

POSITIVE THINKING

DR NICOLA DAVIES EXPLAINS WHY FOCUSING ON REWARDS RATHER THAN PUNISHMENT TO MANAGE BEHAVIOUR IS AN APPROACH THAT'S SUPPORTED BY OUR GROWING UNDERSTANDING OF THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN...

The Psychologist Rudolf Dreikurs, after many observations, identified four motivators for disruptive behaviour in the classroom:

■ **To get attention:** If students are deprived of the opportunity to gain status through useful contributions, they seek evidence of their status through attention-seeking activities.

■ **To get power:** If effective methods aren't used to prevent attention-seeking, students can become power-seekers whose goal is to be leader.

■ **To get revenge:** If teachers implement a range of discipline strategies to address unwanted behaviour, students can retaliate in order to get revenge.

■ **To purposefully display inadequacy:** When students have given up trying to 'belong' and expect failure and defeat they purposefully underachieve in order to fulfil low expectations they or their teachers have of them.

An understanding of the psychology behind behaviour can help teachers implement more successful interventions. For example, Dreikurs advises that teachers question a disruptive student on each of these motivators in order to identify the underlying reasons for the behaviour. Joanne Philpott, deputy headteacher at the comprehensive City of Norwich School (CNS) in Norfolk, says, "Most children like to be noticed and this can manifest itself in negative attention-seeking

behaviour – but for the majority, simple gestures of recognition will go a long way to promoting cooperative attitudes to learning and positive behaviour."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Dreikurs' model for understanding unwanted behaviour demonstrates why punishments rarely work – they cause students to become defensive. Fortunately, the four intrinsic motivators he defined can be counterbalanced by an extrinsic motivator, or motivation with the use of external rewards. Positive reinforcement comes in many forms, from verbal praise to certificates or awards that acknowledge effort or achievement.

An understanding of the adolescent brain can help shed light on why positive reinforcement is more effective than punishment. Biological changes occur within the brain during adolescence – neurons and synapses proliferate in the cerebral cortex, allowing more impulses through. As a person reaches adulthood, 40% of those synapses are eliminated, bringing in calmer, more controlled adult behaviour. Therefore, it is futile expecting adult behaviour from secondary school students – their brains won't allow it! Equally, it makes no sense to punish behaviour resulting from the adolescent psyche.

Teachers can, however, facilitate more desirable behaviour. In the brain, there are networks of neurons which encode information, leading to a neural pathway which is strengthened by repeated reinforcement. If the pathway is paved with repeated rewards,

the behaviours associated with those rewards become habitual. To encourage positive behaviour, the 'rewards' need to be consistent, prompt, and varied.

"We have a house system that has ownership of rewards, and house assemblies demonstrate that non-tangible yet visible rewards promote a sense of achievement and community," says Philpott. "House assemblies allow house leaders to regularly reward students and introduce a competitive element to positive points – rewarded for meeting lesson criteria, participation, progress, challenge, responsibility, and attendance. Form groups enjoy the competitive edge and 100% attendees are entered for a weekly prize draw."

CHANGING CONSEQUENCES

Sacha Griffiths, counselling psychologist, recommends the cognitive behavioural model for understanding adolescent behaviour and for encouraging young people to develop self-awareness and self-regulation. An example is the ABC model offered by psychologists Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, which proposes that behaviour is motivated by thought – "as I think, so I feel (and do!)."

Activating Event – failing a maths exam.

Belief – "I'm useless at maths!"

Consequence – becoming disruptive in maths class.

By talking to students and finding out what is going through their minds, teachers can help them modify any irrational beliefs that are driving unhelpful behaviour. In this example, what a world of difference it might make to explore with the student factors other than "being useless", such as whether he or she revised, or found a particular section difficult, or whether some extra tuition or a different learning strategy might help.



FOUR STEPS TO REINFORCE BEHAVIOUR

Dr Jeremy Swinson, educational psychologist, provides a four-step model for encouraging positive class behaviour:

Step 1: Give instructions that are absolutely clear, including what is unacceptable behaviour.

Step 2: Look for students doing what they have been asked and acknowledge/reward their efforts.

Step 3: Give specific and descriptive feedback, which is appropriate and sincere, to students on track with their tasks.

Step 4: Prepare how to respond to inappropriate behaviour; and ensure your approach is consistent.

