

Intermittent Reinforcement Using a Timer

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Implementing Behavioral Strategies

Purpose:

This set of behavioral strategies was developed for classroom teachers to use with students who may require academic and/or behavioral support. The strategies are intended to support teachers working with students with primary academic deficits and challenging behaviors. For students with more intensive behaviors, potential intensification strategies also are included.

Structure:

Each strategy includes a description of the (a) purpose and overview; (b) type of strategy; (c) behavior(s) addressed; (d) setting; (e) required materials; (f) implementation procedures and considerations; (g) sample scripts or formats; (h) potential intensification strategies; and (i) additional resources (where available).

Terminology and Definitions:

- 1. Reinforcement:** Actions to make a target behavior more likely to occur in the future.
 - **Positive Reinforcement:** Adding something pleasant or desirable (e.g., toy, food, attention) to make a target behavior more likely to occur.
 - **Negative Reinforcement:** Taking something unpleasant or undesired away (e.g., aspirin to relieve a migraine) to make a target behavior more likely to occur.
- 2. Reinforcers:** Incentives (either a reward or the removal of something undesired) that are given to students after they display an appropriate/expected behavior. Use of reinforcers should increase students' continued demonstration of the appropriate/expected behavior.
- 3. Punishment:** Strategies used to decrease or terminate students' demonstration of a challenging behavior, including time-out or loss of privileges.
- 4. Consequences:** Events that occur after the demonstration of any behavior. Consequences can be positive or negative.
- 5. Consequence Clause:** A clause that identifies specific consequences that will be delivered if students do not meet goals/success criteria.
- 6. Replacement Behavior:** An appropriate behavior that a student is taught to use to replace a challenging behavior. The replacement behavior should serve the same function as the challenging behavior.
- 7. Consequence Modification:** Strategies to encourage students' demonstration of an appropriate/expected behavior.
- 8. Antecedent Modification:** Strategies to prevent students' demonstration of challenging behavior by clearly defining appropriate/expected behaviors.
- 9. Schedule of Reinforcement:** Established rules or procedures that a teacher follows to deliver reinforcers.

10. Intermittent Reinforcement: Delivering reinforcers at random time intervals that do not follow a pattern.

Considerations for Successful Implementation:

- These strategies may coincide or be used along with other interventions/strategies (e.g., Check In Check Out).
- The strategies should be aligned with school- and class-wide expectations.
- The reinforcers should be aligned with the hypothesized function of student behavior (e.g., attention, escape, avoidance, sensory).
- When using behavior management systems that award students points for demonstration of appropriate/expected behavior, it is important not to take away points after students earn them. Taking away earned points diminishes their value and may cause students not to care about earning future points.
- When using consequence clauses that include a form of punishment (e.g., time-out, loss of privileges), it is important to accompany them with strategies to teach replacement behaviors and/or strategies that encourage student demonstration of appropriate/expected behavior.
- For students with more intensive behavior, individualize class-wide strategies (using the potential intensification strategies) and consult with a behavior specialist/team in the event that strategies are not resulting in progress.

Examples of Reinforcers

Tangible	Activity-Based	Social	Intangible
Tokens, stickers, posters, prize from a prize box, snack or favorite food item (if appropriate), coloring page, books	Extra time on computer, silent reading time, partner reading, allowed to be a leader, given a classroom job, assisting secretary or teacher	Tell a joke, lunch with teacher, positive phone call home, game with a friend, being a peer model for a younger student	Verbal praise, smiles, thumbs-up, giving eye contact, positive comments written on work

Intermittent Reinforcement Using a Timer

Purpose and Overview:

Students earn points for being on task when a timer goes off. Using different time intervals supports the goal of increasing students' on-task behavior through intermittent reinforcement. Points are redeemed for access to preferred reinforcers or activities. When implementing any system, a teacher needs to be clear about the expectations and how students are to earn points. Expectations should be concise, stated each time a new activity or task begins, and visually displayed for easy reference. Teachers should reinforce the behaviors they want to increase by immediately attending to them. A reinforcement system should be in place to help motivate students. Reinforcers can be tangible, activity based, social, or intangible.

Type of Strategy:

Consequence modification and/or schedule of reinforcement strategy

Behavior(s) Addressed:

Off-task behaviors during whole- or small-group activities (e.g., blurting out answers, getting out of seat, interrupting others)

Setting:

During whole-class or small-group activities

Materials:

- Timer
- Point card/sheet for the whole class or each individual student

Implementation Procedure:

1. Explain to the whole class or a small group of students that you will be setting a timer to “catch” them being on task.
2. Define the expectation for “on-task” behavior.
3. Set the timer for random amounts of time (times should range, be unpredictable, and can include minutes or seconds). For example, start with 75 seconds, and then increase the time to 120 seconds. When first using this strategy, use shorter increments of time and then gradually increase the time. Make sure the intervals are not predictable.
4. When the timer goes off, if students are on task, tell them to add a point to their point sheet. If students are not on task, remind them of the expectations and challenge them to be on task when the timer goes off the next time.

5. Continue setting the timer at different time intervals and awarding points.
6. If at the end of a specified time period the students have earned an agreed-upon number of points, allow them to select a reinforcer.

Implementation Considerations:

- For class-wide implementation, the reinforcer can be connected to another behavior management/token economy system (i.e., meeting the criteria equals one handful of beads toward a classroom party).
- This strategy can be used for individual students, with small groups, or with the whole class. If used for individuals, it is helpful if point sheets are located close to both the teacher and the student, allowing access for the teacher to award points and for the student to see how he or she is doing.
- If used in conjunction with a behavior report card, teachers can set goals for students to be on task in order for them to earn points. For example, during a specific block of time on the behavior report card, the teacher can have the timer go off five times. If the student is on task for at least four of those times, he or she then earns a point and indicates that on a behavior report card.
- It is important to set the timer for random intervals so that students are not able to predict when they should be on task, encouraging their consistency in demonstrating on-task behavior.

Sample Scripts

When giving a point to the class:

“The timer went off and I see everyone is on task; that is a point for each of you.”

Acknowledging that the timer went off but no point was earned:

“Not everyone was on task. Who can raise their hand and tell me what needs to be done next time to earn a point?”

Potential Intensification Strategies:

- If you would like to use the strategy to reward an individual student during a whole- or small-group lesson or activity and do not want the timer to disrupt all students, set the timer to “vibrate mode” and agree upon a signal with the individual student (e.g., touching your ear, pretending to cough) that notifies him or her when the timer goes off.
- Incorporate proximity control and walk around the classroom to highlight how an individual student was demonstrating on-task behavior when the timer went off as a way to model expectations.
- Increase the number of points given to individual students during times of the day when they are more likely to engage in problem behavior (e.g., during unstructured times, during academic subjects they struggle with).

- Increase a student’s schedule of reinforcement to include more frequent reinforcers throughout the day (as identified by student need) or include a bonus reinforcer when a student exceeds his or her goal.
- Identify if the student has a skill deficit that inhibits his or her ability to demonstrate the appropriate/expected behavior and teach the required prerequisite skills for successful performance.