Peer Reinforcement to Promote Appropriate Student Behavior

Module 19

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Kenny is a 15-year-old in Mrs. Smith's life skills class for students at risk for emotional disabilities. He has been diagnosed with internalizing behavior such as, a sad affect, depression, feelings of worthlessness, and obsessive-compulsive behaviors. He was often teased or avoided by his peers. When Mrs. Smith would ask him a question, he would mumble the answer quietly, avoiding eye contact. When the students were given peer activity time, Kenny either sat with his head down on his desk or played alone in his seat. Mrs. Smith was very worried about Kenny. Although she provided lessons on the importance of peer relations and taught the class weekly social skills lessons, Kenny's behavior was not getting better. Finally, Mrs. Smith heard about ways to use peers as forms of reinforcement and decided to give it a try.

Mrs. Smith decided to use peer praise notes, a form of positive peer reporting, to help Kenny become more involved in peer activities. First, she explained to the class how the intervention would work. She demonstrated how to correctly write a praise note to a peer. Then she explained that each student would receive two peer praise notes on their desk each morning. The students could then choose the recipients for that day. Each student had to write at least three notes to a different student during the week. To encourage student participation, Mrs. Smith announced that once the class reached the designated peer praise note goal, the class would have a Fiesta Party (e.g., chips and salsa, outdoor games, a video and popcorn). Each day the students were given 5 minutes prior to the start of peer activity time to write their praise notes. Mrs. Smith then collected the notes, reviewed them for content, and gave them to the students. She also would tally the praise notes and add them to the class goal chart for the party.

At first, Kenny was slow to respond to the new system. However, just over a week into the intervention, after writing seven praise notes and receiving eight notes, he got out of his seat and wandered to the back of the room where his peers

were playing cards. Mrs. Smith noticed that he first fidgeted with the radio but when he was invited by a peer to join the card game he accepted. When the activity time began the next day, Mrs. Smith noticed that Kenny quickly returned to the back of the room, where he was again asked to play the game. Mrs. Smith noticed that Kenny's social interactions with his classmates increased and his peer avoidance decreased throughout the remainder of the year.

Description of Peer Reinforcement

Emotional disabilities and peer rejection pose significant risks for social, emotional, and behavioral problems. These risk factors are often co-occurring, which increases the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes. Research has shown that peer rejection is one of the strongest predictors of delinquency, aggressive behavior, and other negative life course outcomes (as cited in Bowers, Jensen, Cook, McEachern & Snyder, 2008). Studies examining the prevalence of peer rejection in the school-aged population suggest that 15 to 25% of children and youth are rejected by their peers, with students with disabilities estimated substantially higher (Bierman & Montminy, 1993; Mishna, 2003; Nabuzoka & Smith, 1993; Unnever & Cornell, 2003). Given this large number of youth who experience peer rejection, there is a growing interest in using peers as intervention "change agents" (Smith, Simon, & Bramlett, 2009).

Students with emotional disabilities (ED) often have difficulty forming and maintaining relationships with peers and teachers. In addition, students with ED may misinterpret social situations and have difficulty with interpersonal problem-solving skills, often resulting in peer rejection which further heightens the risks for negative outcomes (Lane, Wehby, & Barton-Arwood, 2005; Murray & Greenberg, 2006; Peterson-Nelson, Caldarella, Young, & Webb, 2008). Research shows peers can be particularly powerful change agents within the context of the classroom for students with ED (Morrison & Jones, 2006; Skinner, Neddenriep, Robinson, Ervin, & Jones, 2002).

The use of peers as reinforcement agents for appropriate social and behavioral functioning of classmates has increased over the last decade. These interventions, known as peer-mediated interventions, rely on peers to serve as the primary change agent either directly or indirectly in order to promote positive behaviors (Hoff & Robinson, 2002). A peer-mediated intervention known as positive peer reporting (PPR) has been used by teachers to increase social acceptance for students experiencing rejection by their peers. PPR is a simple peer-reinforcement intervention that involves teaching and rewarding classmates for providing descriptive praise during structured daily sessions to a target child who is considered peer rejected (Ervin, Miller, & Friman, 1996). The rationale behind the PPR intervention is that peers play a powerful role in the development of prosocial behaviors (Smith et al., 2009).

Another method of promoting peer reinforcement is the use of tootling. Developed by Skinner et al., (2002), tootling is a term that was constructed from the word "tattling" and the expression "toot your own horn" (Skinner, Cashwell, & Skinner, 2000). Tootling is like tattling, but students report their classmates' prosocial behaviors instead of inappropriate behaviors when tootling. Students are taught to "catch" each other performing prosocial behaviors (e.g., opening doors, giving positive verbal comments, helping peers with a task, sharing materials) and to write the behavior on a card, which they then submit to their teacher (Cihak, Kirk, & Boon, 2009). Both PPR and Tootling have been shown to be effective in altering the social status of students with ED and enhancing the quality and quantity of social interactions in these students (Skinner et al., 2002).

Research in Support of Peer Reinforcement

In 2002, Moroz and Jones completed a study of the effects of structured peer praise on the social involvement of three socially withdrawn children. The purpose of this study was to further investigate the effects of Positive Peer Reporting implemented in a public elementary school during recess with students who are socially withdrawn. The researchers found that PPR produced distinguishable improvements in social involvement during recess and suggests that brief daily sessions of peer praise may improve the social interactions, peer acceptance, and social involvement of students who are socially withdrawn.

In another study by Cihak, Kirk, and Boon (2009), the use of Tootling in conjunction with a group contingency procedure was implemented to reduce the number of disruptive behaviors in a third-grade inclusive classroom. Nineteen elementary students including four identified with disabilities were taught how to report their classmates' positive behavior using the "tootling" intervention. Results indicate that the use of the "tootling" intervention in combination with a group contingency procedure decreased students' disruptive classroom behaviors. Both of these studies support previous research that shows that peers can successfully affect their classmates' prosocial behaviors by providing positive reinforcement.

When to Consider Peer Reinforcement

Beginning in their early school years, without formal instruction, students learn to monitor and report incidental instances of peers' inappropriate behaviors (i.e., tattle). In 1976, Grieger, Kaufman, and Grieger published the first study that documented the benefits of having peers report prosocial behaviors of other peers. This study showed that providing opportunities for peers to report prosocial behaviors resulted in increased cooperative play and decreased aggression. It was then determined that if students can learn at an early age to monitor and report peers' inappropriate behaviors, then they could learn to monitor and report appropriate prosocial behavior.

Skinner, Neddenriep, Robinson, Ervin, and Jones (2002), describe PPR on the assumption that some students with social interaction problems may have acquired appropriate social skills (e.g., the engage in appropriate social behaviors), but may be ostracized by their peers because they engage in these behaviors less frequently than their peers. Therefore, the goal of the PPR program may be to enhance reinforcement for prosocial behaviors by having peers publicly

acknowledge those appropriate behaviors that were already occurring in the students' natural environments. This approach is intended to address individual student's behavior within the classroom setting.

Tootling, another peer-reinforcement procedure is designed for class-wide implementation. The tootling program is based on the assumption that peers spend so much time observing classmates' socially inappropriate behavior that they may not be aware of, respond to (e.g., socially reinforce), or value incidental prosocial behavior (Skinner et al., 2002). Thus, this program is designed to enhance classroom environments by increasing the probability that peers will engage in incidental student-helping-student behaviors and also increase their awareness of and appreciation for these behaviors.

Guidelines for Implementation of Peer Reinforcement

PPR is a relatively simple procedure that has been used in a variety of settings to enhance peer interactions and perceptions of students who are socially rejected or neglected (Bowers, McGinnis, Ervin, & Friman, 1999: Jones, Young, & Friman, 2000). According to Skinner et al. (2002) there are five basic steps to implementing a PPR program. First, the teacher introduces and defines positive peer reporting to the class. The teacher indicates that PPR is the opposite of tattling, instead of reporting inappropriate behavior, the students will have the opportunity to earn reinforcement (e.g., points, activities, tokens) for noticing and reporting a peer's positive behavior.

Next, the teacher explains the procedure to the students. At the beginning of the week, a drawing will be conducted and a child's name will be selected as the first target student (e.g., "Star of the Week"). Peers will then be instructed to pay special attention to that child's positive behaviors during the course of the day and to report any incidences of positive behavior during the specified time of day (e.g., last 10 minutes of homeroom). Often, students require direct instruction with practice and feedback in order to learn to identify examples of positive behaviors (e.g., showing good anger control, sharing, helping a friend, trying hard in school). That student will remain the target student for one week and then a drawing will occur for the next "Star of the Week."

The third step is to determine the type and amount of reinforcement that will be given for reports of positive behavior (e.g., special activity, points, tokens). Fourth, determine the time of day and amount of time allotted for the sharing of positive reports. Finally, the teacher should monitor the effects of the intervention on the quality of peer interactions and prosocial behaviors. Research has shown that PPR has a positive effect on social interactions and decreases negative and inappropriate behaviors in students with and without disabilities.

Another program developed by Skinner, Cashwell, and Skinner (2000) employs reinforcement for reporting incidental prosocial behaviors of any classmate, called tootling. While PPR targets specific students, tootling encourages all students to monitor and report prosocial behaviors of all classmates. To implement tootling, teachers need to first introduce and define tootling. Like PPR, tootling is like tattling in that you report classmates' behavior. However, with tootling students only report when another classmate helps another student.

Teachers should provide examples of classmates helping classmates and provide corrective feedback and reinforcement for responses. Students should be taught to write behavior observations of peers on index cards taped to their desks. Specifically they write (a) who, (b) helped whom, (c) by _____ (here they write the prosocial behavior).

Once students understand the concept and what they will be recording, the teacher should explain the procedure to the students. Blank index cards are taped to the students' desk each morning. During the day, students record any instance they observe of peers helping peers. At the end of the school day, students turn in their index cards and the teacher counts the number of tootles. The next morning the teacher announces how many tootles were recorded the previous day. This total can be added to a group feedback chart and the teacher can share some of the tootles to encourage student participation. Finally, when the entire class reaches a cumulative tootle goal, the class earns reinforcement, typically an activity. The tootling and PPR programs share some common procedures. With both interventions, brief group instruction is used to prepare students to report positive behaviors and reinforcement is used to encourage students to report peers' incidental positive behavior (Skinner et al., 2002). In addition, both procedures are designed to structure the environment to enhance peer relationships.

Cautions Regarding Use of Peer Reinforcement

Despite the relatively large literature base supporting the efficacy of peer-reinforcement, there are several important considerations. First, it is unclear whether the effects of peer-reinforcement procedures generalize to settings other than the setting in which the intervention was implemented (Bowers et al., 2008). Researchers have not assessed whether generalization of intervention effects just happen or whether it is something that needs procedures specific to it (Bowers et al., 2008). Another consideration teachers must be aware of is that students' behavior may return to baseline levels when the intervention is withdrawn (Skinner et al., 2002). Evidence from research on other behavioral interventions has shown that behavior change does not naturally occur when the intervention is withdrawn (Walker, Mattson, & Buckley, 1971; Kazdin, 1997). Teachers need to consider how to gradually fade the peer-reinforcement system or implement other behavior techniques that fit the needs of the students (Skinner et al., 2002).

Overall, students with emotional disabilities may be more likely to be rejected by peers and receive fewer opportunities to interact with peers in unstructured social situations (Skinner et al., 2002). Findings from current research have shown that the use of peer-reinforcement systems may improve the social interactions, peer acceptance, and social involvement of a range of populations, and across settings (Moroz & Jones, 2002). Therefore, peer-reinforcement provides students with emotional disabilities opportunities to develop and master their prosocial behavior and social skills.

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