The Green Zone
A Recognition-Based Program

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Traditional Behavior Management

Check charts are probably the most familiar behavior management tool to school staff and parents. In response to disruptive behavior, poor work habits, lack of independence and responsibility, inattentiveness, failure to follow the rules, social violations, and many other common childhood problems, teachers and parents have been told to set up a chart.

Traditional behavior programs that rely on point charts are designed around fixed intervals of time (they have a clear starting point as well as a clear ending point), reconciled at the end of the period, the end of the morning, day or week. The day is divided into time periods and the behaviors of interest (target behaviors) are listed in each time period. When the time period is over, the child is checked next to all the target behaviors that were successfully demonstrated. If a target behavior was not successfully demonstrated, no check is placed next to that behavior.

Sometimes each student starts with a fixed number of points and at the end of the interval a count is made of how many points were lost and how many are left. Checks/points are totaled at some later point in the day to determine if enough have been awarded to earn a reward. If students fail to earn enough points within the day, for example, they fail to earn the daily reward.

With a quick mental calculation, a student can easily determine, sometimes long before the period is up, that there is no chance of reaching the goal. Students who have had a difficult first part of the day (or difficult first part of the week for weekly charts) know they won't make it by the end of the day or week (e.g., you need at least 12 out of a possible 15 checks, the student has nine checks and there is only one more period left in the chart). Instead of motivating students, point charts can discourage students and diminish motivation when students realize they have "nothing more to lose" and no reason to continue trying. A student who has done very little work for the first part of the period, then, is not encouraged to get to work. Why work now, if it is not possible to succeed for the period?

Students can also determine that they will easily reach the goal (e.g., they already have 12 of the 12 needed checks and the day is not over). Rather than motivating students to achieve, students may feel like taking a break (because they already have enough points).

With traditional behavior programs teachers are reluctant to award or take away points on the spot because all the points could be awarded or lost within a few minutes into the period, diminishing student incentive for the rest of the period and limiting the teacher's recourse with the program. Many programs avoid this limitation (a finite number of checks or points for a specific period of time) by holding off on awarding

points until the end of the period. Instead, they over rely on repeated verbal feedback (positive or negative) as their immediate and ongoing response. Positive feedback comes with the promise of positive consequences ("If you keep working hard you will get your points at the end of math.") Negative feedback comes with the threat of negative consequences ("If you keep that up you're going to lose a check/point."). Beyond repeated warnings, which lose their meaning, or repeated verbal praise, which becomes mundane, nothing of any great consequence happens until the end of the interval or until the behavior worsens enough to warrant a significant consequence (and this is what we are trying to avoid).

Some students are told several times throughout a class period to complete their work, to follow directions, to pay attention, to stay in their seat, to stop talking, etc. With these students we already know one thing for certain; verbal intervention is ineffective. Nevertheless, verbal intervention continues to be the strategy of choice because it is most readily available and because this is how it works in the world outside of school. People are provided with verbal direction or redirection and they are expected to respond accordingly. It doesn't matter how smart you are or how much you've learned in school; if you don't learn how to respond appropriately to verbal direction and redirection you will be seriously disadvantaged in your efforts to be a success outside of school.

When teachers over rely on verbal correction it encourages students to ignore what the teacher says at first because, if it is important enough it will be followed by several more warnings, and then, after many more warnings—as it gets close to the end of the period—it will be time to make a behavior change before a more serious consequence (point loss) follows. Teachers continuously warn students (that they need to do better), remind students (that they can earn points), and threaten students (about the potential loss of points or not getting enough). The reinforcement or consequence that you want to use (the points) has to wait, limiting the effectiveness of the point system because nothing really happens until the end. And along the way students learn to ignore verbal intervention. Once the period is up students can argue about whether or not they deserve the points and all their effort can be put into rewriting recent history or claiming unfairness instead of assuming responsibility for behavior.

For many students verbal redirection is not only ineffective, it triggers defensive behavior (misperception of tone and intention), it leads to greater dependence (always waiting to be told before initiating, or doing what you want until someone says otherwise), and it inadvertently adds to the bad habit of ignoring the adult direction (it is repeated so often that a verbal direction said once means very little). This is why we want to replace verbal intervention with visual. Visual lasts longer and does not require repetition to be remembered. Furthermore, the visual message is there to be considered by the student when the student is more prepared to process the information in less defensive fashion.

No one can really remember with any credible degree of certainty, what happened over a one-hour period in a busy classroom with staff who are doing many things at one time. And even if you could remember, how do you decide (with point chart systems) if a condition has been violated and deserves no point awarded? What is

the tipping point? Is one violation enough to wipe out the point for entire period? What if the student does something significantly inappropriate that is not covered by one of the behavior conditions on the chart, while meeting all the expectations of the chart? Do they still get all their points? What if the student has a chart violation but engages in an abundance of redeeming behavior that is not listed on the chart? The child loses points despite an abundance of exemplary behavior? What if there was no opportunity to engage in the behavior expectation (e.g., "take turns" during a period of extended independent work). The students are awarded points even though they didn't engage in the desired behavior? These are all situations that call for violating the reinforcement procedures in favor of creating more authenticity. The behavior point chart systems that depend greatly on consistency, then, must be implemented with inconsistency or else risk authenticity, relevance, and meaning.

Authentic, Fluid Reinforcement and Continuous Feedback

Feedback that is authentic is provided in the moment and it pertains to a specific behavior or accomplishment. This is meaningful to the student, it is felt on an emotional level, and it is more easily stored as a clear memory (see Memory Management). Better memories lead to better behavior and a better chance to heal emotional scars. When we effectively manage memory students do a better job of managing their own behavior. The best memory management approaches are authentic, fluid, visually supported and applied in the present, not at the end of the period.

Fluid reinforcement and continuous feedback systems are visual systems that show students where they stand at all times, moment-to-moment, with respect to teacher expectations and task demands; and they are adjusted any time (whenever it is important to emphasize or reinforce the message the teacher wants to send, whenever the student makes a change), not just reconciled at the end of an interval of time as with more traditional behavior management systems.

Discouraged students need to feel encouraged, that there's a reason to try harder or to try again as soon as they can. They should not be made to feel defeated, or that they cannot possibly achieve the goal. They already know too much about that. Their efforts, however sporadic, then, should be recognized when they occur. If you wait until the end to award the reinforcement, it could be too late and you may have wasted an opportunity. Students need programs that are ready to recognize them whenever they are ready to apply themselves. With continuous feedback programs students never have to wait to find out how well they are doing. Also, adjustments in fluid programs can be small or large depending on the intended magnitude of the message.

Feedback that is continuous is supported with some form of visual display. The information can communicate continuously with the student whenever the student is capable of processing it, and the visual display can be adjusted immediately to reflect changes that the teacher thinks are important. This makes it easier for students to see the relevance of their behavior and for them to understand what they did that made a difference. It all happens in the present rather than relying on a behavior review conducted at the end of the period.

Systems that are fluid enable teachers to strategically adjust the amount of reinforcement, the timing of the reinforcement, and the frequency of reinforcement, and students can take all this in by looking at a visual display. Students who start slow can be amply rewarded for picking up the pace. It's never too late to try to get some positive reinforcement, and the amount available is based on the efforts of the student. It's open-ended. You're not dealing with a set or finite amount that has to be dispensed in an even way over the period. Students who make a mistake or a poor choice have ample opportunity to recover. With fluid systems you can always expect to be reinforced as you improve and try to make up for an earlier problem. A little of the right thing can be recognized with a little piece of reinforcement and a lot of the right thing can be recognized with a larger portion of reinforcement. Fluid systems are very flexible, at the discretion of the teacher. Furthermore, reinforcement can be provided for any behavior of importance, not just the designated three or four target behaviors on a chart. The teacher runs the program. The program doesn't run the teacher.

Comparing Approaches

Feedback provided at the end of an interval of time is nearly pointless. First, there is nothing students can do at the end of the period about behavior that has cost them a point. So the loss of a point at the end of the period does nothing to bring about a change in the inappropriate behavior that has already occurred. Some students will remember the point loss and try a little harder next period, but this motivation will generally not carry them through the entire next period.

Traditional behavior management programs leave teachers to verbally explain (at the end) why students didn't earn points. Teachers must try to recall the specific incident or series of incidents and explain everything in enough detail for the student to recall it and understand what has to be done differently next time. This takes away teaching time, promotes arguing and perceptions of unfairness, and the class sees a disproportionate amount of time allocated to students who make poor choices, students who need more explanations and react unfavorably to the point loss. It doesn't give students a chance to redeem themselves until it's too late, and regardless of how attentive everyone tries to be, nobody can fully recall what happened earlier in the period anyway. It becomes an exercise in futility.

Continuous, authentic, concrete feedback, supplied visually and adjusted in the moment (e.g., using The Green Zone, described later in this article) enables teachers to provide their feedback in a form the students can understand and at a time when the students can easily figure out what the feedback pertains to (because the visual feedback pertains to a behavior that just occurred). Furthermore, the student can make a change and immediately notice if the change makes any difference or if it makes enough of a difference because the visual display will be adjusted accordingly.

Traditional behavior management programs limit teachers to using a specific set of target behaviors or rules. Other behaviors of interest may come up, but they cannot earn (or lose) a check because these behaviors are not listed on the original chart, they're not part of the established contract. It is very difficult to construct a chart that covers the full range of possible behavior of interest without making the behavior

standards very general (and meaningless) or the chart very long (and full of irrelevance). A classroom behavior management system needs to be flexible enough to enable teachers to reinforce whatever they feel is important at the time.

Fluid and flexible continuous feedback programs provide immediate flexibility in the choice of the behavior being evaluated. The behavior of focus can change anytime without jeopardizing program integrity. While the class may follow a basic set of classroom rules or aspire to a set of community values, there are many other instances of behavior outside the specific rules and stated values that can earn credit. The teacher determines what to focus on and when to focus on it. Soon students figure out, beyond the stated rules, what is important in their class and how that changes day-by-day and moment-to-moment.

Planned feedback at the end of a period (a report on points earned) is expected; it is part of the plan, so positive feedback lacks sincerity and authenticity. It also lacks relevance because it pertains to behavior that is long in the past that no one remembers with any meaningful detail (unless it is negative behavior). In addition, it is far too general to award a point for a particular target behavior as a way to sum up an entire period (you worked hard so you get your point for that). It leaves the student wondering, what exactly did I do to get that point and when did I do it? Or, when did I lose that point, I can remember working hard for part of the time? Furthermore, what should the teacher do about the student who required frequent warnings, but made excellent progress toward the end of the period? Or the student who did very well for most of the period, but got into trouble at the end? Will those students get their points or lose their points, and what kind of message does that send?

Rather than planned feedback, fluid, authentic, continuous feedback programs provide spontaneous recognition and re-directive feedback. Positive "in the moment" recognition provided by a teacher at unexpected times is a very powerful form of reinforcement and this is always a possibility with authentic continuous feedback programs, so there is never a clear point to quit, it is never too late to start, you are always eligible for recognition. Furthermore, with fluid programs, redirection can be followed immediately with reinforcement if the teacher wants the student to know that the change in behavior was the right change. It is important to reinforce the right change at the right time because students don't always know when the change is the right change and there's a chance, if it isn't reinforced, that they may give up on that change.

Students learn about adults based on the frequency, timing, relevance, and quality of reinforcement and recognition provided by those adults. Students welcome people who are impressed with them, people who reinforce them, people who notice even the small moments of success, people who see the changes they are making, the effort they are applying. A good therapeutic relationship is based on meeting or exceeding a ratio of recognition to correction of 4:1. When people are too negative, when they fail to see the positive, when they withhold reinforcement but too easily dispense criticism and correction; students work on disengaging from these people and devaluing their input. That's human nature and self-preservation with all of us, but especially with troubled children. We don't want our troubled children working hard to care less about what we think and what we want them to do.

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As you approach the student in class, the student forms a hypothesis about what they think you see, what you might be thinking about them, what you might say next, and the likelihood that they will be reinforced or corrected. If the ratio of recognition to correction is too low the student may recoil or detach when you approach, in an effort to begin coping with what you may say or do (even though you may be approaching to compliment them). In fact, your voice tone and words could be interpreted as threatening even if that was not your intention because student mood and memory influence perception (see The Relationship Between Mood, Memory, Perception and Behavior). Clearly, if you are not heavily involved in frequent reinforcement and recognition (and not just at the end of the period during the chart review) you will find it difficult to form a therapeutic relationship with a troubled student.

The Green Zone

The Green Zone is a recognition-based program that exemplifies the fluid, authentic intervention model reviewed above. It's a continuous feedback system. The visual feedback is provided through a recognition board, a laminated two-foot by three-foot digital print mounted on magnetic material. It is divided into three zones, green (excellent!), yellow **(**get back on track), and red (stop and think, make a change).

All students start the day in the middle of the green zone (enabling a move in either direction—more recognition or redirection). Student names are mounted across the top of the board and under each name is a colored magnet or disc that can be moved through the three zones (sometimes the names are put on the magnets). Each zone is illustrated to send the proper message. The green zone has the word, "EXCELLENT" with stars surrounding it. The yellow zone has the words, "GET BACK ON TRACK" and those words are being pulled by a train. The red zone has a stop sign with the words inside, "STOP AND THINK." The stop sign is flanked on two sides by a light bulb and across the bottom of the red zone are the words, "MAKE A CHANGE."

Student markers are moved within zones whenever the teacher needs to recognize a particular behavior. Tickets or credits are sometimes awarded to students in the green zone and students in the green zone are eligible for class privileges (e.g., passing out papers). A student who has spent a good deal of time out of the green zone can move back in that direction anytime and begin earning tickets. It is never too late. Some programs run the Green Zone with The Credit Program (explained in a separate article) and their access to preferred activities is based on a tiered system (top tier = in the green and have enough credits, second tier = meet only one of those conditions, bottom tier = meet none of the conditions).

The Green Zone Program is built on the power of positive recognition and social/community reinforcement (for more information about the significance of reinforcement see Enhancing The Efficacy of Reinforcement in Therapeutic Programs). Sometimes when students are in trouble it gives the impression that the class as a whole is a troubled class. Trouble is highly visible, while productivity is not. When students believe they are from a class that is always in trouble, getting into trouble becomes the norm, so those who get into trouble do not feel any violation of the social

norm. In fact, the implication is that the peer group sanctions their behavior, and as we know, the peer influence is a very powerful one. When The Green Zone is used it becomes clear that not everyone is in trouble. Most students spend the entire day in the green so the peer norm becomes green zone behavior, resetting the social sanction against the inappropriate behavior and reinforcing a positive culture in the room. The Green Zone provides highly visible results; it creates a positive class culture, and takes full advantage of the influence of class culture on individual performance (for more information on the influence of class culture see Community Building and Recognition-Based Classroom Management). In addition, the fluid quality of the Green Zone contributes to an outlook of hope and optimism. It is always possible to succeed, to move up, to recover, and you never know what you will achieve (including a full recovery) until you try and start moving in the right direction. Any time is a good time to start. This is not the case with a points and level system.

The Green Zone maintains its powerful effect when the emphasis is on positive recognition, calling attention to specific acts that have impressed the teacher, encouraging others to recover from a problem, and freely rewarding students who stay in the green. The magnitude of the move of a student's marker must match the severity of the problem (in the case of moving the magnet down) or the amount of improvement (in the case of moving the marker up), and this is based on teacher discretion. Visual, continuous feedback programs like The Green Zone increase accountability and build personal responsibility. The result of student behavior is visibly undeniable and the position the students find themselves in is based completely on what the students do or decide not to do.

Moving a marker down should never be done as a form of punishment. The Green Zone is only effective as a recognition program. The move down should be made with the script, "I'm going to give you a chance to move up by . . .". Students need to be encouraged to recover from a problem, therefore, once students have been moved into the red or yellow you should be alert for an opportunity to start moving them back up again, so they will realize they are doing the right thing and continue with that behavior. Some students who are not reinforced soon enough give up on doing the right thing after a brief try because they are not very sure that it is the right thing and they aren't willing to keep it up if it isn't the right behavior.

It is wrong to move a student's magnet into the red or yellow with the idea that it will not be moved, regardless of any improvements, until a much later time, as if the student is serving a punishment sentence (this is one of the problems with the "levels" systems, a level drop is for a defined period of time, like serving a sentence). Every day the Green Zone markers are reset back in the middle of the green for a new start. Sometimes it is appropriate to reset the board in the middle of the day. Generally, this is done in the lower elementary grades (grades one through three).

Never threaten to move someone's marker. Threats are ineffective (reviewed earlier with the discussion of traditional "point" systems), they create defensive behavior and they teach students how to accomplish things by threatening people.

Instead of threatening ("you better stop that or else. . .") our first step in helping a student to make a change is to recognize others with very specific verbal praise, accompanied by a positive move of that other person's marker with the award of credits or tickets. The next step is to speak directly to the student who needs to improve about what specific change is required. The next step is a marker move, followed by other moves down if necessary. There is never any mention of a threat to move the marker down.

Students who do not respond may need to reset themselves with a restorative break (see the articles on restorative breaks). If you can afford to wait, however, the use/application of time can be very helpful (see De-Escalation Guidelines: Brain-Based Intervention and Support). As time passes, the target student can witness how other students are granted privileges for being in the green, how they are accumulating more credits or tickets for staying in the green, and what their behavior looks like and sounds like as it is being specifically recognized by the teacher. The other students are used as visual supports. Given enough time and opportunity the frontal cortex of the brain can better process what is happening around that person and use this information to put things in context, to balance or temper the effect of the limbic system on current mood. This gives the student's mood a chance to regulate and the student's perceptions a chance to become more accurate. This enables better decision-making; and when better decisions are made the Green Zone provides an immediate source of reinforcement.

All privileges should be contingent on The Green Zone. When students ask about privileges (e.g., a student may ask to work with a friend or ask to use the computer when all the work is done) always look at the board before responding. You might say, "Let me check The Green Zone. All right, you're in the green, go ahead." or "You are not in the green. Ask me again when you get into the green." The Green Zone is most effective when used in a room with attention to community building and establishing a positive classroom climate. For more information about community building in the classroom and the use of positive recognition to shape student identity and manage classroom behavior, see Community Building And Recognition-Based Classroom Management.

The Green Zone board is very active at first, but then behavior stabilizes and the markers hardly ever move out of the green. When the program is not needed as much there is no obligation to use it as much. It still sends a recognition message and privileges are still based on it. With point chart systems the charts have to be consistently filled out after every period, throughout the day, regardless of whether or not they are necessary.

The Green Zone is a zone program, not a color levels program (e.g., "change your slip" is a color levels program). Many elementary school classrooms use a color levels program. The Green Zone started as one of the original color levels programs in schools in 1992. It may have been the first classroom management program to work in this way. The original color levels program worked well compared to the traditional behavior management systems, but it was limited because it only allowed big moves.

That's how color levels programs are run today. A student has to move all at once from one level to the next. If there is a problem on green, then the student is moved to yellow. If the problem continues, the student is moved to blue, and then to red.

The problem with this system is that students too quickly experience major consequences for behavior that is not really major league (e.g., the student is out of his seat two or three times, even after an initial reminder and each time is a change in color level—after ten minutes of class the student ends up on the lowest behavior performance level for merely being out of the seat). The system only allows the teacher to make two moves before the student ends up in the red.

Rather than using the system on minor problems, and risk consequences out of proportion to the problem (which would lead to student resentment and devaluing of the program—rendering it ineffective), teachers use it only for bigger problems. Classroom problems are not dealt with, then, until they get to be big enough or chronic enough, guaranteeing that the class could always be dealing with a steady supply of bigger and more chronic problems. It also means that once students are dropped to a lower color, they stay there for a long time—until their behavior change makes up for the severity of the problem they caused. Thus, the system is not very active and not very powerful. Today many teachers use this model (e.g., the "change your slip" program) and you can see the pocket charts off to the side of the classroom—hardly ever used—while behavior is dealt with using verbal correction and threats of a color change.

The problems with the color levels system led to the "zone" concept. Behavior that was not significant enough to warrant a drop to the next level didn't have to be ignored or met with verbal disapproval until it got bad enough to warrant a drop in level. The behavior could be addressed immediately with a slide within a color zone—an indication that there isn't a big problem yet, but things are not going in the right direction, and there will be no more verbal warnings about it, just more consequences. Also, the use of a zone enabled the teacher to send a positive message to the student as soon as the student made a change for the better. Rather than wait for the behavior to improve enough to warrant a change in color level, the teacher was able to make a small move within a zone to show that things were going in the right direction. Students need to be encouraged at this stage, before they give up on their improvements, thinking that no one notices or no one cares, or no one gives them credit for anything—except when things don't go well.

Some people place The Green Zone recognition board on an easel or in the chalk tray of the blackboard. Remember, the board has to be moved around the room when the instructional site changes and students are no longer facing it. It can be leaned against the wall or a bookcase or an easel may be used.

The board comes with several circle magnets. These should be placed across the board in the designated spaces. Some Green Zone Boards are set up for colored metal discs instead of magnets, because the board itself is magnetic. Name tags can be cut from index cards and placed on top of the solid black line at the top of the green zone. They can be taped in place or held with a strip of magnetic tape. Some people skip that step and put the student names directly on the magnet or disc. Once the name

tags and markers are on the board and the board is put in a highly visible and easily accessible place, you are ready to begin. Remember, the teacher needs easy access to the board to move the markers as frequently as necessary.