

Shaping Attention-to-task in Children in a Regular Classroom Setting

Some of the problems in shaping attention-to-task in children in a regular classroom setting include: a) providing immediate feedback for off-task behavior without calling attention to the child; b) traditional reinforcement “catches the child doing good,” when the target behavior is observed, but throws distractible children off-task; and, c) sustaining motivation for reward following correction for off-task behavior.

The following program utilizes a response cost strategy that is conducted between the student and the classroom teacher in an unobtrusive manner and has been used effectively by regular classroom teachers with students who have high rates of off-task behavior (including learning disabled and ADHD students).

Parents provide a sheet of construction paper to the teacher that has a number of strips or tabs cut on the bottom half of the paper. I usually start a program with ten strips. Parents and teachers instruct the child that on-task behavior includes body squared and facing the teacher if the teacher is speaking to the class, or eyes on class work while following instructions. Speaking with other children, making faces, noises, out of seat, or talking without permission are examples of off-task behavior and result in loss of one strip. When the teacher notices off-task behavior he/she simply reaches for the construction paper, rips a strip off the sheet and throws it away. The teacher makes no other verbal or nonverbal correction or reprimand. The child is seated in proximity to the teacher so that the teacher’s action is easily noticed. The child becomes sensitized to the action of the teacher and therefore receives immediate correction for off-task behavior. The goal is for the child to have at least one strip left on the sheet by the end of the day. One strip earns a reward from parents at the end of the day. The sheet goes home with the child after school.

This is a response cost program that effectively punishes off-task behavior, but the motivation of the student to attend-to-task is sustained because success is achieved by keeping at least one strip.

Improvement in on-task behavior is achieved by calculating the number of strips lost on average for the week and adjusting the total to start the day downward toward that average at the beginning of the next week. For example if the child loses an average of seven strips per day for a week, the teacher could lower the starting number to seven or eight. This would suggest theoretically that the child would receive reinforcement at least 50% of the time based on previous performance. It is best not to decrease the starting number of strips in large steps, say from ten to five, but move in increments of two or three if the child makes rapid progress. I usually work toward a target of three strips to begin the day. Once we have reached that number, I will sustain the program at this level for six to eight weeks before beginning the phase out process.

It is imperative that the teacher has the strips close at hand in the beginning of the program so that consequences (loss of a strip) can be immediate and certain. Remember, that proximity seating of the child is necessary so the child will notice the cue when a strip is lost. It is very important that other children are not privy to this process. If teachers communicate loss of a strip verbally or nonverbally so that peers catch on to

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what is going on, they may interfere with the program. It is not even necessary for the teacher to make eye contact with the child when removing the strip. By following this strategy, it is rare that other children pick up on the process. It is also imperative that parents find concrete and generous ways of reinforcing the child when at least one strip comes home at the end of the day. Reinforcement (rewards) should be varied at times to maintain the child's interest in the program. Likewise, the loss of privileges (TV, video, outside play, friends visiting) must occur immediately after school if there is not at least one strip remaining. Failure to provide an aversive consequence or a delay in the consequence reduces the effectiveness of the program and may jeopardize its success. Effective consequences, whether positive or negative, must be immediate and certain.

Remember; start with a number of strips that ensure the child will reach the end of the day with one strip at the beginning of the program. This does not mean that the teacher should go out of his/her way to see that the child has one left. If the child is off task, a strip should be removed. Make sure that the starting number of strips is high enough that we could make a safe bet there will be one left by day's end. Remember, reducing the start number each week will shape behavior. My guidance is that 95% of the time ten strips will work for the most distractible children. In ten years of using this strategy with dozens of children, I have only had to increase the start number to fifteen for one very hyperactive child.

Most parents find that it is easiest to send the teacher enough sheets for the week on Mondays. The teacher places the construction paper with remaining strips in a folder or slips it into the child's backpack at the end of the day. If the paper is not returned home, the parents assume that all strips were lost and the child loses all privileges after school.

Many elementary classrooms have a general behavioral program that includes loss of a token or a change in colors (representing behavior) from green to red. These programs are not strictly focused to off-task behavior, and the highly distractible child will get to red quickly and lose motivation to stay on-task. Reinforcement in these programs is often a privilege at the end of the week and too far removed from behavior to be effective for these children. I have not found it problematic for the child to be on both programs so that the child does not appear to be treated any differently than others in the classroom. As the child's on-task time improves, he/she will eventually earn the end of the week reward with the class.

Children experiencing the same difficulty with attention-to-task behavior in homework/study may be introduced to this same response cost program in the home setting. Study time may be started with five points with one point being removed for each off-task behavior. Again, the goal is for the child to have one point remaining at the end of study to earn a reward. Failure to reach the goal results in a chore following homework completion. I often start children on the home program before beginning the classroom procedure above. This prepares the child to attend to the feedback and helps them learn to cope with the response cost when off-task. Remember to start study with enough strips that the child is likely to have at least one strip remaining at the end of study. I tighten the requirements each week by reducing the number of strips as described above. Parents

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should use the loss of strips as the consequence for off task behavior. Lecturing, warning or threatening loss of strips will be no more effective than other strategies used in the past.

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