

The dark side of classroom behavior management charts

By Katie Hurley

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With each new school year come shiny new behavior management systems decorating the walls of elementary classrooms. From sticker charts to clip charts to color cards, teachers choose bright and engaging systems with the hope that a little incentive might lead to improved student behavior. The thing is, these systems rarely work for any extended period of time.

Research shows that kids continue to work toward their personal goals when intrinsic motivation is high. What stickers, clips and color cards have in common is that they rely on extrinsic motivation. You do this (sit, listen and don't yell out) and you get this (sticker, clip up, green card). For a short time, these systems can be motivating. Over time, however, the rewards are no longer enough.

There is also a dark side to these behavior management systems. For the kid who doesn't earn the stickers, clips down instead of up, or never climbs above the yellow card, these charts can be shame-inducing. Imagine seeing your bad day played out in bright colors on the very wall that all of your peers stare at all day long. These systems can leave students feeling worthless, overwhelmed and incapable. They can negatively impact the student's self-confidence, which can result in poor academic performance and even more behavioral issues. These behavior management systems, although well-intentioned, can be downright devastating.

I've watched the negative impact of these behavior systems play out both in my office and during classroom observations. Take a 7-year-old first-grade student, for example. He's bright and engaging in the classroom setting. He loves a good joke and greets all of his peers with equal enthusiasm each day. He tells me that he loves math and science, although social studies leaves him feeling "wiggly." He's friendly, kind and respectful, but he does struggle with inattention. Too much sitting is hard for him. When he reaches his limit, he starts moving his legs, tapping his pencil and calling out answers. For those offenses, he moves down on the behavior chart fairly regularly.

In classroom observations, I've witnessed kids going through the motions. In the beginning, clipping down, turning a card or losing a sticker upsets them. Some cry. Some shut down. Some beg to get their good behavior marks back. For some of those kids, the systems might work in the short term. They want the rewards enough to behave accordingly. By the end of the year, many kids will continue to struggle with the same behavior issues, but they will no longer care about the consequences on the wall. The act of clipping down or turning a card doesn't actually help them learn a new strategy to cope with whatever might be triggering the behavior. And when you feel like you can't win, it's easier to accept defeat.

Beyond the day-to-day emotional roller coaster of attempting to meet classroom expectations, these behavior management systems can leave a lasting impact on the psychological well-being of young children in a variety of ways.

It can trigger stress and anxiety.

I will never forget the first time I saw a clip chart in my daughter's classroom many years ago. Students were each given a number, and that number was attached to a clip. Students moved up and down to different colors throughout the day based on behavior. Seeing my daughter reduced to a number on a clip had a prison-like feeling that was difficult to ignore. While she didn't clip down once that year, she did experience stress related to the expectations on the wall. No amount of reminding her that she is generally a good listener and often quiet to a fault was enough to quell the fear of clipping down on what I came to think of as "the wall of shame."

I get a lot of phone calls from parents desperate to help their kids stop worrying so much about the academic and behavioral demands they face at school each day. Is it the actual chart that causes the anxiety? No, more often than not it's the fear of being ridiculed by peers or disappointing or upsetting the teacher and/or the parent that triggers stress and anxiety. Being judged in a public way all day every day makes it difficult to enjoy learning.

Kids develop negative core beliefs.

It's no big secret that kids are sitting for longer periods of time in the classroom setting. While some kids can handle longer periods of inactivity, most can't. Kids are wiggly, easily distracted and quick to excitement because they're young, not because they're poorly behaved. When kids face the same behavioral intervention over and over again, they begin to develop negative core beliefs. Instead of thinking, "I'm having a hard day," they tend to think, "I'm a bad kid and no one likes me."

Kids can face social isolation and symptoms of depression.

When one kid is tagged as the one who always acts out or gets in trouble, he can face social isolation. These behavior systems are individual in nature – each child is challenged to get to the highest level or earn the most stickers on his own. To hang out with the class troublemaker can be risky.

When young children feel overwhelmed with consistent consequences for behaviors they don't know how to fix and lack adequate peer and adult support in the classroom, they can and do exhibit symptoms of childhood depression. They withdraw from peers and family. They experience sleep disturbance and difficulty eating. They talk about feeling worthless or bad. They might even refuse to go to school.

The good news is that there are alternatives to help manage classroom behavior without using charts on the wall. The [MindUp](#) program creates positive classroom environments by teaching self-regulation, reducing stress and increasing compassion. [RULER](#), supported by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, helps students learn to recognize and verbalize emotions and regulate emotions effectively in the classroom environment. When classrooms address the emotions that often lurk beneath the surface of unwanted behavior, students learn to make positive choices and act with compassion for and understanding of others.

In the absence of positive programs in the classroom, the best thing parents can do is work with the teacher directly. Behavior systems are intended to help provide structure and order in the classroom, but they won't work for every child. Requesting a conference with the teacher to share your concerns and discuss positive alternatives can help alleviate parental frustration while creating a more positive learning environment

for the child. While it's often tempting to use social media to drum up support for proposed changes, this can cause a divide between the teachers and the parents. When parents seek guidance from the classroom teacher directly, on the other hand, a positive partnership emerges, and that can have a positive impact on the classroom environment. And on your child.

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