

Positive Behaviour in Jesuit Schools

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Managing behaviour is a big part of every teacher's job.

The assumption behind much classroom, and indeed parental, discipline is to pick up on what is wrong. The positive discipline method does the opposite – it focuses on those children who are on task and behaving well and uses this as a potent tool to modify the behaviour of others.

The positive behaviour method relies on the deep human need for affirmation. When those who are misbehaving or off-task see the on-task pupils receiving attention and praise, they will modify their behaviour to attract some of that attention for themselves.

A positive approach to discipline fits much better with the Christian and Jesuit character of the school. A fundamental principle for St Ignatius (founder of the Jesuits and Jesuit schools) in dealing with people is what is known as the 'good construction':

“... it should be presupposed that every good [person] ought to be more eager to put a **good interpretation** on a neighbour's statement than to condemn it. Further, if one cannot interpret it favourably, one should ask how the other means it. If that meaning is wrong, one should correct the person with love . . .”¹

This means making a habit of looking for the good, rather than the bad, in others. In school, it means catching pupils being good, or doing something well, rather than focusing on the opposite.

Praise is at the heart of the positive behaviour method. The method combines a call to, and expectation of high standards of, behaviour together with an unswerving commitment to forgiveness and fresh starts. It creates a positive classroom atmosphere and makes teaching and learning less stressful and more of a pleasure.

The positive behaviour method should be a whole-school approach in Jesuit schools – but even if it is not yet in your school you can use its techniques within the parameters of whole-school policy. These notes describe a positive approach to classroom discipline and some suggestions for dealing with poor behaviour.

In adopting the positive behaviour method, it is important that you make it your own and find your own voice to express it. Children spot phoniness quickly. You need to be both committed to using the method exclusively and also to enacting it in a way that suits your own personality and teaching style.

¹ St Ignatius Loyola SJ, *Spiritual Exercises* n.22

Praise – foundation of the positive behaviour method

We all like to be praised. Especially when we have done something well, or have mastered something new, or are getting on with the task in hand. We like our hard work and commitment, however routine, to be recognized.

The positive behaviour method is based on the notion that praise will be used frequently in the classroom and around the school.

Teachers will find many more opportunities to praise than to reprimand or punish.

Praise should be:

- **focused on learning** rather than on behaving for behaving's sake
- **Verbal**: think of the bank of words and phrases you use – are they varied and used discriminatingly?
- **and non-verbal**: as appropriate to age and maturity: thumbs up, tick a piece of work in progress, a list of 'best workers' on the board, a pat on the shoulder or the desk of the individual, a whispered 'good' or 'well done' as you walk by
- **noticed by others** but not intrusive so that the praise becomes the focus of attention rather than the task in hand
- **follow the direction of the lesson**: as you assess the progress of pupils during the course of a lesson and consequently make changes to the content, pace, or activities of the lesson, the praise you use focuses on those pupils who have changed direction or pace with you
- **specific and descriptive**: your words of praise name the reason for the praise and are **adjusted to the individual** (what is a real achievement for one child and to be

praised, may be easy for another and so not merit praise)

- **genuine**: the positive behaviour method does not ask staff to give out praise indiscriminately - pupils soon see this as disingenuous

Teachers are sometimes sceptical when they hear about the positive discipline method but many have surprised themselves when they have tried it and found that it works and that it greatly improves the atmosphere of the classroom. But you do have to be committed to it and to put it into practice relentlessly!

Get a colleague to observe you teaching a class. Ask them to note down how often you use praise and to which pupils; and how often you correct or use negative discipline. You may be surprised.

Dealing with poor behaviour – rules, rewards and consequences

The key to the success of the positive behaviour method is to focus relentlessly on praising the positive. But there will be occasions when poor behaviour cannot be ignored and the method offers a way of doing this based around **rules, rewards** and **consequences**.

Simple, well-known, and constantly referred to **rules** need to be established for each context in which the pupils will find themselves (in your classroom, around the school generally, in a laboratory, or gym, etc.). The more these are consistent across the school and consistently implemented by all teachers and support staff, the greater the impact they can have.

Rules need to be simple, displayed at the front of the room, kept to the minimum necessary, and frequently pointed out. To be consistent with the approach of the positive behaviour method, the **rules should be pointed out when they are being kept** rather than when they are being broken.

As we have already seen, the **reward** for following the rules is plenty of praise. Pupils who are on task are in the spotlight.

The method for dealing with a pupil who has broken a rule and whose behaviour cannot be ignored is to follow an unwavering and completely consistent series of **consequences**:

1. Always **be clear what constitutes the offending behaviour** and what the pupil needs to do to get out of that situation and into acceptable behaviour. Teachers often assume this is obvious but to some children it isn't – they may be focussing on some aspect of the situation which, to the teacher, is trivial, irrelevant or just not noticed.
2. Present the consequence of the pupil's behaviour as the **choice of the pupil** ("if you continue to do x, you will be choosing to y"). Avoid saying "if you do that, I will do this".
3. **Appear reluctant** to give the consequence ("I'd much rather you did z, and then I wouldn't have to do y").
4. Give the pupil **every opportunity to back down** and be explicit about this ("You still have a chance to sort this out and avoid y. Last chance!")
5. After a consequence has been given, use **praise at the first opportunity** (in this situation, even finding something trivial to praise).

Always follow through. Do not put off the consequence or make something up on the spur of the moment.

Techniques

The positive behaviour method suggests some techniques for reinforcing good behaviour:

1. **Model the behaviour** you expect of your pupils. Teachers are often not very good at this but children notice hypocrisy and have low regard for adults who do not follow their own rules.
2. **Use proximity praise** first – identify and publicly praise the on-task behaviour of pupils sitting nearby before challenging the poor behaviour of another individual.
3. **Use sound or visual triggers** – a tap on a pupil's desk or staring at a pupil while continuing to speak and teach) to alert a pupil to the fact you have noticed misbehaviour without interrupting the flow of the lesson. If you do need to tackle misbehaviour directly, speak calmly, clearly and assertively – don't appear emotional or display anger, irritation or exasperation.
4. **Use a quiet voice** which makes it difficult for others to hear. This deprives the badly behaving pupil of publicity. If you have to repeat things (pointing out s/he is choosing the consequence, appearing reluctant by repeating it, giving every chance for the child to back down), speak slightly more softly each time.
5. **Stand slightly too close**, and at **90-degrees**, rather than directly in front of the pupil, and **at eye level**.
6. **Use a countdown** if you want the pupil to do something such as pick something up or move to another place ("I'll give you five seconds to do x. OK? Five, four, three . . .")
7. **Deal with secondary behaviours** – Secondary behaviour is when the pupil tries to deflect the focus from him/herself by referring to what others have done. The teacher's response needs to dismiss the

secondary behaviour and bring the focus swiftly back onto the child's own off-task behaviour ("I understand it is annoying that x did y, but I need you to . . .")

8. **Be the silent avenger** – when you choose to ignore an instance of poor behaviour and concentrate on the positive elsewhere in the classroom, it is still good to let the pupil know you have noticed. Speak to them later in the day, or the following day, when there is no audience and let them know that you chose to let it pass this time but will not do so again; explain why the behaviour was not acceptable and what you expect to see in the next lesson.
9. But do not refer to previous poor behaviour in the next lesson. **Always wipe the slate clean** and give the pupil a fresh start every lesson.

Identify one pupil whose behaviour is not as you would wish it to be. Concentrate on using positive behaviour techniques with him/her over the course of a week. Note down his/her poor or off-task behaviour after each lesson, and also your positive behaviour interventions, and see if the behaviour improves over the course of the week.