



What Is It?

Behavior-specific praise is a positive statement directed toward a student or group of students that acknowledges a desired behavior in specific, observable, and measurable terms.

What Do We Know About This Skill/Practice?

Behavior-specific praise has been proven effective through many years of research and practical application. Research indicates:

- Behavior-specific praise is a highly effective strategy that teachers can use both to increase positive behavior and decrease problem behavior.
- The use of behavior-specific praise is linked to increases in student on-task behavior and compliance.
- Behavior-specific praise can be effectively used among students with or at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD).
- Behavior-specific praise is most effective when delivered more frequently than reprimand statements. Some experts recommend four praise statements for every one reprimand, whereas others suggest the use of about six praise statements every 15 minutes.

Procedures

1. **Establish behavioral expectations:** As part of creating a safe and respectful classroom environment, establish and explicitly teach behavioral expectations—that is, the behaviors you want your students to display.
2. **Scan the classroom:** During instructional time, transitions, or down time, look for students engaging in these desired behaviors.
3. **Praise the student:** Provide behavior-specific praise to a student by stating the student's name and describing the behavior immediately after she performs it (e.g., "Johanna, thank you for cleaning up immediately when I rang the science bell.").

Tips for Implementation

- Deliver behavior-specific praise immediately following a desired behavior or as soon after as possible.
- Deliver praise using a sincere tone of voice.
- Self-monitor your use of praise by keeping a tally of praise statements during each class period to ensure at least a 4:1 ratio of praise statements to reprimands.

Things To Keep in Mind

- Behavior-specific praise can be offered to an individual student, to a group of students, or to an entire class.
- The praise should specifically identify the student and the desired behavior. For example, the teacher should say, “John, you did a great job keeping your hands at your sides while walking to lunch!” instead of “Good job!”
- To be effective, praise must be age- and developmentally appropriate. Elementary school students may respond to enthusiastic praise that occurs in front of the entire class, while middle or high school students may prefer subtle praise statements.
- For some students of any age, verbal praise in front of others may be considered aversive or even stigmatizing. To meet the needs of these students, you can provide praise in a one-on-one setting or in a non-verbal manner (e.g., through a note).
- Some students might have difficulty meeting the established behavioral expectations and, therefore, might have fewer opportunities to receive praise. In these instances, you may need to carefully plan how to provide praise four times as often as reprimands. Consider the example below:

During independent work, a teacher periodically praises students who are engaged in the assigned task. However, for a student with attention issues, the teacher might need to offer praise more frequently—every few minutes—for being engaged. Once the student spends more time engaged, the teacher can decrease the frequency of praise, though still maintaining a ratio of four praises for every one reprimand.

Implementation Examples

The table below illustrates how the teacher provided behavior-specific praise when students met the classroom’s established behavioral expectations. Note that the examples of behavior-specific praise both 1) identify the student or group of students who met the behavioral expectation and 2) clearly describe that behavior. Conversely, the non-examples neither identify the student or group of students nor reference specific student behavior.

Behavioral Expectation	Student Behavior	Example	Non-Example
Students come to class prepared with all materials.	All students at Table 4 brought their science journals to class.	<i>Table 4, thank you for remembering to bring your science journals to class today!</i>	<i>Good job!</i>
When someone else is talking, students raise a hand to ask a question or to comment.	Milo raised his hand to ask a question during a guest speaker’s presentation.	<i>Milo, great job following the class rule and raising your hand to ask a question.</i>	<i>Thank you.</i>

Elementary Video Example

In the video below, Mrs. D. wishes to acknowledge that Samantha has correctly headed the top of her friendly letter. Note in the example how Mrs. D. correctly implements the procedures for behavior-specific praise, but in the non-example she fails to provide behavior-specific praise.



High School Video Example

In the video below, Ms. Fischer wants to use behavior-specific praise to acknowledge that Daniel came to class prepared. Note the procedures Ms. Fischer uses to deliver behavior-specific praise in the example and where her delivery falls short in the non-example.



Foundational Research & References

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About the Author

Caitlyn Majeika is a former special education resource teacher for students in elementary and middle school. Currently, Caitlyn is a PhD student in the Special Education Department of Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. Her research focuses on using principles of data-based decision-making to enhance the implementation of behavior interventions for students who display challenging behavior in the classroom.