

Virtual Instruction: Behavior-Specific Praise

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 that:

- Teachers can use behavior-specific praise both to increase positive behavior and decrease problem behavior.
- The use of behavior-specific praise is linked to improvements 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 recommend four praise statements for every one reprimand, whereas others suggest the use of about six praise statements every 15 minutes.

Procedures

Behavior-specific feedback is a simple practice that requires minimal effort. Below are three easy-to-implement steps.

1. **Establish behavioral expectations:** To create a safe and respectful classroom environment—either physical or virtual—establish and explicitly teach behavioral expectations, that is, the behaviors you want students to display.
2. **Observe student behavior:** During instructional time, transitions, or down time, look for students engaging in the desired behaviors. In the case of virtual environments, scan the video feed, join student break-out rooms, or monitor the chat area.
3. **Praise the student:** Offer behavior-specific praise to a student by stating that 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.
- In addition to the three procedures listed above, the four actions below can be helpful when implementing this practice.*
 - **Evaluate your current rates of general and specific feedback:** Prior to establishing behavioral expectations, gather data or reflect on how often you provide feedback, the ratio of praise to reprimands, and which students you praise.
 - **Practice virtual delivery of behavior-specific praise:** After establishing behavioral expectations, practice delivering verbal behavior-specific praise. Additionally, write out praise statements that can be quickly copied and entered into the chat room.
 - **Monitor delivery of behavior-specific praise:** 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. Additionally, download the chat at the end of a virtual session to review your use of written praise.
 - **Seek student input:** Give students the opportunity to offer feedback. Ask them how they liked this kind of feedback, whether they thought it was helpful, and whether they thought it resulted in a more positive learning environment.

* The Comprehensive, Integrated Three-Tiered Model of Prevention (C₃T) combines these four actions with the steps listed above. [Click here to learn more about their seven-step process.](#)

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 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 more general praise, such as "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. Instead, offer individual praise (e.g., through a private chat).

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- Some students might have difficulty meeting the established behavioral expectations and, therefore, 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 a virtual lesson, 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
When students log in to a virtual lesson, they have all materials readily available.	The first four students to log in have their writing journals and a pencil.	<i>Savannah, Gentry, Bain, and Abhi, thank you for remembering to bring your writing journals and pencils to class today!</i>	<i>Good Job!</i>
When someone else is talking, students click on the “raise hand” feature in the virtual platform to ask a question or to comment.	Ariana clicked the “raise hand” feature to ask a question during class discussion.	<i>Ariana, 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. Scruggs wants students to log in to virtual learning on time. Note in the example how Mrs. Scruggs correctly implements the procedures for behavior-specific praise, but in the non-example she fails to provide behavior-specific praise.



Foundational Research & References

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- This resource was developed in collaboration with the Comprehensive, Integrated Three-Tiered Model of Prevention (Ci₃T) Strategic Leadership Team. More information on virtual behavior-specific praise can be found on the Ci₃T Website: <https://www.ci3t.org/covid>