

Guidelines for Using the Coupon Program

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Introduction

Prior to going into more detail about the Coupon Program it is important to understand the role of student comprehension of behavioral expectations. A break down in social understanding is a significant contributor to emotional and behavioral problems in school, so comprehension must be a critical ingredient in any behavior intervention effort. Frequently behavior intervention programs are limited in their success because they do not adequately address the student's understanding of what is expected and what to expect. Just naming the behavior and putting it on a chart or into the schedule or making it a classroom rule is not enough to ensure student comprehension. What is in the teacher's mind is not always what is in the student's mind. This is especially the case with students who have trouble discerning the nuances of routines and situations, as well as students who have a developmental history of poor behavioral adjustment (because they have had such limited experience with expected behavior). Social comprehension is essential to behavioral change, so we must account for that in our intervention programming. For more information about the role of social comprehension in the development of improved student behavior, see (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/improving-comprehension-of-the-nuances-of-routines/>).

Comprehension Guides can be easily created to explain different types of classroom behavior expectations (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/comprehension-guides-directory/>). Comprehension Guides help students increase their awareness about age-appropriate social conventions and expectations by providing an illustrated explanation of the expected behavior—what it looks like, what it sounds like, when it is appropriate, and why it is important—embedded in a story about that behavior. Usually the story also includes examples of the student's current behavior that is inappropriate, along with what that looks like, what that sounds like, why it is inappropriate, and why it can cause problems for the student.

A special case of behavior intervention using social comprehension guides is the Coupon Program. Coupon programs are used to increase greater self-control in young students (ages 6-12) whose behavior is impulsive or the result of a bad habit. In both instances the behavior that is not under good conscious control (it just happens without thinking). The coupon program can improve impulse control and reverse a bad habit by teaching students better self-management. Three examples include the ADHD Coupon Program (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/adhd-coupon-program/>), the Teacher Attention Program (search at <https://kevinplummerphd.com/>), and the Impulsive Responding Program (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/impulsive-responding-program-directions/>). At the end of this article is an example of a coupon from the Teacher Attention Program. You can see that the coupon is created from pieces of the social comprehension guide book from the Teacher Attention Program.

It's easy to understand how impulsive and habitual behavior (e.g., calling out in class, interrupting others who are answering) can be classified as misbehavior or a conduct problem, and then treated with various forms of discipline and constant limit setting (negative consequences following the behavior). This can become a chronic occurrence throughout the school day, because impulsive and habitual behavior is something that happens all the time, to excess. Repeated discipline and limit setting all day long runs the risk of shaping a negative student identity (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/shaping-student-identity/>) and creating negative relationships between the student and the teacher and the student and other students. Furthermore, with a constant focus on what's wrong, and without enough of a focus on the skill that is needed to replace the "conduct problem," sustainable success is extremely unlikely.

Instead of approaching impulsivity as a discipline or conduct problem, coupon programs treat the problem like a skill deficit, a comprehension break down, and a bad habit. The assumption is that the skill can be improved and the habit reversed. Successful programming provides a chance to practice the skill and student efforts are reinforced through recognition and reward. In addition to recognition (which shapes a positive student identity) and reward (earning credit, a feeling of success); support for developing this new skill also includes scripted verbal feedback (teacher uses the content on coupon), precise redirection from the teacher (precision and repetition for better internalization and memory management), and continuous visual feedback on performance (the coupon gives the student feedback needed for self-monitoring) to enable increased student awareness of how close they are to achieving their goal. Taken all together, this has the potential to be a much more potent program than a discipline/negative consequence approach.

Impulsive and habitual behavior is typically under responsive to verbal direction. It requires so many reminders ahead of time to prevent the occurrence of the habitual behavior and then so many additional reminders throughout the task to limit the impulsive behavior when it occurs anyway. Verbal intervention, under these circumstances, can lead to greater rates of ignoring the message (because it needs to be repeated so many times) and greater dependence on the teacher to be the reminder (do what you feel like doing because the teacher will correct you if it's important). The Coupon Program leads to increased self-management and greater independence by using an incentivized visual feedback system.

It is important to remember that impulsive students can, (i.e., they are able to) demonstrate self-control, if they only have to do it for a short period of time (the coupon goals have a fixed time period, the end is in sight). They can do it if they remember to do it (the coupon is a visual reminder of what they have to do, for how long, and how close they are to accomplishing their goal). They can do it as long as they don't have to be perfect, mistake free (the coupon is set up to give them two chances and it shows them how many chances they have left). They can do it if they are motivated (each coupon has an incentive value if it is completed). Impulsive and habitual behavior requires a program that uses a highly fluid reinforcement system, one that enables

students to see immediately (and all the time, while the program is running) what they have done well and what they need to improve. The coupon program provides this.

Implementation Guidelines

1) Complete the social comprehension step using the guide book. Refer to the story as needed, prior to using the coupon, until the student has reached full comprehension of what is required and how to do it.

2) Explain to the student how to use the coupons. The coupon is labeled at the top with the skill the student is working on (e.g., Work on Using Teacher Attention the Right Way). Point this out to the student, then go over the visual reminders on the coupon, (e.g., reminding the student about the appropriate reasons for seeking teacher attention and the examples of inappropriate seeking attention, and point out where the coupon shows this). It is sometimes helpful to refer back to the story, where all this is explained, the first time the coupon is introduced and explained.

Let the student know how long the coupon will run (for a time period, or one learning situation, or until the completion of an assignment). This notation can be written on the coupon. In the case of having the student work independently instead of over using teacher attention and teacher time (using teacher attention the right way), indicate when the teacher will be back to spend some time helping or checking the work. For example, if teacher attention is appropriate to check student seatwork after problem three, that number should be circled, and perhaps put a T next to it (to tell the student to raise a hand to call the teacher over to check, once problem 3 is completed). This is supplying contingent teacher attention. Teacher attention is contingent on (and reinforcing of) productive behavior, rather than nonproductive behavior (e.g., doing no work, acting inappropriately, and the teacher has to intervene).

Explain the various ways that the student can get credit on the coupon (e.g., following the expected behavior shown on the coupon). Use additional information from the guide book if needed, because the coupon only lists a sample of the expected behavior.

Explain that the goal is to fill up all the credit boxes (e.g., 6) before the reminder boxes are full (3). That is a successful coupon and it can be saved for the incentive (the credits from the coupon can be doubled and added to the student's credit sheet—for programs that use The Credit Program—and successful coupons can be put into a bank to be cashed in later for the incentive). For more information about credit programs see (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/credit-program/>). Following a successful coupon, a student can immediately start working on another one.

Also, explain different examples of coupon violations (e.g., calling out an answer without permission with the impulsive responding coupon) and show where this reminder is summarized on the coupon (a summary, so not all the possible examples from the story). Explain that any of these violations will use one of the reminder boxes. An X will

be put in an empty reminder box. Caution the student about filling up all the reminder boxes. Once all these boxes are full, the coupon has to be discarded and the student will start over with a fresh coupon, unable to save any of the credits already earned in the credit boxes.

Step three. Using reminder boxes. There is a place on the coupon to indicate reminders. When the student requires a reminder during the coupon period (the reminder must pertain to the coupon goal, not some other behavior) an X is put in the first open reminder box. If a second reminder is required within the coupon period, an X is put in the second box. The third reminder box is labeled “try again.” If this box is marked, the coupon is discarded and no award is made. The reminders are helpful because 1) no one is perfect (and no one wants to play a game that can only be won with perfection) and 2) the reminders increase motivation when the student is close to reaching the goal (“I have one more chance left, but I’m almost there with my credit boxes”).

Step four. Using the critical period to increase student motivation. A critical period is the point of highest motivation, when the student is about to be successful with the coupon (credit boxes are almost full), and at the same time the coupon is about to be lost because of too many reminders. At this point we want to increase student focus on the learning trial, and create the most helpful memory of the moment.

We cannot explain to anyone how to concentrate, how to control their impulsive comments, how to continue working without over relying on teacher attention and help. We can give them suggestions, but they have to figure out for themselves how it is done, what it looks like and feels like to them while they're doing it. Our responsibility is to make it possible and to cause the student to focus on it. Students become more focused on the goal when they are close to their goal (the credit boxes are almost full) and they are also running out of reminders.

When there is only one box left in the reminders column the student should be told how much time is left (or how much work is left to do in the time available) and that the next reminder will fill all the boxes, so it will have to be a "try again" ("You have 5 more minutes of working independently and only one reminder box left, so let's have you use teacher attention the right way so you don't have to try again with a new coupon."). Point out how many credit boxes are already filled ("You already have 4 credits earned. Make sure you save those instead of using all your reminders, throwing the whole coupon away and starting over again.").

Step five. Decide when it is best to use the coupons. Coupons are only provided to the student during selected opportunities designated by the teacher (e.g., the best opportunity to work on the teacher attention skill might be during an independent work period). The coupons should be used strategically. It is tempting to fill the entire period and entire day with coupons. Remember, this is a short-term program calling for a burst of extra effort, so we want the student to practice something and achieve success within

a short, focused period. A longer period can be too discouraging at the outset (no end in sight) and doomed to fail. Also, successful application of independent work habits and greater self-control/impulse control eventually degenerates if the period is too long. With extended periods that degenerate to a failure point, the student learns nothing new about work habits (memories of success with new work habits are not created, even if the first part of the time period was successful) and impulse control and old habits get too much practice. Something that works well for the short term becomes completely ineffective if used in a long-term way.

Choose a short period of time (at first) to have the student focus on applying the skill (e.g., 20 minutes). Run the program for several short periods at different points in the day, rather than one long and extended period. Each coupon is a learning trial and it is better, at first to have many learning trials than it is to have just one trial that is very long. Throughout the 20 minutes (approximately) periodically (at designated check points and randomly) give the student credit for using the skill (check off a recognition box).

Step six. Reinforce appropriate behavior. Throughout a short academic period (e.g., 20 minutes) periodically (randomly) check off a box if the student has refrained from any violations. In addition, check off a box if the student has engaged in the appropriate behavior (e.g., used teacher attention the right way). At first, you could reinforce each instance with a credit box, or at least with verbal recognition and a credit box the next time (e.g., each time the student calls the teacher over to help with the work and it's legitimate). Each instance of reinforcement should be accompanied by pointing to the visual and commenting with a phrase similar to the coupon (e.g., "I'm giving you credit because you worked on your own and waited for me to check on you, instead of calling me over when you weren't ready").

Within a 20-minute period of demonstrating the appropriate coupon behavior it is expected that all the credit boxes would be checked. However, when there are increased opportunities within the twenty minutes (e.g., the student legitimately needs more help with the work), one coupon could be completed and another one started within the same 20-minute period.

Any partially completed coupons can be saved until the next opportunity. Any successfully completed coupons can be put aside and used for double credits on the student's credit sheet (sometimes people create a coupon bank and decide that a certain number of coupons can be used to earn a reward).

While the coupon is in effect stay focused on that behavior while temporarily ignoring the other work habits that may also need improvement (e.g., do not give an X for a reminder about a behavior that is not part of the program). If you provide correction about all the other things that need to improve you will be distracting the student from the goal and any success with the coupon behavior will be lost or meaningless). If you work on everything at once, nothing will improve. You can always create another type of

coupon for additional behaviors, once the first set of behaviors has improved. Keep the focus simple and clear.

Step seven is to increase the difficulty. Students who are eventually successful with ease with the current coupon can graduate to extended coupons. Simply add another row of boxes under the credit boxes and use the coupon for a longer period of time (but do not increase the number of "reminders" boxes). This coupon will be worth more credit when it is completed, but the effort will have to be sustained for a longer period, without adding any other reminder chances.

Generalization, Transition From Coupons

Once the student is successful with the coupon program, the goal can be incorporated into the student's daily behavioral system as one of the social emotional learning skills (SEL) the student is working on. For example, the SEL skill can be added to the student's Credit Sheet, and all day long that will be one of the points of focus for issuing credits. This will allow for further generalization and internalization of the skill. For more information about how to incorporate SEL skills into a credit program see <https://kevinplummerphd.com/soft-skills-programming/>. The Credit Sheet should always evolve to reflect what the student is working on.

Once students have been successful for a long enough period of time we expect their identity as learners to shift in a more positive direction, and with a more positive identity (e.g., "I'm a student who has no problem working on my own and waiting to check with the teacher") comes more internal motivation (feeling competent is a strong motivator) and greater independence and individual responsibility. For more information on the motivational influence of competence see the work of Ed Deci on Self Determination Theory. For more information on the role of student identity in student motivation and behavior see, <https://kevinplummerphd.com/shaping-student-identity/>.

Other considerations

The coupon program must be used in conjunction with an incentive system. At several points in this article there is a reference to the Credit Program (and a link to an article about it) as the ideal incentive system for a coupon program. Not all classes will want to set up a credit program for a child or change the classroom reinforcement program already in place. In this case, let the coupons integrate with whatever is in place. Some classes have a point system, while others have a ticket system. Some classes have no established incentive system, but something can be created for selected students.

Each coupon lists a specific number of tickets that can be earned (ADHD coupons) or credits (all other coupon programs) if the coupon is successful. A successful coupon should be stored in a collection envelope and later the coupons can be cashed in for tickets or points or whatever the class earns. An unsuccessful coupon is simply discarded with the message, "try again later."

There is no record keeping. The coupons are the record. When enough accumulate, the student should cash in for the incentive and start working on the next goal. It is never too late for a student to start earning coupons. Every coupon will go toward the next goal. The program doesn't conclude at the end of the day, starting over the following day, it runs continuously and goals can be reached anytime throughout the day. The tickets or points should give the student access to a privilege or some other incentive that is made available to the class. If nothing is routinely arranged for the class, then something should be created for this student.

A student on this program should have many coupon opportunities throughout the day (but not too many). If fewer than 4 opportunities are provided, the program is not being run properly and there will be no effect. There will not be enough opportunity to learn, grow, make lasting changes. If more than 12 opportunities are provided, the program becomes too saturated and coupons lose their value, diminishing motivation ("who cares about this coupon, there are plenty of others I can earn").

Work on Using Teacher Attention the Right

W...

Reminders

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try again



I'm getting my work done on my own or I'm trying my best and the teacher is helping me with something difficult



I ask for help that I don't need, or I'm not doing my work when my teacher checks, or my behavior brings too much attention



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Double Credits for positive attention