

Chapter Twenty Two

Turning Problem Students Around

What about Larry?

The Confrontation

Imagine a Hurry-up Bonus in which all of the students but Larry are in their seats ready to begin as the time runs out. You point to the clock and say,

"Class, you are on your own time now."

Larry turns to you and blurts,

"This whole thing is stupid! PAT is stupid too! This sucks!"

Do you have a student in your class who might respond in this way? If so, you have a lot of company.

Who Is Larry?

Before we make a plan for dealing with the confrontation, let's take a moment to think about Larry. Is Larry a happy child? Is Larry a popular child?

Hardly! What kind of kid would say to the class, in effect:

"I have the power to hurt everyone in the class by ruining PAT, and I am going to do it?"

Typically, Larry is angry and alienated. He takes it out on you, and he takes it out on his classmates. He does hurtful things, and he is often a bully. As a result, he tends to be unpopular with his classmates.

Preview

- Omission Training supplies problem students with an incentive for self-control by providing a reinforcer when they refrain from a behavior for an interval of time.
- Omission Training mated with Responsibility Training gives the teacher a powerful and flexible means of motivating the peer group to help the student with individual needs.
- If the student on Omission Training refrains from the problem behavior for a given amount of time, he or she earns bonus PAT for the group.
- Omission Training typically eliminates the problem behavior rapidly while making a hero out of an unpopular student.
- Omission Training is easy to use since it amounts to nothing more than a bonus clause added to Responsibility Training.

Would Larry like to be popular? Show me a child who would not.

Yet the anger gets in the way. He does not seem to know how to be popular. He keeps doing things that seem calculated to make the other students dislike him. He is his own worst enemy.

Your Immediate Response

Take a relaxing breath. Turn in a regal fashion. Take another relaxing breath. Give yourself a moment to think. Your demeanor signals to everyone that this is serious.

Walk slowly to Larry, and wait for a moment before saying anything. Allow your own calm to help Larry relax. What you then say is not what Larry expected to hear.

"Larry, if you think PAT is stupid, we may as well forget it. I would not expect you to work for something that you did not want. I know I wouldn't."

Larry was expecting much worse. Usually he signals relief by saying something inconsequential like, "Right."

It would seem that Larry does not value PAT as an incentive. The fact that you know better is beside the point for the moment.

Rather than being a "tactic," your words simply acknowledge the realities of the situation. You cannot make students like PAT any more than you can force them to cooperate.

Your Plan

If you can finesse the short-term situation, do so. If you stay calm and wait, Larry may take his seat for a lack of anything better to do. You can talk to Larry later.

Of course, you cannot guarantee the outcome of any situation. If Larry chooses to escalate, you will probably end up using your Backup System.

Let's assume for the moment that you successfully finesse the immediate situation. Before the day is over you must have a heart-to-heart talk with Larry. During this talk, you will implement Omission Training.

Omission Training

The general name given to an incentive system that *decreases* the rate of a behavior is *Omission Training*.

Omission Training

Incentives to Eliminate Behavior

As described earlier in the book, the basic strategy that underlies behavior management is quite simple. *Increase* the behaviors that you *do* want, and *decrease* the behaviors that you *do not* want. If you can do this, sooner or later you will be left with what you want.

Not too surprisingly, therefore, there are two basic kinds of incentive systems. One kind *increases* the rate of a behavior, and the other kind *decreases* the rate of a behavior. The vast majority of incentive systems used in classroom management, including Responsibility Training, are of the first kind. Yet, incentives to decrease behavior can be very helpful, especially when dealing with severe or chronic behavior problems.

The general name given to an incentive system that *decreases* the rate of a behavior is *Omission Training*. Omission Training has a unique structure.

The Structure of Omission Training

The structure of Omission Training is dictated by the simple fact that you cannot reinforce the *non*-occurrence of a behavior. It would sound stupid if you tried:

"I like the way you didn't just hit him."

The recipient of this compliment might well conclude that you were losing your mind.

You can, however, reinforce someone for not doing something *for a given length of time*. You could, for example, reinforce a student for going *ten minutes* without interrupting or for going *twenty minutes* without getting out of his or her seat or for going *an entire class period* without hitting.

Omission Training plus Responsibility Training

While Omission Training is useful in providing a means other than the Backup System for eliminating problem behaviors, it becomes especially powerful when mated with Responsibility Training. This combination of management programs mobilizes the peer group to help both the teacher and the student with special needs.

For example, you could give the group a minute of bonus PAT if Larry could go ten minutes without making an inappropriate remark. This gives the peer group a vested interest in supporting Larry's efforts and ignoring his provocations. Cheers typically erupt as the PAT is posted on the board.

As you can see, Omission Training within a group context goes beyond simply changing a behavior. It makes Larry a hero with you as his cheerleader. It gives you "the power of the peer group," and it involves

the class in helping an unpopular child which is uplifting for everyone.

In addition to helping a single child, you can also reinforce the *entire class* for omitting a behavior. You could, for example, give the group a minute of bonus PAT if *no one* interrupted for a given amount of time. This allows you to eliminate a problem behavior that is brief but scattered, and, therefore, difficult to deal with using Limit Setting.

The Heart-to-Heart Talk

Find a quiet place where you will not be interrupted for the next twenty minutes. Heart-to-heart talks usually require plenty of "wait time." Of course, you will impart your own style to this conversation. The following dialogue is only intended to map out the terrain. The heart-to-heart talk has four parts.

Enough Is Enough

"Larry, that scene in front of the classroom this morning in which you told me that PAT was stupid – that is what we call in education 'unacceptable behavior.' I will make you a promise. If one of us has to go, it will be you.

"Right now, we are looking at the Backup System. As I explained at the beginning of the semester, it goes from a verbal warning all the way to the state penitentiary and everything in between. It is not supposed to be fun. Its purpose is to raise the price of misbehavior to the point where you are no longer willing to pay for it.

"Between where we stand right now and the Backup System lies another option. It is a lot more enjoyable than the Backup System.

"Let me explain it to you. Then, if you want to do it, we will. And, if you don't, we won't."

A Vested Interest in Helping

While Omission Training is useful for eliminating problem behaviors, it becomes especially powerful when mated with Responsibility Training. This combination gives the peer group a vested interest in supporting Larry's efforts to improve while ignoring his provocations.

Brainstorming a Reinforcement Menu

"This morning when you said that PAT was stupid, my first thought was that I had thoroughly failed you in explaining PAT. So, let me try again.

"First of all, you do not have to do what the rest of the group is doing during PAT. It is always possible to do your own thing as long as it is constructive. It is even possible that everyone in the class might do a different activity during PAT. The only thing that must be the same for everyone is the *duration* of PAT.

"So, let's sit down with a pad of paper and make a list of things that *you* would like to do during PAT. The boundaries are as always: It must be something that *you want*, and it must be something that *I can live with*."

This phase of program building is known as "brainstorming a reinforcement menu." It marks a change of direction in the conversation from "enough is enough" to becoming a partner with Larry in seeking enjoyment. If the two of you can pinpoint some PAT activities that Larry really wants, you have the foundation for a win-win solution to the problem.

As you brainstorm PATs with Larry, remain flexible without giving up your focus on learning. You will never accept just "kicking back" as a PAT. But management is *the art of the possible*. If the most achievement-oriented activity that Larry lists is reading motorcycle magazines, you may want to put it on the list even though you might expect more from some other students. After all, those magazines represent fairly challenging reading.

Estimate a Time Frame for Omission Training

How long can Larry behave himself during a typical day? When in doubt, shorten your estimate. You want Larry to *succeed every day*.

The most common time frame in regular classrooms is half a class period (25 minutes). Even on days when Larry gets into trouble, he will probably give you at least half a class period without getting into trouble. Be conservative. If 25 minutes seems like a lot to ask, shorten it to something that is "doable."

Explain the Mechanics to Larry

Brainstorming a reinforcement menu usually puts Larry in a positive frame of mind. Estimating the time frame gives you the final piece of the puzzle. Now, it is time to explain what you have in mind to Larry.

"You can do any of the items on our list during PAT. That is, you could if you had PAT. But, unfortunately, you don't. You said it was stupid, and I said, 'Then, let's forget it.' And you said, 'Right.' So, I did.

"Kidding aside, I do want you to have PAT. But I also want to relax and enjoy teaching when I come to work. And that little 'altercation' we had this morning was hardly enjoyable.

"That is to say, while I want you to have PAT, I want something in return. I want something that you have given me *every day* that you have been in my class since school began – even on days in which you got into trouble. I want you to give me *half a class period* of appropriate behavior. You don't have to do anything special. Just cool it for 25 minutes.

"Think of it as a gesture that says, 'I will meet you halfway.' If you meet me halfway, I will meet you *more* than halfway. I will give you back your PAT, but that is not all. I will give you your PAT *plus a minute*. But it is not just *your* minute. It belongs to the *entire class*."

Always rehearse your announcement of the program to the class with Larry beforehand so that there is no embar-

rassment when the time comes. Typically with older students, the less said the better.

The next day you begin the program. As soon as Larry earns his first bonus minute, announce it just as you rehearsed.

"Class, let me have your attention. Larry and I have devised a program that we are implementing today,

and Larry is doing a great job. As a result, Larry has just earned a bonus minute of PAT *for the entire class*. I will circle the tally so you can see how many minutes Larry has earned for the group. Think of this minute as a gift from Larry to all of you."

Walk to the board and post the minute on the PAT tally. Draw a circle around the bonus minute and all other minutes that Larry subsequently earns for the class. Then say,

"Let's hear it for Larry. (Lead the group in giving Larry applause.) Come on, class! Let's not be shy. You just got lucky. Let's hear it for Larry! (You can always get a class to applaud if you try.)

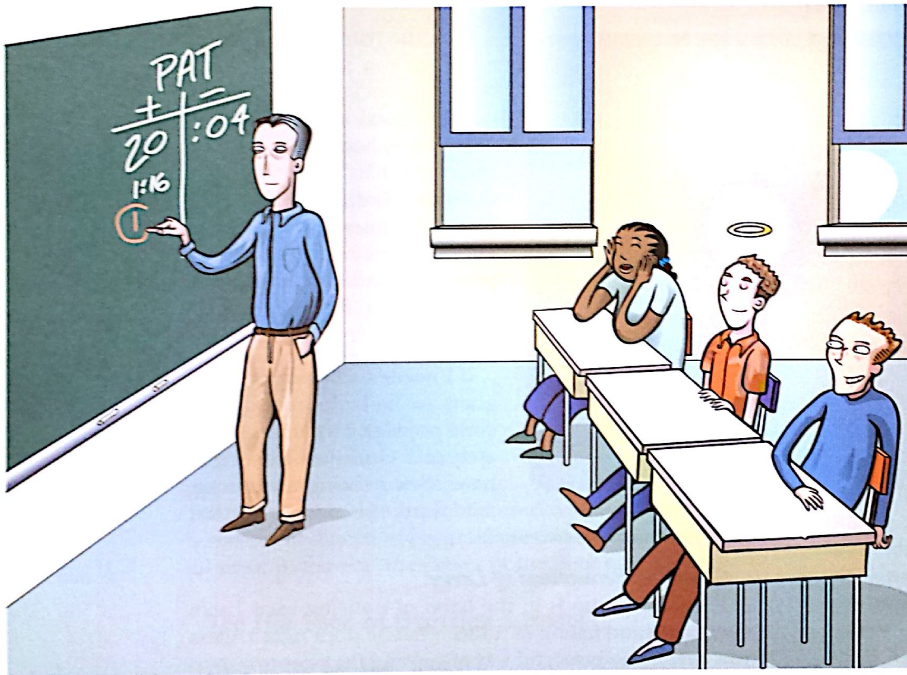
"Okay, Larry, let's see if we can get another minute before the period is over."

As the class period comes to an end, say to the group,

"Class, let me have your attention. Larry has just earned a *second* minute for the group. Larry, you are doing a great job. Let me post your second bonus minute on the board.

"Class, you are all two minutes richer thanks to Larry. Let's hear it for Larry." (Once again, lead the group in applause.)

Let us return to our conversation with Larry for a moment. There is one more detail of the program that needs to be explained to him.



Larry becomes a hero by earning time for the group.

"Larry, there is one more part to this program that I need to show you. It is a *kitchen timer*.

"If anybody ruins this program, it will probably be me, not you. I may get busy teaching and forget about keeping track of the minutes. As I see you walking out of the room, I will think, 'Oh no! I forgot all about Larry's minutes.'

"So that I do not have to be a clock-watcher, I will use this kitchen timer. I will set it to 25 minutes and forget it. When 25 minutes is up, it will ring, and we will both know that you have earned another bonus minute."

In fact, the class quickly learns that the sound of the kitchen timer signals a bonus minute for them as well. Within a day or two, cheers erupt before you even make the announcement.

One final detail needs to be explained to Larry.

"With this program, you can only *earn* time for the group. You can no longer lose time.

"Consequently, if you should get into trouble in class, you will deal with me personally. After you rejoin the group, I will reset the kitchen timer so that you can immediately begin earning bonus PAT. If the period should end before you have earned the next minute, I will carry all of your time forward to the next day so that you *never lose time*."

As you can see, Larry could not lose time for the group if he wanted to. Since Larry showed a weakness for playing the bully, we have simply removed the temptation.

A Bridge to Healing

Making Larry Popular

As we mentioned earlier, Larry is typically neither happy nor popular. But he would like to be. He just doesn't seem to know how.

Getting the Class Involved

The peer group is in the habit of noticing what Larry does wrong. Unless you have some powerful way of causing the peer group to look at Larry differently, they will continue to expect the worst while they fail to notice Larry's improved behavior – an extinction program.

For the price of a heart-to-heart talk and a few marks on the PAT tally, you have rearranged group dynamics to support Larry's growth.

Over the years these negative emotions can produce serious deficits in social skills. Larry is not very good at getting along with people because he has not spent much time trying. Omission Training serves as a "pump primer" for helping Larry learn to get along with people by setting him up for success from the very beginning.

If I needed a behavioral program to make an unpopular child popular, I would immediately pick Omission Training. I have seen it bring an outcast child into the middle of the

class sociogram in two weeks!

Changing Perceptions of Larry

The peer group is in the habit of noticing what Larry does *wrong* and failing to notice what he does *right*. Unless you have some powerful way of causing the peer group to look at Larry differently, they will continue to expect the worst and fail to notice Larry's improved behavior.

Omission Training focuses the peer group's attention on Larry's new behavior and helps them see Larry through new eyes. Without the theatrical aspect of Omission Training plus the bonus PAT that the class shares, the peer group might be slow to notice Larry's improvement so that they inadvertently put his improvement on extinction. Rather than let this happen, we will make a hero out of Larry.

In Omission Training, we allow the normal hunger of young people for peer approval to serve a constructive end. And we give the peer group an opportunity to experience being part of the healing process.

It Is Cheap

In addition to Omission Training being powerful, it is *cheap*. For the price of a heart-to-heart talk and a few marks on the PAT tally, you have rearranged the group dynamics of the entire class to support Larry's growth.

It is actually cheaper to institute Responsibility Training just so you can institute Omission Training than it is to institute a traditional individualized behavior modification program. And it is far more powerful since it delivers "the power of the peer group."

The Life Span of Omission Training

How Often Do You Need It?

Upon learning about Omission Training, most trainees envision two or three students in each class period who would need it. They assume that every "Larry" will be a

candidate. This misperception needs to be corrected before we can get an accurate picture of the implementation of Omission Training.

It is impossible for you to assess your need for Omission Training until you have fully implemented Classroom Structure, Limit Setting, and Responsibility Training. Only then can you count the problems that are left over.

Typically, the tally is zero. Proper Classroom Structure *plus* Limit Setting *plus* Responsibility Training will give you far more management leverage than you have ever experienced.

My biggest problem with Omission Training is that it is so seldom needed that, by the time it is finally called for, trainees have forgotten about it and have unnecessarily gone to the Backup System. While a sudden blow-up may force you to use your Backup System, Omission Training almost always provides a cheaper and more pleasant way of resolving a repetitive problem.

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Won't Others Want It?

During a workshop, someone will always ask, "Won't other students want Omission Training if it makes Larry into a hero?" As logical as this seems, I have no memory of it ever happening.

The explanation probably has to do with the fact that Omission Training is so seldom used and then, only for problems of marked severity. To put it bluntly, the student who receives Omission Training is "way out there." He or

she is so deviant that no classmate would want to be put in the same category. Consequently, while other students appreciate the extra bonus minutes, they are quite happy to let someone else get the "glory."

How Long Do You Let It Run?

Any student who needs an Omission Training program is severely damaged. Consequently, after you set up Omission Training for one of these students, let it run for a long while. You need to allow time for healing to take place.

At the regional special education facility where program development took place, we would allow Omission Training to run for six to eight weeks before we even considered eliminating it. During that time we would look for "soft signs" of healing. In addition to improvement in Larry's behavior, we would look for signs of acceptance by the peer group such as:

- being included in games and activities just like the other students
- having students sit near him in the lunchroom before all of the other seats are taken
- walking down the hall in animated conversation with classmates

When it seemed as though the target student had become integrated into the social fabric of the class, we would consider eliminating Omission Training. But we were very conservative. If you are in doubt, let it run a little longer.

Eliminating Omission Training

Fading Procedures

The easiest way to eliminate Omission Training is through a simple fading procedure. The two most common methods are:



Let Omission Training run until you see Larry integrated into the social fabric of the peer group.

- gradually extending the time frame
- fading critical features

Of the two, I would choose the second, fading critical features. Extending the time frame can backfire since the student might feel as though you are constantly changing the rules.

Fading Critical Features

The fading of critical features is a simple three-step process. Discuss it with the student beforehand:

Step 1: Eliminate time-keeping.

"I keep setting the kitchen timer, and you keep getting the bonus minutes. You have gotten all of your bonus minutes for so long that I am beginning to wonder why I bother setting the timer.

"Would you mind if I announced to the class that you had earned *two* bonus minutes at the *end* of every class period? Then I could forget the timer."

Rarely does the student object to this alteration in procedure. By this time Larry has probably noticed that the kitchen timer has become superfluous too. Besides, he is still earning the same number of bonus minutes for the group, and he is still receiving public recognition.

Step 2: Eliminate the contingency of reinforcement.

"You know, Larry, I am beginning to think that it is silly to wait until the end of the period to give you your minutes. I am usually busy with other things then. I have almost forgotten it several times.

"Why don't I just give you your bonus minutes at the *beginning* of the class period so that I won't forget? You will get the same number of minutes, and I will announce it just as I always do."

Step 3: Eliminate the program.

The arrangement described in step 2 can run indefinitely. There is no pressing need to eliminate the program, particularly if you are worried that the student might revert to his or her old habits.

If you decide that the program has finally become "excess baggage," the easiest time to eliminate it is to simply drop it at the end of the semester. Have a simple ceremony in which both you and the class recognize Larry's achievement, and then begin the new semester without the program.

When Fading Fails

Fading any management program is a calculated gamble. You won't win them all. Consequently, as you progress with the fading program described above, you must be very attentive to signs of failure.

The main sign of failure is a gradual reemergence of the problem behavior. Seeing the old problem reemerge tells you that fading was premature.

The cure is to simply reverse the fading procedure. Reestablish the last step that was faded and wait. Typically, you only need to go back one step, although you can go back to the original program if the reemergence of the problem behavior is sudden. If you have to reverse course, remain where you have reestablished success for a long time before you risk going forward with the fading procedure again.

Protecting Automatic Bonuses

All or Nothing

Imagine an automatic bonus in which all of the students get a minute of PAT for being in their seats when the bell rings. Today when the bell rings, everybody is seated but Larry.

Obviously, you cannot give the class its bonus minute. Group management is "all for one, and one for all."

But imagine that this problem occurs again the next day. Now, the class has failed to get its bonus *twice in a row*. Are you beginning to get a sinking feeling of powerlessness? What if it happens a *third* time?

Early in our discussion of Responsibility Training, I said that I wanted perfection, not just improvement. The reason I gave was purely *practical*. What is the practical difference in terms of hassle between having two students who show up without pencils as opposed to four?

Now, let me give you the *technical* reason for seeking perfection. If Larry can deprive the class of its Automatic Bonus, Larry is not only in control of the class, but he has also placed the rest of the students on an *extinction program* for cooperation. This is a management disaster!

You must have cooperation from *everyone*, or the entire notion of Automatic Bonuses collapses. That is why group management has such a poor track record in the research literature. It promises great efficiency and power, but there is usually at least one Larry in the class who will wreck the program just to prove that he can.

Cutting Larry Out of the Herd

We need a failsafe mechanism to keep Larry from ruining Automatic Bonuses for the class. It is called *cutting Larry out of the herd*. I will give you two versions.

In the *simple* version, you tell the class that Larry can no longer lose their bonus minute by being out of his seat. Rather, if Larry is out of his seat, you will deal with him.

The *more powerful* version adds an element of Omission Training to the program. Simply add the following paragraph to your explanation.

"However, class, if Larry is *in* his seat when the bell rings, you will *all* get a *second* bonus minute. So, class, while Larry can no longer cost you time, he can give you time if you all choose to work together."

Avoiding the Backup System

When a student consistently blocks the teacher's management objectives, the resulting exasperation naturally leads the teacher's mind toward the Backup System. But, the Backup System is both costly and prone to failure.

The use of Omission Training provides an excellent alternative. For very little effort you can protect the many from abuse by Larry. In the process, you substitute a *positive* approach to management in place of your Backup System which is adversarial by nature.

All or Nothing

If Larry can deprive the class of its bonus, Larry is not only in control of the class, but he also puts the rest of the students on an extinction program for cooperation.

Helping Substitute Teachers

If you place Responsibility Training in the hands of a substitute teacher, you may return to find that your class has lost PAT for the next month. When stressed, substitutes tend to overuse the penalty portion of the program.

You can, however, give substitute teachers a simplified *bonus-only* version of the program. Tell the students before you leave that the substitute will keep a list of the names of cooperative students. When you return, each name on the list will be worth three bonus minutes.

Or, you could have the substitute teacher give the students a "cooperation score" of 0, 1, 2 or 3 at the end of

each assignment. All of these scores will be added when you return. The total will represent the number of bonus minutes of PAT that the class earns for having cooperated with the substitute while you were gone.

Piggybacking

Omission Training can be stretched well beyond the bounds of discipline management. You can make a kid a hero for anything. Just “piggyback” the individualized program onto the group program.

Motivating the Unmotivated

A fourth grade teacher that I trained several years ago had a boy who had never turned in a complete assignment in all of his years of formal education. Yet, the student was bright. The teacher decided to use the peer group to gain some leverage over motivation. She said to her “do-nothing” student during a math assignment,

“I know that you understand the material. But today I will give you an added reason to try. For each math problem that you complete, I will announce to the class that you have earned a bonus minute of PAT for everyone. I will be back soon to see how you are doing.”

The teacher provided frequent feedback to the student at the beginning in order to keep him going. The announcement of each bonus minute was greeted with cheers from the class. Within two weeks the student was handing in all assignments.

Helping the Class Pariah

A fourth grade teacher in Indiana had a boy who never bathed, never combed his hair, and slept in his clothes. He smelled. The other children tormented him, and he retaliated by hitting, tripping, shoving, and calling names.

In desperation the teacher put the boy on an Omission

Training program for going a half-hour without tripping or hitting or shoving. The boy succeeded beautifully since these behaviors are almost impossible to do while seated at a desk, and the class cheered as their PAT grew. The boy's negative behavior declined, and the peer group began to treat him better. Eventually, he began to bath and groom himself.

One day the boy's mother visited the teacher after school to see what was going on. She said that she no longer had to fight with her son about showering and combing his hair and sleeping in his clothes. She was moved to tears when she told the teacher that, for the first time in his life, her child had been invited to a birthday party.

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Overview

While Omission Training is not magic, it is as close to magic as you will get in behavior management. It has tremendous power to save the child who might otherwise become a casualty, and it provides a win-win strategy for dealing with severe behavior problems. In both regular and special classrooms, Omission Training all but eliminated office referrals.