

“The guiding principle for disciplinary interventions is that they should include a healthy balance between negative consequences for inappropriate behaviour and positive consequences for appropriate behaviour.”

– Robert Marzano,
Classroom Management That Works

Negative consequences are designed to influence an individual to avoid a problem behaviour. However, consequences that are not perceived as fair or are not delivered consistently, can become punishing.

Choose effective consequences

Teachers often select consequences that are effective in dealing with a “typical” child. For example, for the many students who prefer to be in the classroom working with others, sending them out in the hall or to the principal’s office is a negative consequence. However, some students may prefer to leave the class and sit in the hall, either to be alone or to avoid doing an assignment. So in such cases a teacher who delivers this consequence is inadvertently reinforcing the problem behaviour.

For some students, any kind of attention is better than none at all. In these cases, negative consequences that give the student attention tend to reinforce problem behaviour.

Some typical positive reinforcement approaches are not effective for students with behaviour disabilities. These students might respond to praise, for example, by refusing it and then doing the opposite behaviour. Sometimes they even find praise upsetting. For example, Ms. Smith tells Robert he is printing well. He says, “I am not” and starts to scribble across the page.

Identify the least restrictive or aversive consequence

The most successful method of facilitating long-term behavioural change is to:

- use positive strategies that focus on increasing the students' competence
- make necessary accommodations to physical settings, materials and instruction.

Teachers have to plan consequences for negative behaviours in order to maintain order and safety in the classroom, but they should never implement these consequence-based interventions in isolation. There should also be complementary reinforcement strategies that motivate students to refrain from negative behaviour and demonstrate new or replacement behaviour.

Tips for using negative consequences

- Never implement negative consequences until it is clear that positive reinforcement is ineffective. Document the effectiveness (or noneffectiveness) of all behavioural methods to justify the use of alternative measures.
- Always design and implement interventions that are safe for students and staff, and that respect the students' dignity and basic rights.
- Always include parents in discussions and decisions about using negative consequences.

All school staff involved in providing positive behaviour supports have to be prepared to react to specific behaviours in consistent ways and with the same consequences. Staff responsible for carrying out behaviour support plans require skills and knowledge about behavioural principles.

Types of negative consequences include:

- planned ignoring
- correction and overcorrection
- restitution
- response cost
- time away
- timeout.

Planned ignoring

If getting attention is the motivation for a student's behaviour, the teacher's reaction may actually encourage it. Teachers may need to teach students how to get attention in appropriate ways.

Ignoring may be difficult to implement in the classroom, particularly if the behaviour is disruptive to learning. Be aware as well that others (for example, peers) may be inadvertently reinforcing students.

As well, staff may be concerned that others think they are "not doing anything" when they choose to ignore problem behaviour. Some behavioural experts use the terms "active ignoring" or "planned ignoring" to stress that this strategy takes a lot of intention and effort.

Another difficulty with planned ignoring is that an attention-seeking student may respond by increasing the frequency, intensity or duration of the behaviour, or choose to engage in an even more problematic behaviour. Be prepared for the problem behaviour to escalate before it decreases.

Correction

Requiring the student to correctly display the desired behaviour can be an effective consequence. For example, if students run down the hall, have them return and walk instead. Give them an opportunity to "do it right."

Restitution

Restitution involves having the student correct the situation. For example, if he or she breaks something, ask him or her to repair it or pay for the cost of replacing it.

Response cost

A response cost technique involves taking away a reward when problem behaviour is observed; for example, fines or a loss of privileges. Response costs must be immediate and consistent, not spontaneously determined. If not properly implemented, the response cost technique can escalate problem behaviour, as students may feel they have nothing to lose. Also, some students can become confused and behave aggressively when reinforcers are removed.

Time away

Time away involves removing students from a task, situation or materials until they are ready to come back and complete the task or correct the situation. For example, a student is throwing around math blocks instead of doing a math activity, so the teacher takes the blocks off the student's desk. The student has partial control, in that the teacher returns the blocks if the student asks for them and commits to doing the activity appropriately.

Timeout

A student who is anxious or upset may need to leave the situation to calm down before any redirection or teaching of new behaviours can occur. Combine this approach with positive programming strategies such as teaching students to recognize when they are becoming anxious, and teaching them to independently remove themselves from situations before they lose control.

Because removal from the learning environment is a restrictive and serious form of intervention, use it only when less restrictive interventions have proved ineffective. Always use timeout cautiously, and carefully document the process that was followed.

Timeout can be in the classroom or outside of it. If students stay in the room, the teacher removes them from an activity or group. They can continue to observe but not actually participate in the activity. Timeout outside the room may involve directing students to a nearby hallway or a separate area. To ensure safety, monitor and supervise students throughout the timeout.

Some students may purposely engage in negative behaviours to avoid group situations and structured tasks. Generally speaking, timeout consequences are only effective when students feel that they are missing out on positive experiences.

Clearly outline timeout procedures in the students' individualized program plans and/or individual behaviour support plans, and communicate the procedures to them, their parents and administrators. Seek permission for using this procedure from administrators and parents prior to implementation. Regular evaluation of the effectiveness of the procedure is critically important.

Never use consequences such as timeout in isolation. Develop a comprehensive approach to behaviour management that is structured around positive behavioural supports to motivate students to display appropriate behaviours (see example of individual behaviour support plan on pages 80 to 81).

Timeouts are for a minimal and predetermined time. When the time is over, the student returns to the situation, task or activity.

Alberta Education's guidelines for the use of timeout include:

- Timeout is part of a continuum of behavioural interventions. Use exclusion and seclusion timeout only when less restrictive interventions are not successful.

- An exception is a student who presents with acting out behaviours that school personnel did not anticipate, and the safety of staff and students is in jeopardy.
- Subsequent to this single, unpredictable incident, develop a behaviour plan.
- Staff **must** obtain parental permission to utilize seclusion timeout as a strategy in behaviour management. If parents do not support the use of timeout, involve them in determining alternative strategies for dealing with their child's inappropriate behaviours.
- The administration **must** play a leadership role in developing, implementing and monitoring the timeout procedures and processes. The administration must also provide for regular consultation with and feedback to students, parents and staff about timeout and the school's behaviour requirements and expectations.

Guidelines for using negative consequences

- Make clear to students what the problem behaviour is and what the consequences are for engaging in that behaviour.
- Deliver the consequence. Do not just threaten to deliver the consequence.
- Recognize and embrace the use of negative consequences as a teaching tool, not a punishing tool. The consequence gives students another opportunity to learn that what they have done is problematic and that they can correct their behaviour.
- Be consistent. The severity of the consequence is not as important as its certainty. People speed because they only get caught sometimes. Students display problem behaviour because they sometimes get away with it. It is harder to learn to stop a behaviour if sometimes it is a problem and sometimes it is not.
- Be sensitive about when and how the consequence is delivered. If possible, avoid delivering a negative consequence in front of the student's peers.
- Deliver the negative consequences in a matter-of-fact way. When an adult shows emotion while delivering consequences, students tend to react emotionally and therefore don't think about what they should have done. They are less likely to learn from the consequence.

- Be aware of the relationship between memory, information processing and consequences. For example, students with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) have difficulty remembering or making associations between their behaviour and the consequences of their actions. Negative consequences may not motivate students with these types of disabilities to reduce or eliminate the problem behaviour. The primary focus in these cases is to teach new or replacement behaviours and manage the environment to support positive behaviour.

Avoid the pitfalls of punishment

Punishment is complex, and has many pitfalls.

- Punishment, which does not teach correct behaviour but rather temporarily eliminates problem behaviour, can be degrading and abusive. Students who are punished often develop a negative self-concept, especially if the punishment is arbitrary, inconsistent or focused on the student's personality as opposed to the behaviour itself. These students may begin to see themselves as stupid, or believe they are unlikable and only capable of negative behaviour.
- If students have experienced a variety of negative emotional or physical punishments in their family and home life, they may feel the consequences delivered by the school are mild and/or irrelevant.
- The consequences a teacher gives in class may have less of an impact than potential consequences from other students. For example, Zenia acts out and does not participate in a class discussion. She would rather have peers see her as the class clown than as someone who doesn't know the answer and is "stupid" or "dumb."

Activities associated with punishment also tend to become punishing. For example:

- If a teacher corrects students frequently while they are reading, the students begin to feel that reading is a punishment.
- If a teacher requires a student who is weak in math to miss physical education class to do additional math questions, the student begins to feel that math is a punishment.
- If a teacher assigns a student an essay to reflect on a problem behaviour or incident, the student begins to feel that writing is punishing.
- Individual students may connect certain teachers, teacher assistants or the principal with punishment if they see these people only when they receive a negative consequence.