

Health (Http://Www.Philly.Com/Health)

— Healthy Kids (http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/healthy_kids)

Hey teachers, behavior charts are not the problem. Here's why

Updated: SEPTEMBER 22, 2016 — 9:46 AM EDT



 ISTOCKPHOTO

by **Jessica Kendorski, PhD, NCSP, BCBA-D**, Associate Professor in School Psychology/Applied Behavior Analysis at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine

[_@DrJessKendorski \(http://twitter.com/DrJessKendorski\)](https://twitter.com/DrJessKendorski) |

[healthykids@philly.com \(mailto:healthykids@philly.com\)](mailto:healthykids@philly.com)

Last week, Wendy Thomas Russell wrote a [column](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/column-hey-teachers-please-stop-using-behavior-charts-heres/) (<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/column-hey-teachers-please-stop-using-behavior-charts-heres/>) for *PBS Newshour*, outlining the reasons behavior charts should not be used in the classroom. While her article outlined some potential issues with the inappropriate use of behavior charts in the classroom, there were many inaccuracies that respectfully need to be addressed.

As a behavior analyst, school psychologist and mother, I often see a misunderstanding of the field of applied behavior analysis. The most salient myth is that behavior analysis is about controlling behavior—however, that's not true.

The official definition of behavior analysis is “a science devoted to the understanding and improvement of behavior.” That is, it seeks to empower students to achieve their full potential by enabling educators to recognize the environmental factors that affect students' behaviors and change them.

Often in applied behavior analysis, a misuse of terminology can sometimes lead to confusion and a misuse of strategies. This confusion of terminology is apparent in Russell's column. What she describes as a “reward” is actually being used as punishment because the reward is being removed when the behavior is poor. A reward is presumed to have a positive impact on behavior. Additionally, whether something is considered reinforcement or punishment must be understood within the context of the effect it has on a student's behavior. For example, if a behavior increases following the presentation of a token, then the token is reinforcing.

Let's talk about some of Russell's other claims.

Claim 1: They are shaming. “Rewards are for training pets not people.”

Misuse: When used inappropriately, even seemingly positive things (grades, trophies, test scores, praise) can be used to shame a student. A child with behavior difficulty who does not receive appropriate behavior support is more at risk for shaming when he or she is constantly corrected--or removed from class altogether—than a child whose class focuses on teaching and encouragement.

Appropriate Use: The appropriate use can empower the student and improve relationships between teacher and student. Teachers should set clear, achievable goals for students that are developed in collaboration with the students. When goals are met, provide genuine praise; when they are not, explain why, and that the slate is clean and he or she can begin anew. The focus is on encouragement of appropriate behavior.

Claim 2: Behavior charts waste valuable class time.

Misuse: Calling attention to inappropriate behavior is the wrong way to use a behavior chart, and nothing wastes more valuable class time than ineffective behavior support strategies and the constant correction of behavior problems.

Appropriate use: Providing students with praise when they are engaging in appropriate behavior means increased time spent in instruction (<http://www.pbis.org/research>). This can be subtle, individual to the student, done while teaching and takes only seconds. Additionally, acknowledging a student doing the right thing, will help encourage the student with behavior difficulty to act similarly. This helps to build positive relationships.

Claim 3: "Extrinsic rewards reduces intrinsic motivation."

Misuse: Intrinsic motivation is when an individual engages in an activity for an internal reward (enjoyment, excitement, challenge). Some research (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/oct07/vol65/num02/The-Perils-and-Promises-of-Praise.aspx>) has indicated that extrinsic rewards can reduce intrinsic motivation when they are used for activities that a student has a high probability of engaging or that they already find enjoyable.

Appropriate Use: There has been a significant amount of research (http://www.misd.net/mtss/consequences/extrinsic_rewards.pdf) that shows when extrinsic reinforcement is used appropriately, it does not reduce intrinsic motivation. Often in the classroom, rewards are used for activities that students are less likely to do. At these times, instructors should teach students specific behaviors and criteria that can lead to a reward, so that students know what is expected of them. Additionally, teachers

should determine if the requirements are close to their instructional or skill level. Specific praise for low preferred activities should focus on the effort put forth by the student in meeting the behavioral criteria and not on “getting a token.”

Claim 4: “Rewards and punishments rarely change behavior.”

Misuse: Behavior analysis seeks to determine why an individual is engaging in a certain behavior. Rewards are only reinforcing if they change behavior, specifically, that they increase the likelihood that behavior will continue in the future. Often, teachers may believe that they are “rewarding” a behavior, but we can only determine if something is reinforcing or punishing when we see that change.

Appropriate Use: If an instructor implements a behavior strategy that does not reduce the inappropriate behavior or increase the appropriate behavior, then we must investigate what may be prohibiting that behavior change. This often involves determining the needs of the students and working to meet those needs. Behavior strategies do not dismiss the needs of students, in fact quite the opposite, it is used to develop more appropriate strategies for students to get their needs met.

The bottom line is, each of these strategies (<http://interventioncentral.org/behavioral-intervention-modification>) can be considered a tool for managing classroom behavior. With any tool, the user must learn how to use it properly. In the same way that it’s ridiculous to throw out a hammer because you’re using the claw to pound in nails, it’s also ridiculous to dismiss these strategies as “ineffective” simply because the user doesn’t yet understand how they work.

Have a question for the Healthy Kids panel? [Ask it here](#) (<http://www.philly.com/philly/health/kidshealth/214763771.html>). Read more from the [Healthy Kids blog](#) » (http://www.philly.com/philly/blogs/healthy_kids)

Published: September 22, 2016 — 4:00 AM EDT | **Updated:** September 22, 2016 — 9:46 AM EDT

© Copyright ([//www.philly.com/philly/about/copyright/](http://www.philly.com/philly/about/copyright/))2018 Philadelphia Media Network (Digital), LLC
Terms of Use & Privacy Policy ([//www.philly.com/philly/about/terms_of_use/](http://www.philly.com/philly/about/terms_of_use/))