

Good Behavior Game₁

Short Story

Ms. Harden is a young middle school teacher, and this is her first year teaching sixth to eighth grade students. Although most of her students can follow the rules and directions, there are always a few who talk to each other throughout class and ignore her redirection.

Talking is not a serious problem, but it can bother other students and interrupt Ms. Harden's teaching. Sometimes Ms. Harden feels tired and frustrated. She often has to stop her lessons to manage the situation. When she ignores the disruptive behaviors, the students get louder.

Ms. Harden has tried warning students who continuously talk in class, but that was not successful. Recently, a consultant suggested a strategy that has a silly name but really works—the Good Behavior Game. Ms. Harden was surprised to see that such a simple intervention worked so well. She has now joined hundreds of teachers who use this approach to address mild disruptive behaviors in the classroom.

Defining Disruptive Behavior

Disruptive behavior is student noncompliance with teacher requests (De Martini-Scully, Bray, & Kehle, 2000). More specifically, disruptive behavior in the classroom is defined as behavior that interrupts or inhibits the teaching and learning processes: talking, being out-of-seat, name calling, cursing and verbal aggression.

Disruptive behavior forces teachers to spend a considerable amount of time controlling the classroom. As a result, there is less time spent on academic instruction. To respond to this problem, researchers and educators teamed up to develop a simple yet effective incentive based “game” for teachers to incorporate into their class routines.

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Are you having trouble keeping your class on task?

Disruptive behavior affects teachers and students.

The Good Behavior Game is one of the few universal, simple strategies proven to change disruptive behaviors.

Good Behavior Game

About 30 years ago, Barrish, Saunders, and Wolf published a study called the Good Behavior Game. The game was applied successfully in a classroom of fourth grade students with high rates of talk-outs and out-of-seat behavior (Lannie & McCurdy, 2007). Today it is widely recognized and has been endorsed as an evidence-based practice.

The Good Behavior Game is a group incentive game. The teacher divides the class into teams. When dividing the classroom, it is important to distribute the trouble makers equally between both groups. The students and teacher define the fouls (disruptive behaviors) and determine how many fouls will be allowed. Each team's goal is have a score under the number of allotted fouls. The team that stays below this number is the winner. If both teams accomplish this, both are rewarded.

The teacher should always decide on a form of recognition ("prize") before the game begins. The prize has to be a worthy incentive, one for which the class will compete. Put in other words, the prize makes rule breaking a costly venture. If the prize is not worthy, the students will not have an incentive to cooperate. Letting students participate in selecting a reasonable prize solves this problem. Note that prizes should not be tangible or expensive—simple privileges work well (e.g., selecting the music that's played during a designated period or changing one's seat assignment).

What age group performs best with the Good Behavior Game?

The primary participants in research on the Good Behavior Game have been students in first through sixth grades. Nevertheless, the Good Behavior Game has been successful with preschoolers and adolescents. Student participants have been either non-disabled or have had a history of behavior problems.

Why is the Good Behavior Game so powerful at decreasing students' disruptive behavior in the classroom?

The success of the Good Behavior Game depends upon the ability to make disruptive behavior costly – the cost of not receiving the prize. If disciplinary measures are not adequately preventing students from misbehaving, clearly they don't view punishment as a significant cost. Incentive rather than punishment-based correction has been proven by the success of the Good Behavior Game.

Game Plan

We have reviewed the basic concepts about disruptive behavior and Good Behavior Game. Now we have to know how to connect them together to prevent the students' disruptive behaviors in the classrooms.

Harris & Sherman (as cited in Tingstrom et al., 2006) analyzed the components of Good Behavior Game, and suggested three essential features of the Good Behavior Game: (1) dividing the class into teams, (2) setting criteria for winning, and (3) reinforcing the winning team. The following are the detailed steps to incorporate the Good Behavior Game into the classroom (Embry, 2002):

1. Teachers announce the rules of the game to students, such as “no tattling” and “no out-of-seat”. These specific rules make the classroom a better place to learn, more enjoyable, and pleasant. All of the rules are labeled as “the good things we all want.”
2. Teachers elicit and combine students' descriptions of behaviors that would interfere with desirable outcomes and label those negative behaviors as “fouls.”
3. Teachers provide examples of both (good behavior and fouls) which are presented physically and verbally.
4. Teachers explain that the game is played at intervals. The duration of the game should be based on the length of the academic period.
5. Teachers divide the group into teams and explain that a team may win the Game by having the fewest fouls. Common prizes include free time, additional recess time, or additional activity time. The activity could be working on special art and science projects, being teachers' helper and so on. Other creative incentives include leaving school 10 minutes early or a special visit from school principal.
6. A scoreboard should be highly visible in the classroom, like the scoreboard of baseball or football, with fouls much smaller than wins.

Pros and Cons

Pros

- The events and activities are efficient resources and difficult to purchase, steal, or share.
- The Good Behavior Game utilizes group solidarity and cooperation within teams, so it leads to positive side effects such as increasing pro-social and cooperative behaviors among group members.
- Students can win the game in a variety of ways; thus, students may be motivated to behave appropriately according to the rules. Even if they have met the criterion, they still are motivated to behave appropriately to surpass the competing team and gain the rewards.
- Group-oriented procedures may alleviate some teachers' concern that a particular student will be singled out and treated differently.
- The game has a great deal of flexibility and can be designed as simple, or complex, as desired.

Cons

Peer influence can be the greatest potential disadvantage. O'Leary and Drabman (1971) found peer influence can produce undue pressure verging on harassment toward the individual who does not exhibit the appropriate behaviors. Some students may think the game is not fair when others' behavior results in the loss of rewards. To prevent these problems, teachers should emphasize that appropriate reactions to offending students and warn students that negative reactions will not be tolerated. **Research has shown this to be an effective safeguard.**

Students may not comply with the rules of good behavior if the incentives are not attractive, or are not what they want. An optimal alternative for teachers to solve this problem may be to use a combination of individual and group-oriented contingencies.

Conclusion

Although studies have suggested different interventions to prevent students' disruptive behavior in classrooms, the positive effects of the Good Behavior Game have been recognized by several sources. These sources include the Colorado Violence Prevention Blueprints Project and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (Embry, 2002). **Many researchers identified the Good Behavior Game as one of the few universal, simple strategies useful for dealing with disruptive behaviors.**

We encourage you to try this powerful but easy strategy to stop the disruptive behaviors in your classroom and school.

Interested in learning more?

Articles:

De Martini-Scully, D., Bray, M. A., & Kehle, T. J. (2000). A packaged intervention to reduce disruptive behaviors in general education students. *Psychology in the Schools*, 37(2), 149-156.

A combination multiple baseline/reversal design assessed the effectiveness of a packaged intervention included a contingency contract, antecedent strategies, positive reinforcement, and the reductive technique of response cost to reduce disruptive behaviors in two 8 year-old students.

Embry, D. D. (2002). The Good Behavior Game: A best practice candidate as a universal behavioral vaccine. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 5(4), 273-297.

The author introduces the definition of behavioral vaccines, and considers the Good Behavior Game as one of them. The article reviews the procedures and provides practical issues when implementing the game.

Lannie, A. L., & McCurdy, B. L. (2007). Preventing disruptive behavior in the urban classroom: Effects of the Good Behavior Game on student and teacher behavior. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 30(1), 85-98.

This study examines the effects of the Good Behavior Game on students' behavior and teachers' responses.

Interested in learning more?

Articles:

Tingstrom, D.H., Sterling-Truner, H.E., & Wilczynski, S. M. (2006). The Good Behavior Game: 1969-2002. *Behavior Modification*, 30(2), 225-253.

This article provides a clear outline of the Good Behavior Game.

Tingstrom, D.H. (1994). The Good Behavior Game: An investigation of teachers' acceptance. *Psychology in the Schools*, 31, 57-65.

Tingstrom investigates teachers' satisfaction with and acceptance of the Good Behavior Game.

Websites:

Dealing with disruptive behavior in the classroom. Illinois State University, Center for Teaching Learning & Technology. Retrieved February 25, 2008, from <http://www.teachtech.ilstu.edu/additional/tips/disBehav.php>

This site provides teachers with simple strategies for dealing with students' disruptive behaviors.

Good Behavior Game. Intervention Center. Retrieved from October 22, 2008, from <http://www.interventioncentral.org/htmldocs/interventions/classroom/gbg.php>

This website provides many practical suggestions for implementing and troubleshooting the Good Behavior Game.

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