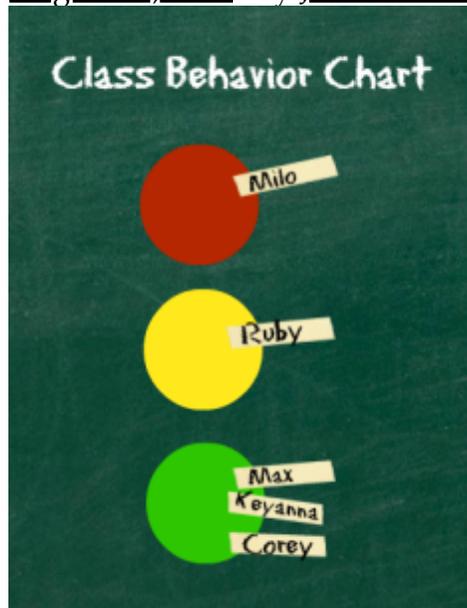


## beyond the stoplight

sharing resources to create caring classroom communities for all children

## a letter to teachers on the use of stoplights in the classroom

August 31, 2013 · by Jennifer Bradley · in Uncategorized ·



[\\_ \(https://beyondthestoplight.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/screen-shot-2013-09-04-at-12-55-03-am.png\)](https://beyondthestoplight.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/screen-shot-2013-09-04-at-12-55-03-am.png)

Dear Teacher,

Before you hang that stoplight up for the new school year, please put yourself on red for a minute or two. Rethink the idea that hanging a large paper traffic light in the front of the room, dotted with magnets or popsicle sticks displaying each student's name is ok. Rethink the concept that publicly tracking behavior and doling out consequences based on whose behavior moves them off of green each day is fair, kind, or appropriate. Please rethink.

I recognize myself in you. I once believed that giving students a "visual" for where their behavior stood in my class would enable them to control it, that all children *could* control their behavior, and that controlling behavior was one of the most important tasks on my teacher to do list.

As a first year teacher, I remember ‘writing names on the board.’ That’s what I was told to do, and that’s what my teachers did when I was in school. But then I started paying attention to the hurt, the shame, the frustration, and even the apathy in the eyes of those students whose names appeared in chalk day after day. They were six and seven years old, and I knew they deserved better.

I absolutely understand why you want it to work. It’s a very big and very unwieldy job to be in charge of educating dozens of young children for six hours/day. But we both have to admit that a major part of the stoplight equation, even if it works, is shaming. And shaming children simply isn’t what we educators are supposed to do.

We also know the predictable pattern the stoplight creates. Think about how it feels to see your name, day after day, moving towards that red circle, broadcast to your peers and anyone who walks into your classroom. Those are the very children who struggle with “school behavior,” and they deserve our support, not embarrassment.

Or you could think about how it feels to be 5 or 6 or 7 years old and to worry daily about your name being moved from its perch on green. I promise, there are more authentic ways to get children to think about their behavior and more compassionate ways to help children to develop those executive functioning skills. There really are.

I know you can put a halt to it because I did, and it wasn’t even that difficult. We simply started talking things out. I know you can do it because my current work takes me into so many wonderful classrooms of K-3rd grade children, both public and private, urban and suburban, with amazing teachers in each of those categories who don’t use the stoplight or anything like it.

What they use, and you certainly have this too, it’s just not as visible as the stoplight is right now... is respect. They teach and practice and brainstorm and model and discuss and live respect. Respect for the teacher, yes. But respect for children, too. The stoplight used this way does not respect children, their feelings, or their struggles.

So please leave that stoplight in the supply box. Don’t use your crisp new class list to construct more names to move from green to yellow to red. Your students are so much more than popsicle sticks or magnets, and these events in your classroom are learning opportunities for all of you.

The school year is fresh and new. Ditch the stoplight and adopt an approach that helps every child in your classroom feel supported, not just the ones who are most able to control their behavior. All of you will feel better at the end of the school day. I know my students and I did.

Thank you,  
Jen Bradley, Ph.D./mom to four/former chalkboard shamer

### **What else is out there?**

For a list of ten alternatives to the stoplight, click [here \(https://beyondthestoplight.com/2013/09/02/ten-stoplight-alternatives/\)](https://beyondthestoplight.com/2013/09/02/ten-stoplight-alternatives/).

Here are three more resources to help you rethink this practice:

[www.responsiveclassroom.org \(http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/\)](http://www.responsiveclassroom.org/)

<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positive-psychology-in-the-classroom>  
(<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positive-psychology-in-the-classroom>).

<http://www.nea.org/tools/15828.htm> (<http://www.nea.org/tools/15828.htm>).

Are you a parent? Check out our [stoplight post for parents](https://beyondthestoplight.com/2013/08/31/theres-a-stoplight-in-my-childs-classroom/)  
(<https://beyondthestoplight.com/2013/08/31/theres-a-stoplight-in-my-childs-classroom/>).

This is a copy of an article originally posted on Germantown Avenue Parents. To read the rich debate in the more than 200 comments that followed, please click [here](http://germantownavenueparents.com/2013/08/does-your-childs-teacher-use-a-stoplight-for-behavior/)  
(<http://germantownavenueparents.com/2013/08/does-your-childs-teacher-use-a-stoplight-for-behavior/>).

## 64 responses to “a letter to teachers on the use of stoplights in the classroom”

### 1. [OneMommy](#) [September 3, 2013 at 1:40 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Thank you.

You put into words my thoughts about the system used in my daughter’s classroom. As a former teacher I tried names on the board very briefly. I found just talking to the student quietly for a minute and having other consequences worked so much better, and there was a lot less stress in the classroom for everyone.

Definitely sharing this!

#### ◦ [Jennifer Bradley](#) [September 5, 2013 at 3:42 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I’m glad it resonated with you. It sounds like we had very similar experiences!

### 2. [sharon](#) [September 5, 2013 at 6:14 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I agree totally! You mentioned one important thing...you did what you were told to do. In most schools, teachers are expected to implement new ideas administrators present. If not they have their own consequences to pay. Many times the only way to get rid of these practices is to discuss the problems with the principals and hope they will convey this to their boss that had the idea in the first place. In my school the teachers hated both of the behavior controls you mentioned but they had ways to appear to follow policy when they were not. There are so many programs in use today that administrators force on teachers. There is no easy answer for maintaining behavior in the classroom of today. Students at all levels know exactly what teachers can and cannot do to discipline students. I do know one thing. Ask any teacher that has taught at least five years if they would still go into teaching knowing what they know now. I ask them all the time and I have yet to find one that said yes. Instead, they say, “NO” but I am stuck or they say they are trying to find something else. The teachers that have taught many years constantly talk about retirement.

### 3. [Jennifer Bradley](#) [September 7, 2013 at 4:41 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Hi Sharon,

You bring up a great point... that the top-down mandate to use systems like the stoplight can be systemic, rather than a teacher's decision. This is something I plan to explore in a subsequent post. Thanks!

4. Pingback: [What's wrong with classroom behavior charts? | My Family Blog](#)

5. *Jen* [November 14, 2013 at 5:14 am](#) · [Reply](#) →

It sounds to me that you have identified what you see as a "problem" but not given very many alternatives. Where is the great letter telling teachers the awesome new ideas that you have tried? I agree that "talking" it out is good and can be effective...but what happens when you have to spend a large amount of time talking to each child and then have to talk to all the parents after school. The stop light/color chart is not the problem in our classrooms.

6. *Jennifer Bradley* [November 15, 2013 at 4:57 am](#) · [Reply](#) →

Hi Jen,

Did you see this list?

<https://beyondthestoplight.com/2013/09/02/ten-stoplight-alternatives/>

I hope it helps.

I'd also like to hear what you believe the problem is?

Best,

Jen

7. *ConcernedDad* [December 13, 2013 at 1:49 am](#) · [Reply](#) →

Love the article, I am currently going through dealing with a similar behavior management system in my 5 year old son's school. It is basically the same thing but with more levels. I had not put much thought into at first when he started school this year, but recently he has come with 6 "negative colors" in a row, and it really had me lost. Mostly because my son is not a trouble maker, he is a very caring young boy that loves to help people and make them happy. I will agree that he does his fair share of talking or playing when he isn't really supposed to, however I view this as normal behavior for a young boy and to be honest would be more worried if he wasn't playful or talkative. I decided to place a black star through the boxes on my son's behavior calendar and write a note to the teacher explaining that I no longer want my son to participate in the rainbow behavior chart. She responded by letting me know that he would continue to participate in the chart in class (which is one of my main gripes with it, considering its at the front of the class) but she would not send the calendar home anymore. That is completely backwards in my opinion on how to rectify the situation and to be honest was disgusted by the matter of fact nature in which she told me that he would still participate in the chart. I am currently writing to the Principal and Superintendent. If that goes unheard I will write to the School Board, State Offices, etc. Whatever it takes. A Kindergarten teacher spends 180 days or so in the state of New York with my son, and I refuse to allow these methods to leave a life long effect.

o *Jennifer Bradley* [January 6, 2014 at 4:51 pm](#) · [Reply](#) →

Hi Concerned Dad,

I was wondering if there was any update to this? You make so many excellent points, and I agree that the teacher's response was not helpful.

Best,

Jen

o *Darua* [January 17, 2016 at 2:49 am](#) · [Reply](#) →

O M G. We were all raised with stuff like this in school. I don't even remember the feelings associated with getting in trouble and I got in trouble quite a bit. There was no life long effect any of it had on me other than follow the rules of the establishment I'm in if I don't want to deal with the consequences of not following the rules. How about we start raising people who take responsibility for their misbehaviors instead of raising entitled pansies that seek to place blame on someone else for everything they do?

8. [Leith January 6, 2014 at 10:27 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I feel that any behavioural (Aussie) system must be educative and assist a child to understand the complex social environment of the classroom. Traffic lights for kindergarten aged students sends a message that the staff will give conditional approval to students based around how the student is behaving from the viewpoint of the staff member without regard of function or needs of the student.- geez what a message that is and rest assured children will figure that out real quick. Assuming that a 48 month old child has any form of meta cognition re a choice of behaviours at such a young age is developmentally unsound- children require teaching yes even behavioural teaching. Behavioural systems need to be educative and supportive- traffic light labelling is convenient for adults , looks attractive and works for some children who don't require it in the first place and stigmatises children who do need teaching and support but does it really promote positive behavioural learning or could it teach students that in certain situations adults will withdraw support of the child publicly and utilize negative peer reinforcement to extinguish behaviour which is in my view counter to what an educator is aiming to achieve in the first place. Too hard is it ? too many children to help one child? The journey starts with one child and the world changes for the better.

Levels of Behaviour is the educative approach to teaching behaviour- email me if you want a copy [Leith.Tarling1@education.wa.edu.au](mailto:Leith.Tarling1@education.wa.edu.au)

o [Jennifer Bradley January 6, 2014 at 4:53 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

HI Leith,

You make EXCELLENT points, and I appreciate your input. I'd be very interested in seeing any resources you have to share along those lines. Is the Levels of Behavior document free?

Best,

Jen

o [Leith January 7, 2014 at 12:36 am](#) · ·

Hi Jen

Thank you for your reply 😊 I'm very happy to share for free through this forum. Once I have an email address I'll send through ' Levels of B has US copyright but that is to protect the IP LOB for individual use plz contact for wider use 😊

Leith

9. [Amy June 1, 2014 at 5:42 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I have been a very successful kindergarten teacher for 7 years. I have found that a behavior chart is the most effective way for students to monitor their own behavior. Along with the behavior chart, a behavior log goes home each night with each student, and a private conversation with each student as to why their color was changed has been highly effective. The student must tell their parent why their color was changed. I promote using this for young children.

Does this work for everyone? Of course not! A behavior chart will stigmatize a child if you treat a behavior chart as a personal failure chart. In my classroom color changes are not a big deal. I tell the class: "Everyone has to change their color, even the teacher. This doesn't mean you are bad

this only is something to help you remember to make a different choice next time." I tell parents "If your child is truly having a behavior problem you will know because I will be calling or emailing you. The color chart is just a tool to help kids remember to make different choices."

I do believe that every teacher should use what works best with his or her population of students and differentiate the behavior modification strategies to obtain the best learning environment for the whole group. This definitely varies from class to class and teacher to teacher.

- o [Jennifer Bradley June 3, 2014 at 2:50 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Hi Amy,

I appreciate you sharing your experience. I know many teachers look at this similarly.

Obviously, I have a different perspective, particularly about the information being posted publicly. But I also question the notion that children are always making choices about their behavior. I often think we talk about behavioral events as choices when in reality, they're not. And teachers do not have to move their color in any public way, so while I think the message you're offering (that we all have things to work on), is wonderful... with the stoplight, I argue that the delivery system is problematic.

- o [A.Rose October 9, 2015 at 12:03 pm](#) · ·

Amy, my son's teacher uses a rainbow behavior chart in his classroom and i can tell you that it does nothing to promote good behavior. In fact, he comes home and cries every day because he doesn't make purple (the superstar color). He has anxiety issues as well as sensory issues, so, I agree with Jennifer that his behavior is not always a choice- sometimes it is an unconscious reaction to stimuli. He is a kindhearted kid, but is a typical wiggly 4 year old boy who becomes easily frustrated and upset when he feels like the lights are too bright and when he feels like someone is disappointed in him. The chart publicly shames him, making him feel that even when he is doing his best, it is not good enough, or that he doesn't measure up to the other kids in class and I am the one who has to pick up the pieces after school every day. I have tried offering solutions to the teacher but all are rejected. If I had another preschool option, I would take it, but unfortunately, this is all there is.

10. [Heather June 1, 2014 at 7:57 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I wholeheartedly agree with all of this article and also want to add the reason I chose to discontinue the "stop light" (other than it really didn't work!). At pick up time, parents weren't asking "How was your day?" but instead, "Did you stay on green?". That shouldn't be the focus of a young child's (or any child's) day.

Keeping children engaged, redirecting when needed, and teaching kindness and self control are the tools I choose to use. It works.

- o [Jennifer Bradley June 3, 2014 at 2:45 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I agree Heather... so many parents have shared how much the "goal" of the day has shifted in their conversations. It sounds like you have great tools in your toolbox.

- o [Crystal Reavis June 13, 2015 at 8:02 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I agree to much emphasis is put on if the child was able to stay on green or not. We had this system when I was in school and it would stress me out, not because I was really punished or anything. It stressed me out because I didn't want others to see me as "bad" or wonder why I was not on green. This type of system can actually have a negative impact on children.

11. [Joy Darden June 3, 2014 at 6:21 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Another resource would be Discipline Without Stress <http://www.marvinmarshall.com/>

- *Jennifer Bradley* [June 3, 2014 at 2:44 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →  
Thank you, Joy... I'll check that out!

12. *Karen S. Western* [June 3, 2014 at 8:13 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I don't agree. When I was in school spanking was allowed. So was humiliation and shaming. We were well behaved students, because these things worked. Today's students are out of control due to the parental insistence that their angel is never wrong—no matter what they do. There was a teacher I had requested for my daughter. Other parents said, but she is a yeller and is mean. My daughter cried about it. I told her if she did what she was asked and behaved well that she would get along fine. Guess what? My daughter is 21 now and says that mean yelling woman was her favorite teacher.

- *Jennifer Bradley* [June 3, 2014 at 8:08 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →  
Well Karen, recalling the days of spanking and shaming are simply not something I'm going to agree with. But I will point out a big error in your assessment of what I'm arguing... that children are never wrong no matter what they do. ALL of the approaches advocated on this site absolutely work to teach children to differentiate between right and wrong and the trays in between. They are simply longer more meaningful lessons than shaming or spanking provides.

13. *Katie* [June 3, 2014 at 8:35 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I love this article. I see this in the schools where I work. You have to teach children how to act. Simply telling them they are doing something wrong is not teaching them how to act. And... Research indicates that positive rewards work better than punishments. Thank you for putting this out there.

- *Jennifer Bradley* [June 3, 2014 at 10:17 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →  
Hi Katie,  
I agree that children need guidance and support to learn these skills.  
Thanks for stopping by!  
-Jen

14. *sandy* [June 3, 2014 at 9:55 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I use The Responsive Classroom and also have a clip chart. I feel strongly that today's kids are not held responsible for their own behavior in too many ways. Why can they not control it? I feel that they can and should be taught self control and do not feel that the clip chart is humiliating. I have never had other students say anything about someone being on red and actually since it means they make a phone call home themselves in my class there really aren't too many times when a kiddo makes it past yellow (think about it). How can teaching kids self control be a bad thing?

- *Jennifer Bradley* [June 3, 2014 at 10:15 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →  
Hi Sandy,  
I totally agreed that children need to learn self-control and that those skills need to be both taught and practiced, but I do think the clip chart is a negative visual if it's publicly posted.  
Thanks for commenting,  
Jen

15. *Catherine Callow-Heusser* [June 4, 2014 at 12:30 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

When I teach pre-service courses, I love to hand out Carol Dweck's article, *The Secret to Raising Smart Kids* (Scientific American, December 2007). Every teacher and parent should read it.

16. *Michelle Bradley* [June 5, 2014 at 5:44 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Have you ever heard of the apple tree? My daughter (who is now in college with kindergarten well behind her) had a kindergarten teacher who used an apple tree for classroom behavior. All the students started off the day with nice, bright red apples which were near the top of this very large, 10 ft. high tree. As a student's behavior was identified as unacceptable, the apple was replaced with a green apple near the middle of the tree. Upon the second misstep, the apple became yellow and was located near the bottom of the tree. If a student was at the 4th level of unacceptable behavior, their apple was brown with a worm in it and it was on the ground below the tree. Imagine the impact on a 5-year-old child who received the repeated message that not only were they not acceptable, they were rotten apples with worms. My daughter never had such an apple, but my heart broke for the students who were frequent offenders. One little boy whose apple frequently landed on the ground, rotten, was usually seated by my daughter because she could concentrate despite of his lack of focus. Over the years, they continued to end up assigned to the same elementary classes and she continued to be assigned to sit next to him. She was nice to him and didn't shun him the way other kids had done since kindergarten. I think it was because she knew how much it hurt me to see his name on that rotten apple; so, she tried to help him with his work when she was allowed to.

◦ *Julinda* [August 20, 2015 at 11:57 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Oh, my gosh, a rotten apple with worms? That is SO mean! Who would even think of doing that to a child? If our kids did that to another kid, what would we tell them? If an adult did that to us, what would we think?

◦ *Amy* [September 11, 2015 at 1:17 pm](#) · ·

That's funny that you mention the apple tree. I'm 34 years old and I remember to this day when I once got the black apple on the tree in my kindergarten classroom. It made me feel terrible. I just never wanted to get the rotten apple.

17. Pingback: [Public School and The Unconventional Parent; How I Made the Choice - RESPECTFUL PARENT | RESPECTFUL PARENT](#)

18. Pingback: [stoplight spotlight: one teacher shares how she moved beyond the stoplight | beyond the stoplight](#)

19. *web design company* [October 17, 2014 at 4:25 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I am in fact grateful to the holder of this web site who has shared this great piece of writing at here.

20. *Rachel Hottle* [February 18, 2015 at 10:14 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I completely agree that students should not be publicly shamed for their inability to conform to institutional standards. This piece is extremely relevant to the Schindler reading on extrinsic v. intrinsic motivation. I think the use of the stoplight falls into the extrinsic motivation category of punishment or shaming, which Schindler notes is not effective since it causes students to act or not act out of fear and does not prompt them to form long-term patterns of respectful behavior for others.

21. *Nancy Sorto* [February 18, 2015 at 1:38 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Hi Jen,

I completely agree with you. When I was in elementary school, I had my name written on the board once when I was in the third grade. I don't remember what I did, but I clearly remember seeing my name on the board in red marker. Everyone in the class saw me as one of the "good kids" so every one was shocked when my name went on the board. All I remember was feeling incredibly embarrassed. The classroom shouldn't be a place where students feel embarrassed; it should be a safe space.

When I went to my placement, I noticed that the teacher had a stop light in her classroom. The classroom reminded me of my elementary school classroom, but the chart still made me very uncomfortable.

22. *Sarah Hancock* [February 18, 2015 at 1:51 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I had a similar experience in my schooling experience, but we used what we called "Stop and Think"s. Stop sign shaped magnets that had the bold printed words "STOP AND THINK" would get placed on our desks for all to see if we were misbehaving. Students could accumulate multiple "Stop and Think"s before a greater punishment was given. Punishments alter behavior through fear rather than having a child logically and critically think for him/herself why such behavior is acceptable or not. I agree that there are better ways to manage behavior without degrading a child. By conversing with the students and thinking about how students' behavior affects themselves and others, the students can change their behavior for themselves. My only concern is a teacher's transition from the stoplight to conversion. How does a teacher manage the transition period when the students are just beginning to learn how to behave through respect?

23. *Nathaniel Peters* [February 18, 2015 at 2:09 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I agree that the idea of publicly shaming children can be really harmful. Kids in the classroom know who the ones are who usually end up on yellow or red, and I remember being mortified when my color changed.

However, this is a really practical tool for a teacher to use. Is there any value in a teacher using this privately? Or are the effects of a teacher knowing who the "yellow and red kids" are each day still going to poison their judgement?

24. *Sommer Denison* [February 18, 2015 at 2:44 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

This stoplight situation is one I am extremely familiar with as a system very similar to this one was used in my classroom from kindergarten up to fifth grade. Unlike the stop light we had a card system. Every student had their name and a pouch with 4 cards in it hanging from the board on this sheet of cloth. We started on green. If you did something bad it would go to yellow and then red. However, if u did something good it would go from green to blue. While there was no punishment for being on red at the end of the day, if you got a certain amount of blues in a row you would get a prize. During elementary school I was a pretty well behaved kid therefore I had never seen this system as a problem as I ended up with usually blue and green cards at the end of the day. However, I will never forget one time when I had to turn my card to yellow and then red. I was in second grade and I remember when the teacher made me go change my card I was mortified. I was so embarrassed that it was all I could think about the rest of class. It took my mind away from what I was learning that day and was a distraction. Reflecting back on my experience in elementary school while this system is not seen in a negative light by the kids who usually behave well, I would agree with your opinion that this system should be abolished. When a kid misbehaves there are other ways to discipline them besides doing it in front of the whole class with the stop light or card system.

The card system relates to the readings from this week as it comes with a rewards for behaving

appropriately. If one got a certain amount of blues in a row they got a prize. This prize was an extrinsic motivational factor to behave well. The students desire to behave in an appropriate manner does not come from their desire to be on task and not distract the class but instead their desire to earn a prize. Also this system can be further criticized as the reward is promised in the future which can cause short-term changes of behavior or if this reward is present the entire year then it creates a dependency of students on rewards making it harder to “remove them over time” (Shindler).

25. *Rachel Bronkema* [February 18, 2015 at 2:53 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I definitely agree with this argument. Children are not in school to be shamed and embarrassed and this is essentially what is happening. When I was in kindergarten, we had one of these stoplights and my name was accidentally moved to the yellow light and I was devastated. I hadn't even done anything to deserve that and yet just seeing my name on the yellow light was awful. I can only imagine the children whose names are constantly on the yellow and red lights. This sort of shame and embarrassment is not conducive to in depth and excited learning. They begin to get discouraged and at this point, they are no longer excited and they no longer desire to continue learning, which is perhaps the worse thing that can happen as a result of these stoplights.

26. *Sierra Stark* [February 18, 2015 at 2:57 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I totally agree with you Jen! I definitely made some connections between your post and the Skinner article, for example when Skinner says, “There are two ways to teach a man to look before leaping: he may be severely punished when he leaps without looking or he may be positively reinforced (possibly “spuriously”) for looking before leaping,” (p. 87-88). I think there is much to be said for incentivizing instead of punishing. It makes learning a positive experience instead or a negative one.

27. *Jasmine Anouna* [February 18, 2015 at 3:09 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

John Shindler described in his text ‘Transformative Classroom Management’ that oftentimes when a student gets a poor mark on an assignment, they may perceive the grade as a “reflection of themselves or their ability in that subject.” As I read your post Jen, Shindler’s words lingered through my mind; if a typically “green student” ends up on the red circle for some reason one day, perhaps the visual representation of their behavior that day may crush their incentive to do better for the entire year. A private one-on-one evaluation is much more effective to change bad behavior: I speak from experience!

28. *Maricarla* [February 18, 2015 at 3:10 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Wow, I have never heard of this technique. I am placing myself in a student’s shoes and feeling embarrassed seeing my name on red. What exactly is the teacher implying here?? Red in a stoplight means ‘stop.’ Are teachers basically implying that the child on red should literally stop behaving the certain way that led them up there? To “stop.” I find this really hurtful for the child. This would definitely impact a child’s motivation drastically. The stoplight seems to be an incorrect way to keep track of the children’s behavior in class; the stoplight will drive most students towards a desire for attention and reward, which would be the green light. This extrinsic motivation would be much more harmful to the child in the long run than helpful. The students would want to focus on the reward to be seen as a “good” student on the green of the stoplight, than learning.

Really insightful and great article. Thanks!

29. *Alice Liu* [February 18, 2015 at 3:25 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

In second grade, my teacher used stoplights to visually indicate our performance in the class. We would always start with green, and could only move down from infractions. Typically, my card was green. However, on the days that I forgot to bring homework, I would have to get up, walk over to the cards, and change my card from green to yellow. I was shamed in front of my classmates, and was externally motivated to never forget my homework or act out of character in class. I always described those days as my bad days, and failed to remember anything special about that day. For me, changing my card from green to yellow indicated both “bad” and “special” day. I wanted to always be green and feared the shaming that came with stoplights. Furthermore, homework check was during the start of the day, so before I did anything in the classroom, I had already fallen from green to yellow. The card was not representative of my performance in the class, but how obedient I was because I had completed my homework.

However, some of my classmates who became yellow frequently started not to care. They lowered their expectations of themselves and did not have the motivation to pursue their studies. There was no way to go from yellow to green, and thus the teacher provided no external motivation to give encouragement.

Like our motivational reading, our teacher used stoplights as an external motivation to tell students to perform better. However, there was no incentive to perform better or be exceptional or give in “high quality work”. There is no important learning lesson associated with it. Instead, the stoplight reinforced our need to just be obedient.

30. *Sophia* [February 18, 2015 at 3:38 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Spotlights definitely seem like a bad idea. Like the Schindler reading on motivational strategies says, extrinsic motivational strategies, such as the spotlight, may lead students to want to please the teacher rather than learn to base their behavior on what is right or wrong.

Schindler also talks about how antagonisms between student can be created when praise and punishment is misused, and the spotlight certainly seems like a breeding ground for sparking conflict and competition between students. Making kids feel like they are in a constant contest to win over the teacher creates an unnecessary struggle in the classroom that does not revolve around self-improvement or growth.

31. *Marissa* [February 18, 2015 at 3:57 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I mostly agree with this. The classroom I observed used a similar system involving stop signs, and it didn't seem to increase good behavior, only to foster resentment. The reading on motivation described the way that negative punishment only leads children to attempt to avoid punishment, instead of motivating them to behave. It would be better to give the children intrinsic motivation, as you outline in your discussion on respect. However, while I believe systems of negative reinforcement such as stoplights are not beneficial, I wonder if individual incidences of punishment are occasionally necessary.

32. *Rida Hassan* [February 18, 2015 at 4:00 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I really enjoyed reading this piece Jen, and I completely agree with the message you are bringing across. I do believe that it is important to alert children to the need to change certain problematic behaviors, but I do not believe that this should be a public process which shames them. An important part of student-teacher relationships is trust, and this can only be cultivated if students feel that their teachers are supporting rather than undermining them. Although it undeniably requires more effort on the part of the teacher, investing more time in children individually is guaranteed to pay off more than taking the easy way out and putting their names up on the chalkboard or the stoplight.

33. *Yanyan Ren* [February 18, 2015 at 4:12 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I can totally relate to this. We had the similar system in primary school of putting name on blackboard. Student in charge of cleaning the blackboard would often leave that corner untouched, so the names would be up there forever unless the teacher wipes it off. I remember the shame of seeing my name up there for two days because no one else misbehaved after me.

Maybe you can already tell that this system's reinforcer is not working properly. Instead of feeling bad for my misbehavior and change it, I focused on praying for the next misbehaved student comes up quickly to replace my name.

The reinforcer is not proportional in both spotlight system and blackboard system. It's really easy for teachers to put names up, but hard (or random in my case) to take it down. Also, instead of feeling happy to see my name get off, I felt the second wave of shame because it reminds me once I belong to the "bad kid list".

I would also argue that using such a mechanical technique in teaching simplifies the problem and stops teacher from really knowing students. But even if we are OK with it, it's a terrible designed programming.

34. *Chris* [February 22, 2015 at 4:36 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I have always agreed that a public display of a child's behavior is humiliating. I never use the spotlight. However there needs to be some medium of behavior management in the classroom. I know that children are not bad. They like to talk and be silly. They have energy and spunk. When there are 26 students in the classroom who all want to learn we need to get beyond distractions through an individual or classroom management system.

35. *Madaline* [June 2, 2015 at 9:14 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I remember my teachers using this in the early 90s. I remember in second grade getting a red once and being devastated (I was a highly sensitive child). However – I vowed never ever to get in trouble at school again. And you know what I didn't. I never even so much as forgot my homework.

Likewise my 6 year old nephew happily reports via skye that he brought home two pinks (apparently the new green) and (giggling) one red last week. I asked him what he did, id'ed it and we moved on. Now I totally recognize not all children are able to grasp it and id what happened and how to avoid it, however, I am hoping my now toddlers teachers will use this system when appropriate in the future. I also won't shame her if she brings home a red, but at least it'll give us an opener to talk about a problem day at school.

36. *Denice* [June 5, 2015 at 9:12 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I think you underestimate each child's ability to control his/her behavior. The behavior exists and is displayed to the class whether you put a name on the board or not. The spotlight eliminates the teacher having to constantly call the misbehaving student's name all of the time. Even children with disabilities have it within themselves to change their behavior when encouraged to do so. When a teacher lets all children know that HIGH EXPECTATIONS are the rule and not the exception, children rise to that self fulfilling prophecy. Set the academic and behavioral bar high so that students can attain above and beyond what they think is possible. Spotlight, chalk, etcetera....be consistent, respectful, fair, and set the bar high.

37. *Courtney* [June 12, 2015 at 7:03 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Do you have any suggestions of resources for parents to use with kids who have anger issues? Books to read with the child, etc for parents of children who end up on the red all the time? I appreciate your suggestions!

38. *Denise* [June 23, 2015 at 9:41 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Hi, as both a teacher and a parent I find this interesting. I have two children with special needs. My older child rarely ever has to clip down, but on the times he does it results in a huge meltdown. He has extreme anxiety and Aspergers. My youngest is in a self contained special education class. He is diagnosed with autism, ADHD, intellectual delay, and mild cerebral palsy. He has a horrible time controlling his behaviors. Medications help a little, but due to a brain injury he suffered at birth, medications are hard to regulate. He is often clipped down to yellow or red. I wonder what your opinions are on clipping down children who have behavioral concerns due to disabilities? My son will likely require some sort of care for life. He will always struggle. Not all children are as “in control” of behaviors as we would like to think.

39. Pingback: [Infodumping is My Love Language vol. 2 | The E is for Erin](#)40. *Emma @ P is for Preschooler* [July 17, 2015 at 11:38 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

So glad to read this! My daughter just finished her first year of school, and now things she is one of the “bad kids” because she was often on red. I don’t think a lot of teachers think about how seriously children can be affected by this kind of thing.

41. *Pat* [July 25, 2015 at 2:44 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Dear Parent Letter,

For one day I would like to videotape your child in my classroom so you can see exactly why their clothespin was moved from green to red on the stoplight. A picture/video is worth a thousand words.

Thank you.

Your Child’s Classroom Teacher

42. *termlimitsforcongress* [August 29, 2015 at 8:06 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I agree that I don’t like using the color charts- even if they have options for going above or the option to move back up within a day... I struggle daily with it at my school because it is the system used school wide for K-2 — the assistants and the specials teachers, principal and administration expect you to be using it. Even if I don’t move a child in my class down- my part-time assistant or other people in the school move a child down in my classroom. This year I’m “using it” but also tying it into another system (private- not visual for others to see) In FL I only used it my first year and stopped the other 3. It never really worked that first year anyway- and it didn’t work last year when I was forced to use it again. I wish there was a way to get rid of it where I am now. I wish the administration wasn’t so old school on this.

43. *S. Rainey* [August 30, 2015 at 8:47 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

i will begin by saying that I have taught for several years and for most of them I have used the stop light . I agree with many of your concerns and have tried to address them in my room . First of all I generally tweak the traffic light to fit the classroom theme so it is not as noticeable as a regular behavior chart . It has been a traffic light with little cars , a rocket ship, and most recently a little bird house . The children are assigned a number . The number is written on a marker (a race car, an astronaut , bird , etc) and placed in a container near the chart . The children move their marker to the pocket on either side of the chart . The chart is placed on the back wall with a cart or bookshelf in front of or near it . A visitor coming in would not even see it . If they did they would not know which child had moved their marker since they are numbered . At the end of the day or the next morning the child will move down their marker . I talk with them about why it had been moved and tell them each day is a new day to start fresh with better choices . I agree that talking or playing are normal for young children but they must also learn appropriate times for talking and

playing . They generally do not move their marker for either unless they have been asked to settle down and have not . Or they will move it for being defiant . I then send a note to the parent in the child's day calendar . Students who did not move their marker also get a note with a smiley face . I think children need to learn that actions have consequences . A behavior chart where the children move their marker to the chart or up the chart as part of a consequence as well as off the chart as part of a reminder to start fresh can be helpful in teaching and monitoring or discipline . It can also allow a teacher to discreetly tell the child to go move their marker and hopefully continue teaching .

44. *Jen* [August 30, 2015 at 2:48 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

It seems to me the majority of people complaining about the stoplight want to 1) shield their child from the consequences of their actions and 2) are unable to accept that the teacher is the authority in the classroom, not the parent.

45. *londongirl* [January 20, 2016 at 10:11 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Hi thanks for this article. My children's school uses various versions of this – cards or pegs which move to different colours, etc. Whilst it may work for some children, for others it doesn't work. (I have 3 children so am quite aware how different children are!).

My son has struggled with school from the start. He is a summer baby so was one of the youngest in the year. I can remember when he started school in Reception year the method used was 'weather' so you started your day on a sunshine, moved up to a rainbow if you did something 'good' etc. I recall my son spending rather a lot of time being on the 'dark cloud' at the bottom. Looking back I wish I had spoken out about it at the time. I can't help wonder what message that gave to him at 4 years old – 'you are a dark cloud'.... no wonder he doesn't like school. Last year the method the teacher used was that he would come out with a face on a piece of paper – smiling, neutral or sad. The colour system is still used in his current classroom and he now spends a lot of time on orange or red.

So – for those who say 'it helps children control their behaviour', it doesn't!! All that has happened is that my son is so used to changing his colour (or face or cloud or whatever), that it has become meaningless. His self-confidence and his view of himself at school are very low. We are working so much with him at home to improve his behaviour and skills, but I can't help wondering what the school have done to help him apart, from from this method.

Also as others have pointed out, my son comes out of school and the first thing he tells me is what colour he is on, rather than how his day was, or what he learnt. So when my son came out from school the other day to tell me he was on orange again, I said 'how about instead of you telling me the colour, you tell me what actually happened?'

I used to try to be as supportive of the school's policies as I could because I felt it was important we should work together, but after 4 years of this I am now feeling pretty fed-up.

46. *Dana* [February 11, 2016 at 2:50 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

This article made me smile. For all the years I have been teaching, this is one method I never used. In my first years of teaching, I tried star charts, various reward systems, collaboration work, some of them are effective but never to all of the children in the classroom. And i know why.

To keep a controlled class environment, a teacher must be able to connect to every child in the room. All of them are different and there's no one method fits all. Spend at least 3 minutes each day on one on one talk per child. Find out their family culture, their way of doing things at home. Getting to know them wholeheartedly makes a hell lot of difference.

I have been teaching 3 – 4 year olds for 8 years, 2 year olds for 3 years, and the connection once established works like magic. When a child knows you know them well, a mere look is enough.

Also, have fun. Do not dwell on keeping track of their behavior. Enjoy the learning process with them as if you are one of them and everybody will be engaged. If anything goes wrong, talk. Calmly. Tell them why it is not right and what should be done. Tell them why you are not happy with the behaviour. Teach them how to behave.

I have been doing this for years. And believe me when I say I have no behaviour management system because there's no need for it.

47. *Diane* [February 11, 2016 at 12:38 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

I was unfortunate enough to grow up in a violent, alcoholic home and, as a result, lacked concentration in class. One day in grade 3, my teacher decided to display our test results in geography by having the whole class stand up and then sit down according to our scores from the top 100 pct down in groups of 10 (100-90, etc). I was the last one standing. This affected my self-esteem, willingness to learn and willingness to participate throughout my life. I was already shame based and this exercise completely reinforced that. It took a lot of hard work and many years but I have overcome the shame. Please consider how vulnerable and tender your students are before choosing how to correct their behaviour.

48. *brit* [February 12, 2016 at 8:23 am](#) · · [Reply](#) →

Plus, I remember something similar, and if you saw your name you were devastated. But what is more likely to happen is what I remember happening- you get in trouble and it gets recorded and shown. You're in your best behavior to get that trouble erased, but now the teacher is so overwhelmed they no longer have time to notice how good you're being. They also have no time to record publicly the others being bad, which creates favoritism. THEN, because you can't get out of trouble due to distraction, you are an automatic suspect every day, and can get continuously in trouble because you're "prone to it" according to the teachers memory. Cycle and repeat until it's a self esteem issue and the child is now grown. Shaming has such long repercussions

49. *julie* [June 2, 2016 at 8:01 pm](#) · · [Reply](#) →

My child came home on red everyday with "Not making good choices" ths did not go with the personality I knew. We had a conference and the teacher said I tell her it is story time and she goes to the art table. So basically she isnt making the the choice you want her to make. To her it is a good choice. She can go to the art tables and not be bothered. You keep telling her everyday "make a choice" then telling her she really didnt have a choice. Just say Maggie it is reading time. problem solved.

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