Creating a Positive Classroom Atmosphere: Teachers’ Use of Effective Praise and Feedback

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Creating a positive and engaging classroom atmosphere is one of the most powerful tools teachers can use to encourage children’s learning and prevent problem behaviors from occurring. Although a number of factors are related to a positive classroom atmosphere, such as classroom management techniques and instructional pacing, one important factor is how teachers attend or respond to children’s behaviors. Teachers’ responses to children’s appropriate and problem behavior can help set the tone of the classroom environment. If teachers attend to and respond in a harsh and combative manner to children’s display of problem behavior, they most likely will receive combative responses from children in return and see an increase in their display of problem behavior. This type of response can lead to coercive interactions between teachers and children and negatively affect the classroom atmosphere. Similarly, if teachers ignore children’s appropriate behavior and more frequently attend to their problem behaviors, children most likely will learn to engage in problem behaviors as a predictable way to obtain a teacher’s attention.

On the other hand, if teachers provide corrective feedback to children about their behavior in a positive manner and help them learn alternative behaviors that will gain them positive teacher attention, teachers may be more likely to have positive reactions from children. In addition, children will learn new skills and behavior, and more time will be available for instruction. Likewise, if teachers attend to and praise children’s appropriate behaviors and ignore their problem behaviors, children will learn that these positive types of behaviors are more likely to obtain teacher attention than problem behaviors. Creating these positive interactions between a teacher and child is one important way to help build a positive classroom environment.

Unfortunately, engaging in positive interactions with children may be easier said than done for teachers, especially if the children in their classrooms have emotional and/or behavioral disorders (EBD). For one of the key defining features of children with EBD is chronic and persistent problem behavior, these behaviors are often well established in their behavioral repertoires. Children often enter classrooms with coercive and negative interaction styles that have been previously established and may have a strong history of reinforcement. These negative interaction patterns can significantly affect the atmosphere of the classroom. It is not unusual for even one child with severe problem behaviors to change the entire classroom climate, influencing teacher interactions with all children. Fortunately, teachers can employ strategies that can change the nature of negative interactions. By changing the negative interaction patterns into positive interactions, the climate of the classroom can dramatically improve.

In this article, we will discuss two important forms of teacher attention that can be used to help promote positive teacher-child interactions: teacher praise and feedback. Although most teachers already use these instructional tools in their classrooms, researchers have found that they may not always be used frequently or effectively. In the following sections, we will discuss how teachers can use praise and feedback most effectively to affect their interactions with children in their classrooms and improve the classroom atmosphere.

The Use of Effective Praise to Build a Positive Classroom Atmosphere

What Is Effective Praise?

Teachers regularly use praise as an instructional strategy to increase the occurrence of children’s positive social and academic behaviors. On the surface, praise appears to be a simple strategy that the teacher alone can implement. However, in reality, praise is a complex reciprocal process that involves both the teacher who provides praise and the children who are recipients of that praise. The effectiveness of a teacher’s use of praise is influenced by the children’s individual and cultural differences, different conditions under which praise has been previously provided to them (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Lam, Yim, & Ng, 2008), and characteristics of the praise that is given. Children from different backgrounds and experiences, including socioeconomic classes, ability levels, developmental levels, and genders, may respond differently to praise (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988). In addition, the characteristics of the praise statements may also influence children’s responsiveness to praise. Characteristics of effective praise include its being contingent on desirable behavior (Shores, Gunter, & Jack, 1993), behavior specific (Chalk
and focused on effort (Lam et al., 2008) and process (Dweck, 2000). Just as the terminology describing praise varies, the definitions of praise in the literature also vary (Chalk & Bizo, 2004). According to Brophy (1981), general praise means “to commend the worth of or to express approval or admiration” (p. 5), and it is provided when a child completes an expected task appropriately (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1982).

Examples of general praise statements typically include phrases such as “Great job!” or “Good.” In this article, we define effective praise as teacher-initiated statements that convey to children the specific academic or social behaviors in which teachers would like to see students continue to engage. It uniquely fits each situation and focuses on children’s effort, improvement, and/or quality of work, rather than focusing on outcomes or abilities. Examples of effective praise statements might be, “Great job, you repeated the words after me” or “Wow! You sat quietly and listened to the entire story.”

How Can Teachers Use Praise Effectively?

Identifying the essential characteristics of praise that make it most effective can help teachers to learn how to use praise successfully in their classrooms. Thus, for praise to be effective, it should include the following characteristics.

1. Praise should include specific statements about the appropriate behavior children displayed (Chalk & Bizo, 2004; Sutherland, Wehby, & Copeland, 2000). That is, children need to know explicitly what behavior is being praised and acknowledged by the teacher. “You did a great job counting numbers!” is an example of a behavior-specific praise statement. In addition, to increase the power of praise statements, teachers may want to individualize their praise statements and direct them at individual children and groups of children. For example, if all the children are working diligently on a task, the teacher may praise one child for sitting quietly at his desk, praise a second child for the amount of work she has completed on the task, and a third child for his correct responses. The teacher then concludes by praising the group, “I see everyone working very hard on this task.”

2. Praise should be contingent upon a desired behavior; that is, it should be provided immediately following the behavior (Willingham, 2005). Praising the children later can diminish the effectiveness of praise.

3. The instructional nature of praise is another important characteristic of effective praise. For example, it is important to provide frequent praise when children are initially acquiring a skill. However, once they have acquired the skill, the teacher may want to decrease the use of praise and provide it on a more intermittent basis. Then, the teacher might identify another behavior that the child is acquiring and increase the amount of praise that she or he provides for this behavior while simultaneously fading the praise for the behavior that the child is demonstrating with more fluency.

4. Praise should be teacher initiated (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988). Effective praise requires a teacher to monitor children’s behaviors and initiate praise in a timely manner rather than waiting for the children to elicit praise from the teacher. In other words, waiting for a child to say, “Look at what I did!” is far less effective than the teacher catching the child engaging in the desired behavior and praising it immediately.

According to Brophy (1981), praise often may not be deliberately provided by the teacher; rather, teachers are more likely to respond to children who elicit praise from them. To be effective, teachers should plan and initiate unsolicited praise to children in their classroom.

5. Praise should focus on children’s improvement and effort (Hitz & Driscoll, 1988; Lam et al., 2008). That is, praise should acknowledge children’s efforts and accomplishments rather than being an evaluation of individual abilities and/or outcomes. For example, a statement such as, “You are so smart!” is an evaluative statement of a child’s abilities, rather than an effective praise statement that focuses on effort. It labels children as “smart” or “not smart” and communicates a vague message about what can be considered “smart,” as well as how a child can become “smart.” In this situation, children are judged on the basis of their cognitive abilities, which is hard to modify (Dweck, 2000; Lam et al., 2008). As a result, children may become less confident, afraid of making mistakes, and afraid of completing work that is not perfect. They may worry about not meeting the teacher’s expectations. This type of praise may set children up for failure and discourage them from trying new tasks and taking risks.

6. Praise should be sincere; be delivered with an affirmative, natural voice; and be appropriate for children’s abilities and chronological age level. Children can easily recognize false exaggeration and overestimation of simple effort, and this type of praise may negatively affect children’s responses. In addition, praise statements should match
Effective praise is considered an appropriate learning and behavior. It is more likely to increase children's generalized reinforcer that can help to learn that comes from mastering tasks (Brophy, 1981; Hitz & Driscoll, 1988; Willingham, 2006). Although praise should be provided to groups of children in a classroom, at times it might be more appropriate for teachers to deliver praise individually with a particular child to help motivate the child to increase a particular behavior. Using effective praise in a classroom can increase positive interactions between teachers and children, which also helps build an overall positive classroom atmosphere.

**Strategies for Increasing Effective Praise in Classroom Settings**

The benefits of using effective praise in classroom settings are many. For example, research indicates that increases in teacher praise have positive effects on children's academic and social behaviors (Gable & Shores, 1980; Sutherland et al., 2000). Teacher praise is associated with an increase in children's correct responses, on-task behavior, and engagement. It has been associated with an increase in the work completed by children across all age levels (Kirby & Shields, 1972; Luiselli & Downing, 1980). Unfortunately, researchers have found that teachers do not necessarily use praise effectively or frequently (Beam & Wheldall, 2000). Alber, Heward, and Hippler (1999) pointed out that only 5% of teachers' praise statements are behavior specific. In addition, researchers have found that for students with EBD, praise is provided at a rate of only 1.2 to 4.5 praise statements per hour per student (Shores et al., 1993; Sutherland & Wehby, 2001; VanAcker, Grant, & Henry, 1996; Wehby, Symons, & Shores, 1995).

Clearly, there is a need to increase both the quantity and quality of praise in classrooms for all children. To help teachers improve on their use of praise, we suggest they begin by implementing the following strategies:

1. Identify a time or activity when a particular child or group of children are engaging in problem behaviors that interfere with classroom instruction and management. Such behaviors may include being off task, noncompliant, or disruptive.

2. Make a recording of this activity using any convenient method (e.g., audiotape, videotape). This recording will provide the data to help you change your use of praise.

3. Measure and examine the quantity and quality of the praise statements that occurred during this activity. How often do you praise children? Do you provide general praise or specific praise? Is your praise focused on the child's effort? Does every child receive praise, or do only a couple of children receive most of the praise statements? Are praise statements appropriate for the children's skill levels?

4. Set a goal of increasing the number and quality of praise statements that include the characteristics outlined above.

5. Identify the children who have the most social or academic problem behaviors and who seldom receive praise.

6. Make a list of four target behaviors that will elicit praise statements for these children.

7. Make a chart of the problem behaviors that these children display and the desired replacement behaviors that are in the children's repertoire.

8. Make a list of effective praise statements that can be provided to the children. For example, "Your handwriting has improved. It is clear and neat here." "You worked hard on these math problems." "You put the toys away quietly and with care, thank you." "Good job cleaning the table." "You shared the blocks today with Tim and you played together." "You must have tried hard to complete this homework."

9. Implement your plan and evaluate changes in your praise statements and the influence on children's behavior.

To assist in implementing your plan, we suggest teachers use self-monitoring strategies. Self-
monitoring has been supported as an effective method to promote and change behaviors in a variety of settings with different populations, and thus, it has been effective in changing teachers’ behavior with respect to increasing the quantity and quality of praise in the classrooms (Kalis, Vannest, & Parker, 2007). Self-monitoring is the process in which “teachers identify if the target behavior has occurred and record the occurrence of the target behavior” (Kalis et al., 2007, p. 21). Figure 1 provides a data collection sheet that can help a teacher to monitor the effectiveness of using praise in the classrooms.

The use of effective praise is an important teaching strategy that can facilitate positive interactions between teachers and children in their classroom. Along with the use of effective praise, providing feedback to children in an effective way is also critical. In the next section, we discuss strategies to help foster the use of effective feedback.

The Use of Effective Feedback to Create a Positive Classroom Atmosphere

What Is Effective Feedback?

Similar to praise, effective teacher feedback is a simple and powerful form of teacher attention that can enhance learning, increase achievement, and promote self-regulatory competence in children with and without disabilities (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Werts, Wolery, Holcombe, & Gast, 1995). Teacher feedback is an essential component of the learning process and can help create a positive classroom atmosphere in which mistakes are valued for their potential to enhance learning and in which academic success and appropriate behavior are reinforced (Bangert-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Witt, VanDerHeyden, & Gilbertson, 2004). The purpose of feedback is to provide children and teachers with information regarding children’s performance and understanding and allow for continued learning following initial instruction (Miller, 2002). Effective feedback has the potential to affect future student performance by increasing correct responding and desirable behaviors and decreasing incorrect responding and undesirable behaviors (Bangert-Drowns et al., 1991; Konold, Miller, & Konold, 2004).

In this article, we define feedback as information provided to children by teachers regarding their understanding or performance of academic or behavioral tasks. Teacher feedback is just one step in an instructional sequence and necessarily follows effective instruction, opportunities to respond, and active student responding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). It can be used to address both correct and incorrect student responses and can support the learning of academic information as well as social or behavioral skills (Miller, 2002). In addition, feedback can increase teaching efficiency and result in increased opportunities for learning (Werts et al., 1995). Feedback can be presented in a variety of instructional formats either verbally, visually (e.g., pictures, flash cards, manual signs, computer-based, modeled), or using a combination of the two (Werts et al., 1995; Werts, Wolery, Gast, & Holcombe, 1996).

How Can Teachers Use Feedback Effectively?

There are a number of important characteristics of feedback that can make it more effective. The literature suggests that to be effective, teacher feedback should be (a) intentional, (b) overt, (c) prompt, (d) direct, (e) specific, and (f) positive. It should occur frequently and consistently within a supportive classroom climate and target skills for which children have received sufficient developmentally appropriate instruction (Barbetta, Heward, Bradley, & Miller, 1994; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1987).

Two specific types of feedback that can be used to address correct and incorrect responses, respectively, are instructive feedback and error correction. Instructive feedback is a method for responding to correct student actions or responses. The purpose of instructive feedback is to expose children to additional instructional information in relatively little instructional time. This practice can enhance the efficiency of instruction and lead to the learning of both the targeted instructional material and the additional material. Instructive feedback follows effective instruction on target material, an opportunity to respond, and a correct student response (Werts et al., 1995).

Instead of simply continuing with instruction or praising the correct response, teachers can foster additional learning using a simple two-step process. To use instructive feedback, a teacher will (a) acknowledge the correct response or behavior (e.g., “That’s right, it is a square”) and (b) supply additional related or novel information. After acknowledgment of the correct response, the additional instructional material can expand on the child’s response by providing related information (e.g., “It has four sides”), can draw a parallel between the response and another target requiring the same response (e.g., “That table is a square too”), or can provide unrelated material from a different conceptual class (e.g., “It’s purple”). The additional material selected for use as instructive feedback may be information that teachers want children to learn but that is not specifically addressed in the curriculum, or information that is scheduled to be taught in the near future (Werts et al., 1995, 1996).

Another type of feedback that can be beneficial in the classroom is error correction, also called corrective feedback. Error correction is provided to a child following an academic or behavioral error with the purpose of
Figure 1  Praise Self-Monitoring Data Collection Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Praise Statement</th>
<th>Target Child</th>
<th>Target Behavior</th>
<th>Type of Praise</th>
<th>Characteristics of Praise*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>Ineffective</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* S = specific, I = immediate/intermittent, T = teacher-initiated, E = focus on effort, A = sincere and appropriate voice, V = void of comparisons

Teaching the child the correct response. This can increase the likelihood of correct responding in the future. Corrective feedback ensures that the child is aware of his error, provides him with the correct response, and gives him further practice in exhibiting the correct response (Barbeta et al., 1994; Colvin, Sugai, & Patching, 1993). Following effective instruction, an opportunity to respond, and an incorrect student response, the four-step error correction process can be used to help children learn from their mistakes. Error correction consists of (a) telling the child that the response or behavior was incorrect (e.g., “No, it’s
not a triangle"), (b) providing the correct response (e.g., "It is a square"), (c) giving the student another opportunity to exhibit the correct response (e.g., "What shape is this"?), and (d) providing specific praise for cooperation (e.g., "That's right, you identified the square!"); Colvin et al., 1993).

Strategies for Increasing Effective Feedback

Similar to increasing effective praise, to increase the use of instructive feedback and error correction in the classroom, teachers can

- identify specific opportunities and
- plan for the intentional use of these two strategies.

Initially, it may be helpful to focus on increasing feedback during specific activities or times of the day. For instance, a preschool teacher may initially choose to increase her use of feedback during circle time (e.g., adding color words as instructive feedback following students' correct identification of shapes and using error correction following incorrect responses). Similarly, a third-grade teacher may decide to increase his use of feedback during spelling lessons (e.g., adding the definition of the word following students' correct spelling responses and using error correction following incorrect responses; Werts et al., 1996). Once teachers are able to consistently use feedback during one routine or activity, it can be expanded to other classroom activities. Recall that feedback can also be used to address social and behavioral tasks such as student responses to behavioral expectations and class rules.

As with any new instructional strategy, it is essential that teachers monitor their use of these feedback procedures to ensure consistency and correct implementation and measure children's responses to determine whether the procedures are having the intended effect. These strategies are thought to be most effective when used following each correct or incorrect student response in a targeted instructional session (Werts et al., 1996).

Teachers can measure their own behavior (i.e., provision of either instructive feedback or error correction following each student response) using a data sheet on which they can record the number of opportunities for providing feedback and the number of times that feedback was actually provided. For monitoring children's behaviors (e.g., learning of additional instructional material through instructive feedback, or learning of targeted skills or information during error correction), teachers can use a data sheet to collect information on children's success on learning probes. Learning probes are a simple way teachers can keep track of children's progress by providing opportunities for them to engage in the correct responses and then recording their correct or incorrect responses. For instructive feedback, to assess children's responses, learning probes are typically conducted before beginning the use of instructive feedback and after the child has reached criterion on the targeted skill or behavior (e.g., spelling is the targeted skill in the spelling lesson example above). However, more frequent probes may be desirable. With corrective feedback, learning probes occur and can be recorded each time the child is given an opportunity to respond to the target material (see Figure 2 for a sample data sheet). Consistent recording of this information can help prompt teachers to provide adequate amounts of feedback and can provide information on whether feedback strategies are assisting students in learning new skills and information (Werts et al., 1995, 1996).

Implications for Practice

Although both teacher praise and teacher feedback can be conceptualized as forms of teacher attention as a consequence of children's performance, the purposes for these different types of teacher behaviors are quite different. For example, the purposes of teacher praise include acknowledging children's correct academic performance and/or desirable social behavior. In this manner, praise is used as a reinforcer: The teacher is attempting to increase the likelihood of the desired response by the child in the future. Alternatively, the purpose of teacher feedback is not necessarily reinforcement (and may in fact not be reinforcing to some children) but rather to provide information to the child that can enhance his or her learning. For example, the purpose of corrective feedback is to provide the child with information to increase the likelihood of correct responses to future instructional requests, whereas instructive feedback is used to help expand children's understanding of content. When used effectively, teacher praise and feedback have a long history of contributing to positive classroom outcomes for children with learning and behavior problems.

In sum, it appears that the effective use of both teacher praise and feedback can be effective tools for teachers as they attempt to best meet the needs of the children in their classrooms. It must be pointed out, however, that neither of these consequent events will be effective unless used within the context of a positive classroom atmosphere that is structured, safe learning environment. In this positive environment, children are comfortable taking learning risks, and errors, both academic and social/behavioral, are seen as opportunities for growth. Within a supportive learning context, teacher praise and feedback can augment each other in a powerful way. To illustrate, consider that teachers might have three options for responding to a child's responses. First, if a response is correct, the teacher might provide contingent, specific praise to acknowledge the correct response
**Figure 2** FEEDBACK DATA COLLECTION SHEET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Name: __________________________ Student Name: __________________________</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional task/activity: __________________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instructive Feedback**
1) Acknowledge correct response
2) Add extra information: __________________________

**Error Correction**
1) Tell student response is incorrect
2) Provide correct response
3) Provide another opportunity for student to respond
4) Provide specific praise for cooperation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Opportunities for Feedback</th>
<th>Feedback Given</th>
<th>Instructive Feedback (+/-)</th>
<th>Error Correction (+/-)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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(thus increasing the likelihood of future occurrences of the response). Second, if a response is correct, the teacher might use praise to reinforce the response while also providing instructive feedback to help expand the child’s understanding of the concept. Third, if a response is incorrect, the teacher might praise the effort made, use corrective feedback to provide information for the child to respond correctly in the future, provide another response opportunity, and then praise the child for the ensuing correct response (thus increasing the child’s knowledge of the content and the likelihood of future attempts to answer even if he is unsure about the correctness of the response). Each of these teacher responses would be useful and appropriate and, if used interchangeably in the classroom, can lead to increases in children’s responding and engagement.

Beyond the effects on the individual child, highlighted by the results of research summarized previously, these types of instructional interactions also may have an effect on the learning of other children in the classroom as they are exposed to both their peers’ correct responding as well as the teacher’s expansion of concept information. Moreover, the use of effective praise and feedback can have an overall impact on classroom climate, manifested through increases in children’s engagement and decreases in their disruptions. Given the complexity of learning and behavior problems of students, particularly those with EBD, it appears that using praise and feedback as effectively and efficiently as possible should be goals for all professionals interested in improving outcomes for children.

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as a function of risk for aggression. 


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