

## **The Green Zone**

### **Basic Guidelines and Reminders for Staff**

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#### Introduction

The Green Zone is a recognition program on a large magnetic board with three major color zones, Green, Yellow, and Red. Each student is represented on the board by a magnetic marker and the placement of this marker reflects feedback from the teacher about student performance. Students are recognized for their efforts by moving up their marker in the zone, and they are told to try harder by moving their marker down. Students are always told what they need to do to make a move up and movement on the board can happen at any time. No one has to wait for recognition when they show a good effort. All students are expected to stay in the green zone, because: 1) the therapeutic program gives students all the support they need to make good choices, 2) students are given constructive options when they are struggling, and 3) they are provided with different ways to recover when they lose their stamina or their tolerance. Students who are doing well are able to stay in the green zone at least 85% of the day. The Green Zone is monitored closely and adjusted nearly continuously when students are working on improvement. The Green Zone is able to be monitored less frequently when students are consistently in the green zone. The Green Zone requires specialized therapeutic training to be used the right way. Do not help parents use this program at home. It is not recommended for home use. Not only will it be ineffective in a home setting (especially without the classroom Green Zone norm as an influence); it is likely to create additional problems and/or worsen problems.

Color	
Green	<p style="text-align: center;">“Excellent!”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- All students begin their day in the middle of the green</li><li>-Students are moved up to recognize their good effort and performance</li><li>-Students are moved up when teachers are impressed with a single behavior (e.g., working hard as others nearby are fooling around), when students overcome an obstacle, when students do something difficult, or when they sustain a good effort over a long period of time.</li></ul>
Yellow	<p style="text-align: center;">“Get back on track”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Need to try harder to follow the routines of the class</li><li>- Need to try harder to complete work at a suitable pace or quality</li><li>- Need to do more without so many reminders</li><li>-Need to recover from causing a disruption</li><li>-Students may continue to move down in the yellow for a more significant disruptive behavior or for an extended disruption.</li></ul>
Red	<p style="text-align: center;">- “Stop and Think”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- When a “think time” is required</li><li>-Destruction of property</li><li>- Demonstrating unsafe behaviors toward people or property</li><li>- Threatening staff or students verbally or with gestures</li><li>- When the safe room is required</li></ul>

## Use the Green Zone as a Teaching Tool

The Green Zone is a teaching tool. It provides students with feedback on their performance as they try to meet the academic and the social emotional standards in the classroom. When they improve a little, their marker should move a little, and this teaching process should continue until the student is solidly in the zone of green. Student performance is measured by criteria that is outlined in one or more of the academic or social emotional learning routines that the classroom uses (e.g., a routine for listening, a routine for taking a break, a routine for math, etc.). The Green Zone is used to give students feedback so they can learn the subtleties of executing the behaviors within the routine, so they can make adjustments, try again, and finally learn what it takes, what is required, and how to do it. A laminated Green Zone reference sheet has been placed in each classroom (also see the illustration above that we use with parents). Please refer back to this sheet as needed (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/green-zone-guidelines/>), and for more information see <https://kevinplummerphd.com/the-green-zone-a-recognition-based-program/>.

It is important to remember that continuous reinforcement programs (programs like the Green Zone that provide continuous visual feedback on performance) must be updated as often as necessary to provide accurate information to the student. The power of the program is in its ability to show students immediately—in real time—what the outcome is following their actions and choices, and to provide that information in a stable form (visual display) so they can process it better. Students need to know what we mean when we redirect their behavior, and a move up (or a lack of movement) on the Green Zone helps them determine that. A student who has responded well to redirection and has made improvement should not continue to see their marker stuck where it was back when they were struggling and before they were told to improve. Imagine what we are teaching students if our Green Zone feedback is not monitored properly.

- 1) I guess the staff aren't paying attention so you can do what you want
- 2) Seems like the staff are not attuned to the students so I'm mostly on my own here
- 3) It must not have been important in the first place if they're not even following up
- 4) These improvements aren't the right improvements so I should stop doing them
- 5) The teacher doesn't really care so much about what she said
- 6) I don't have to listen to their words because they just forget what they wanted you to do

The Green Zone is a teaching tool. It is always teaching something, whether you realize it or not. Pay attention to it, utilize it effectively, and make sure it is teaching the right thing. Some classrooms assign it as a duty, for someone to monitor and run the Green Zone while others are busy running some other aspect of the classroom.

## Use the Green Zone to Instill Hope

The Green Zone should represent hope and opportunity and it should enable the students to take responsibility for their own behavior (and take credit for their own accomplishments). Students should believe that it is always within their ability to put themselves in the green, to recover from a mistake, to make the necessary improvements and see the results right away. How do we convince them to have hope and to try to improve?

The power and effectiveness of the Green Zone, depends heavily on close monitoring, tuning in to the small teachable moments, and using it to encourage students. This takes great presence and self-control, an ability to see small steps of improvement, and a fair amount of stamina in maintaining

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attention and focus. The Green Zone depends on staff being very aware and highly responsive, especially to improvement. At first, the Green Zone appears deceptively simple in application, but the more sophisticated the staff become with therapeutic methods, the more nuanced the Green Zone becomes as a tool. The good news is that when it is used properly and students make great therapeutic progress, they stay in the green zone all day and the Green Zone board has to be monitored much less.

### **Other Important Things to Remember**

Great care has to be taken to ensure that this is a therapeutic support instead of a punitive intervention. It's "human nature" to use it as a punitive intervention ("You're going to move down if I have to tell you that again"). People are naturally more triggered and more attentive to what is wrong, to what bothers them, than they are to what is right and what is going well, but the quickest way to reduce the effectiveness of the Green Zone is to use it as a punishment.

The Green Zone is a communication tool. It tells the student about you, what you care about, how you see them, what you notice; and it tells them about the importance and relevance of specific classroom expectations. It also tells students about themselves, what they have done well and what they still have to do, how far they have come and how far they have to go, and how they measure up with the norm of the room.

Use your routines and the expectations embedded in those routines to redirect students who are behaving in ways that you want them to change. Borrow the language from those routines and those expectations when you create the redirection for the student (see some of the scripts below).

Verbal threats ("You better. . .or I'm moving you down") and physical gestures (e.g., rushing to the board and holding your hand over the marker in warning) should not be made regarding the movement of the marker. Instead, use the Green Zone to establish a culture and a norm of success in the classroom.

Do not overuse the move down. When students are unresponsive to two or three moves down, they need another intervention.

We must always remember that the goal of the Green Zone is to teach/clarify and to reward the student for improving performance or for sustaining good performance levels. This is a recognition program. Point out good behavior and move students up. Students learn from the move up, from getting it right. This is just a fundamental approach that we use to teach students anything that they don't do well enough (reinforcement for getting it closer to right). Naturally it's okay to point out mistakes and move a marker down, but the true teachable moment comes when recognition is provided for improvement. Don't wait too long after a student has responded favorably. Also, let the magnitude and the direction of the move send the message you intend.

Once you've moved the marker down, be sure you don't miss the opportunity to move it up, to make it a teachable moment. You can see that it is a difficult program to run unless you are attuned to and attentive to small moments of behavior, which is difficult on a busy day, or a day when you might be tired or stressed or preoccupied.

Students should be moved throughout the day, unless they are already in the top of the green. There should be a lot of movement within the yellow and red zone to move up to green. No one should stay

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stuck in an unfavorable zone, after they've made some improvement, as if they've been given a term of punishment that they have to serve regardless of the changes they've made.

It is important to consider nonverbal means of communicating along with your verbal message while using this program (how fast and decisive staff move in the direction of the board, how fast and far the student marker moves, staff body language, verbal language, and voice tone, etc.). Positive staff affect (facial expression, body posture, choice of words, tone of voice) should accompany a move up while a neutral affect (and neutral scripted language—see below) should accompany a move down. These experiences create memories that you can build upon. Reinforcement is not just the move up, it's the recognition and words of praise, it's the experience of impressing the teacher, it's the feeling of being competent and capable of improving, and it's the feeling of pride and success.

As much as is practical, ensure that the student is aware of the movement on the board as it occurs or soon after. It's difficult to learn from your behavior if the feedback about what you did comes so much later and at a time when you can't clearly remember the details of what you did, how you did it, and how it felt.

Do not develop literal guidelines for using the Green Zone. It is a therapeutic tool to be used strategically to reinforce your message and to recognize a good student response. Literal guidelines cannot substitute for your own good therapeutic judgment.

### **Key Phrases to Use**

"I'm giving you a chance to move up by . . ." (say this when moving a student marker down and mention the behavior you will reinforce from the routine that you want the student to follow).

"Let me check The Green Zone. All right, you're in the green, go ahead." or "You're not in the green yet. Ask me again when you get into the green." (a way to connect the Green Zone to incidental privileges).

"I'm ready to move you up, (or, I really want to move you up) but first you have to do some work." (commenting on a missed opportunity that the student had while encouraging the student to make good use of another chance, and reminding them that their outcomes are in their own control, not your control).

"That was so nice of you to encourage your friend. I'm going to move you up for being so kind." (when you want to spotlight an impressive behavior, create a memory, and shape a student's identity in real time).

"Remember, you need to be in the green to get top tier at credit check." (to increase motivation by reminding about an upcoming outcome of being in the green zone).

"I'm impressed, you waited so patiently. I'm going to move you up for being so patient." (when you want to help a student become more aware of an important and emerging SEL skill they have been working on).

"When we get back to class you will be able to move up right away by walking in quietly and sitting at your desk." (when you want to motivate a student to hold it together after they have recovered their behavior, but they will not yet be in the green when they get back to class).

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"I'm going to give you a chance to move up right away by how you handle this disappointment." (when a frustration is expected, such as a student is about to find out they're not getting first choice of an activity, or finding out that some work has to be done over).