will remind the child that he is not to leave the room. The teacher must clearly state the replacement behavior he expects of the child, i.e., “sit at your desk.” When the child sits at his desk, initially with the physical prompting of the teacher, the teacher immediately rewards the child for sitting at his desk.

This important principle of behavior modification, rewarding the child at times he is behaving appropriately, i.e., when he is sitting at his desk, is the key to changing the behavior. Rewards can take many forms, but the best reward is one which is highly motivating for the child. For some children, it can be a smile, hug, or verbal praise; for other children, it can be food or a token object such as a sticker. Older children can be rewarded with a special privilege. When giving food, tokens, and privileges, verbal praise is also given, with the verbal praise specifically naming the replacement behavior, i.e., *I like the way you are sitting at your desk; you get a sticker.*

Because the replacement behavior is one which we want the child to internalize as self-beneficial rather than performed in order to obtain the reward, rewards must initially be given continuously, then 75% of the time, followed by reductions to 50% of the time, 25% of the time, and then intermittently before being eliminated altogether. For older children, charting the occurrence of the replacement behavior is essential. The chart records the replacement behavior and reminds the child that he is working on something special. A chart with its record of successes is highly motivating for the child and can also be used to help the child obtain a prize. The prize can be something very special such as a trip to the ice cream store, but for the parent, the real prize is the changed behavior.