

Habits of Effective Classroom Practice

Habits are predictable and regular responses to cues in our environment. In *"The Power of Habit,"* Charles Duhigg (2012) described how we develop habits through cue-response-reward loops. For example, we say "Thank You" (response) when someone holds the door (cue), and we may hear "you're welcome" or see a smile in return (reward). We read or hear words (responses) based on unique combinations of letters or sounds (cues), and we receive information (reward). In other words, we develop habits by experiencing antecedents, behaviors, and consequences—the ABCs of behavior. Consider the following examples.

	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Example 1	In public	Wear mask and maintain safe distance	Avoid germs and receive positive attention
Example 2	In line at a grocery store with candy stocked shelves	Child repeatedly asks (screams) for candy in line	Parent gives child candy
Example 3	Child repeatedly asks (screams) for candy in line	Parent gives child candy	Child stops screaming

In each example, the behavior becomes a habit through repeated practice of the ABC sequence. Habits are maintained because they work (i.e., result in occasional reinforcement). In this brief, we discuss how we (a) develop habits of effective classroom practice and (b) expand effective habits in our schools, districts, and states.

How can we develop habits of effective classroom practice?

Although we can develop habits accidentally (e.g., give child candy to escape screaming), we can also use our knowledge to develop effective habits intentionally. For example, consider the parent in Example 3. Instead of continuing to give their child candy to avoid a tantrum in line, the parent may change the antecedent, engage in a different behavior, and experience a different consequence (see example below).

	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Example 3 (revised)	Parent chooses candy-free check-out line at store	Parent engages child in "line game" while waiting	Parent avoids screaming and enjoys child's attention

Like the parent in this revised example, we can modify our own ABCs to develop habits of effective practice in our classrooms. We do that by starting with simple practices, setting ourselves up for success, building effective habits, celebrating accomplishments, and sharing with others.

Start Simple

Identify a few simple, evidence-based, contextually-appropriate, and culturally-relevant classroom practices. For example, we may prioritize three key practices:

- Positively greet students as they enter the classroom ([learn more¹](#))
- Actively engage students in instruction ([learn more²](#))
- Provide specific positive (and corrective) feedback ([learn more³](#))

These practices each contribute to creating positive, predictable, and safe learning environments that promote students' social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth. See additional information and resources in the [A School Guide for Returning to School During and After Crisis⁴](#) (Center for PBIS, 2020).

Set Up for Success

To set ourselves up for success with implementing these simple practices, we redesign our environment to support implementation. Consider the following example strategies to set up for success with implementing each of the three simple practices.

	Positively greet students as they enter	Actively engage students in instruction	Provide specific feedback
Add cues for effective practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add greeting poster by door or a greeting slide to start class 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add opportunities to respond (OTRs) into instructional materials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Script potential praise statements (see planning template⁵)
Prevent undesired practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare in advance of class (rather than during transition into class) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce "lecture" segments of lessons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively look for desired behavior (rather than focusing only on disruptions)
Add prompts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include greeting in your lesson plans • Set a reminder in Be+ app³ or other system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop visual reminder of common OTRs approaches • Set a reminder in Be+ app or other system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include praise in your lesson plans • Set a reminder in Be+ app or other system

Build Effective Habits

Then, we build effective habits by (a) engaging in the simple practices until they become fluent and (b) monitoring our implementation. Consider the following example strategies to build effective habits of implementing each simple practice.

	Positively greet students as they enter	Actively engage students in instruction	Provide specific feedback
Use practice to build fluency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice greetings until fluent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice high rates of OTRs until fluent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice specific feedback until fluent
Monitor implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor daily greetings for each student with a table (name, point of connection like a pet, and other information needed to build relationships and uncover need) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Track number and response to OTRs via Be+ app³ or counter Examine data for equitable implementation and responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Track ratio of positive to corrective feedback (goal >5:1) via Be+ app³ or on student roster (mark +/- to track ratios) Examine data for equitable implementation

Celebrate Successes

To ensure we develop and maintain effective habits, we (a) provide specific feedback; (b) celebrate implementation progress, effort, and successes; and (c) prevent reinforcement of ineffective habits.

	Positively greet students as they enter	Actively engage students in instruction	Provide specific feedback
Provide specific feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review data to ensure you greet all students and differentiate based on student preference/need Praise yourself (e.g., "Nice greeting!") 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Praise yourself during engaging instruction (e.g., "Great engagement!") Review your data and set a goal for desired OTR rate or variety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pat yourself on the back for praising during instruction Review your data and set a goal for your positive to corrective ratio (e.g., >5:1)
Celebrate progress toward implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrate efficient and positive start to class with students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrate days you meet your goal (e.g., take a break to read, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Celebrate days you meet your goal with students (e.g., play a

	(e.g., do a fun check-in that increases student engagement before diving into work)	have a treat while you work)	class game at end of activity/day)
Prevent reinforcement of ineffective habits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you forget, add an extra prompt for the next opportunity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If rates are low, add more OTRs into next lesson 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If praise rates are low, revisit and enhance plan

Share with Others

As we make a plan set up for success, build effective habits, and celebrate success, we can share our plan with others. By sharing our plan, we recruit additional prompts to help us stay on track, and we hold ourselves accountable to celebrating with others. We also model how to develop habits of effective classroom practices, which may encourage others to join us in this work.

How can we expand effective habits in our schools, districts, and states?

To expand habits of effective practice, we invest in key systems features (e.g., leadership teaming, training, coaching, school-wide data collection and evaluation) to support implementation. Using the same logic, we design systems to set all staff up for success (antecedent supports), build habits of effective practice (behavior supports), and celebrate success (consequence supports). Consider the following examples, illustrating the ABCs of systems supports.

	Antecedent	Behavior	Consequence
Systems Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increase prompts and reminders for effective practice Provide resources to support implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train and coach on key practices Monitor fidelity and outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide performance feedback Celebrate successes Prevent rewards for undesired practices

At the [district and state level](#)⁶, leadership teams also consider executive functions (stakeholder engagement, funding and alignment, policy, and workforce capacity) to further support educators in developing habits of effective practice.



Big Idea

We (a) start simple (prioritizing a few evidence-based, contextually-appropriate, and culturally-relevant practices) and (b) arrange our ABCs to build habits of effective practice. At the school, district, and state level, we develop systems to expand use of effective habits.

Hyperlinks Shared in Brief

- ¹ <https://www.pbis.org/resource/positive-greetings-at-the-door>
- ² <https://www.pbis.org/resource/examples-of-engaging-instruction-to-increase-equity-in-education>
- ³ <https://www.pbis.org/announcements/track-positive-reinforcement-with-our-be-app>
- ⁴ <https://www.pbis.org/resource/a-school-guide-for-returning-to-school-during-and-after-crisis>
- ⁵ <https://www.pbis.org/resource/creating-effective-classroom-environments-plan-template>
- ⁶ <https://www.pbis.org/topics/districtstate-pbis>

References

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Duhigg, C. (2012). The power of habit: Why we do what we do in life and business (1st ed.). Random House.

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