Classroom Management for Kids Who Won't Sit Still and Other "Bad Apples"

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Abstract

This article presents a case description of collaboration between an occupational therapist and a general education teacher to develop an effective classroom management system. The classroom management system described here was based on the Alert Program for Self-regulation: How Does Your Engine Run? In addition, the case description provides a clear example of how this system could be replicated in other classrooms.

Keywords

classroom management, behavior management, self management

At the request of the teacher and the parents of the student discussed in this case, names have been changed.

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Mrs. Zapka was a veteran teacher of 26 years when I was assigned to her classroom to provide occupational therapy services to one of her 31 first grade students. She ran a tight ship and had a reputation of being a strict disciplinarian who didn't tolerate misbehavior. I heard that she was an excellent teacher, but that she wasn't fond of new instructional methods and was a bit old-fashioned. Mrs. Zapka's classroom was neat and orderly and most students entered proudly each morning knowing that they had one of the most revered teachers in the entire school.

I, too, entered one morning. I was excited, and a little nervous, to work in the presence of Mrs. Zapka. Upon my arrival, she graciously introduced me as "the handwriting teacher" to her students and proceeded to ask all of them to say their names to me as well. After each student said his or her name, Mrs. Zapka shared a little bit of information with me so that I might get to know each of them better. I learned who was a strong reader, who enjoyed doing math problems at the board, who didn't turn in her homework this morning, and who was a "bad apple."

Mrs. Zapka explained that Joey, the student that I was going to be servicing, was a "bad apple." She pointed to a large paper tree on one of the walls and asked for a volunteer to explain this classroom management system to me. Kayla, who was obviously a "good apple," raised her hand and started explaining the apple tree system.

Each of the students had an apple with their name on it. The apples were taped all over and under the tree. Some apples were at the top of the tree, some were in the middle, some were hanging as if they were going to fall, and some were stuck under the tree on the "ground." I noticed that the apples were different colors, red and brown. Kayla explained that at the beginning of the year the students got a red apple with their name on it. I noticed that Joey's apple was brown. Kayla explained that if a student did something wrong, something bad enough to get his apple moved to the ground, that he only had two days to improve his behavior and get it back on the tree. Otherwise he got a brown apple. Mrs. Zapka chimed in that Joey hadn't had a red apple since the first day of school because he wouldn't "sit still and pay attention."

Mrs. Zapka asked the students to take out their journals and start working on copying the information on the chalkboard. Then she began to discuss her concerns about Joey with me. Besides his sloppy and illegible handwriting, Joey was in constant motion. He made unnecessary trips to the pencil sharpener and the garbage can. Joey took the long way to Mrs. Zapka's desk whenever he was called. He was out of his seat five to six times an hour. When Joey did remain seated, he had difficulty staying on task and struggled to give an appropriate answer when he was called on. Mrs. Zapka was hoping that I might be able to help her address Joey's difficulties in the classroom.

As an occupational therapist working with general and special education teachers, I heard these complaints almost every day that I worked in elementary schools. Mrs. Zapka's frustration and approach to dealing with Joey's needs are not unique. Educators regularly raise concerns related to increased activity and frequent off-task behavior when it comes to students with known disabilities like ADHD and Autism. However, they also express their dissatisfaction with active children who walk to the beat of a different drummer, and consequently drive them crazy. These students may be a constant source of frustration to many educators because they haven't

learned the necessary skills to control their own behaviors.

Maintaining order in the classroom is a responsibility of every teacher regardless of subject area or certification. The challenge lies in balancing the time required to teach the curriculum and the energy it takes to manage the needs of each of the students in the classroom. As consultants, occupational therapists can support both general and special educators to develop classroom systems that address the needs of their students in a positive manner while affording students the much-needed tools for learning self-management or self-regulation skills.

How Does Your Engine Run? The Alert Program for Self-Regulation

The Alert Program for Self-Regulation (Williams & Shellenberger, 1996) was developed to teach children self-management or self-regulation strategies. The program is based on the tenets of Arousal Theory and Sensory Integration. It is geared towards teaching children how to maintain the optimal level of arousal necessary to attend and remain on task in the classroom.

Most adults experience typical fluctuations in their ability to remain task-directed and productive throughout the day. This is because levels of arousal or alertness operate on a continuum with sluggish being on one end, hyper-alert being on the other, and optimal functioning in the middle (Royeen & Lane, 1991). Adults do things like drink coffee in the morning and sing to the car radio on the way home from a stressful day at work to maintain optimal levels of alertness. In fact, many of us have developed a repertoire of strategies in order to calm down when we are excited or anxious and to psych ourselves up when we are tired or bored. Oftentimes we engage in regulating behavior automatically and unconsciously, but sometimes we need to be reflective about our level of alertness and develop new habits to maintain optimal levels of functioning.

The Alert Program for Self-Regulation, also known as How Does Your Engine Run?, can be used to teach children how to identify, monitor, maintain, and change their own level of alertness so that they can effectively participate in the task at hand (Williams & Shellenberger, 1996). The program uses the metaphor of an engine to cue children whether their internal motors are running *high, low,* or *just right*. Through collaboration, the educators, along with the occupational therapist, can develop strategies to help each student keep his or her engine level running at *just right*. Through a three stage process, the students are then taught to determine how their engines are running and how to use predetermined strategies independently in order to successfully participate in the classroom and school environment. A major benefit of using the Alert Program for Self-Regulation versus a typical classroom management system, like Mrs. Zapka's apple tree, is that the students aren't labeled as "good" or "bad." Instead of feeling judged, students are empowered to be in control of their engines, and therefore, their behavior.

Using the Alert Program for Self-Regulation With Mrs. Zapka and her Class

After I introduced Mrs. Zapka to the Alert Program for Self-Regulation, she agreed to get rid of the apple tree and try it as her classroom management system. We decided to modify the program to better fit with Mrs. Zapka's philosophy of education and her teaching style. We set up a weekly time so that I could come into her classroom and run a 20 minute group for all of her students so that they could learn the vocabulary related to

the program and the ways to maintain an optimal level of arousal. Prior to our first group, Mrs. Zapka and I fabricated a two-dimensional street made out of art paper and labeled car-shaped die cuts with each student's name. We drew speed limit signs on three sections of our street to correspond with the different engine levels.

Stage I: Identifying Engine Speeds

During the first group I explained to the students that they were like cars. Sometimes their engines ran high, sometimes they ran low, and sometimes they ran just right. We discussed the difference between the levels and talked about times when it was appropriate to have high or low engines. Engines run high on the playground during recess. They run low before we fall asleep and sometimes when we have a cold or feel sick. We also discussed how having an engine running just right at school was the best for learning. Mrs. Zapka and I took turns modeling the behaviors that we engaged in when our engines were operating at each of the three levels. The first graders enjoyed the experience and understood the concept rather quickly. Both Mrs. Zapka and I placed our cars on to the paper street. Next we passed out the students' and invited them to place their cars near the speed limit signs that best explained how their engines were running right now.

Most children placed their cars near the street sign that matched their disposition that day. Joey, whose engine was running noticeably high, put his car near the sign that corresponded with a just right engine. Mrs. Zapka reviewed the engine levels with Joey and explained to him why his engine was running high and not just right. Rather than using phrases to describe his behavior as she had in the past, Mrs. Zapka explained that when engines are running high they make it difficult for us to sit in our seats and to keep our mouths quiet. Mrs. Zapka assured Joey that she and I would help him to take control over his engine. Joey gladly accepted this explanation and with a look of determination put his car in the more appropriate place.

For the next week, Mrs. Zapka continued to move her car up and down the street as her level of arousal changed throughout the day. She encouraged the students to do the same, especially when they first came to school in the morning, after lunch and recess, and in between activities when they were completing seat work. Mrs. Zapka started to notice patterns develop among certain students. For example, Joey always started out his day with his engine near just right. However, after first period, he usually moved his car closer to high. He typically moved his car along the road closer and closer to high after each subject. Joey usually moved his car back to just right after lunch and recess. Joey would repeat this pattern in the afternoon.

Stage II: Leaders Introduce Methods to Change Engine Speeds

Mrs. Zapka was initially concerned that the strategies used to change engine levels would be distracting to her and students that were engaged in a lesson. She shared an experience of working with an OT who recommended that one of her former students sit on a large red therapy ball during math class. The child bounced and rolled on the ball throughout the lesson. The other students giggled, watched, and, with hushed voices, urged the student to perform tricks on the ball. The strategy that was meant to help him pay attention to instruction ultimately turned him in to the class clown with a very responsive audience.

When it was time to teach students how to change their engine levels, I intro-

duced some basic, practical, and non-intrusive methods for changing levels of arousal that could easily be incorporated into a general education classroom. Each student experienced using the strategies, or engaging in the sensory experiences, and was then given an opportunity to indicate how it impacted their engines. Students whose engines were running low indicated that when they walked quickly to the garbage can or to the drinking fountain to get a drink, their engines got closer to just right. Students with engines that typically were running high, like Joey, commented that when the lights were dim and there was soft music in the background, their engines were closer to just right and they were better able to listen to the teacher.

In addition, this activity served as an opportunity for Mrs. Zapka and me to collaborate and develop a list of functional strategies that could be used in her classroom. These supports would be put in place to assist students in changing their engine levels and maintaining optimal levels of arousal. We decided to post pictorial representations of the strategies on our street in between the different engine levels to cue students when they needed to get their engines back to just right.

Throughout the week when students would move their cars, Mrs. Zapka would suggest that they try one of the strategies to help bring their engines back to just right. Mrs. Zapka modeled how to choose a strategy and how to problem solve when the chosen strategy wasn't effective. Initially, Joey chose strategies to change his engine from high to just right that were unproductive. He chose things like walking to get a drink of water or doing a lap around the classroom. These activities seemed to make his engine run even faster. Through trial and error, Mrs. Zapka and Joey figured out that to slow his engine down he needed to engage in activities that forced him to use his muscle strength or offered some degree of resistance. For instance, Joey was able to get his engine to just right when he carried a basket of books to and from the library or washed down the chalkboard.

Stage III: Regulating Engine Levels

In our final group, I asked the students to name some strategies that they had used to change their engine levels or keep them running at just right. I helped them think of new things that they could do within the school environment that would have the same effect. Mrs. Zapka and I posted the students' suggestions near the paper street. For example, one student said that doing five jumping jacks helped him concentrate before a spelling test. We talked about how even though this was an effective strategy, it bothered some of his neighbors. Instead I tied a large elastic therapy band to the legs of the student's desk. I told him that when he wanted to release extra energy before a test, that he could quietly push it with his feet. Another student said that she hummed a tune when she was reading to help her engine stay at just right. Mrs. Zapka and I brainstormed with the student and decided that she should try reading while listening to quiet music through headphones. We changed her seat to the end of a row so that we could plug in the tape recorder. The student was told that she may only use the headphones during quiet reading or independent work times. When another child was using the headphones, the student would have the option of working at a desk in the back of the room where she could hum without disrupting others.

Mrs. Zapka shared with me that although the Alert Program for Self-Regulation appeared to be helping all of the students stay on task more effectively, it was very difficult for her to get through an entire lesson without

being repeatedly interrupted. Knowing that Mrs. Zapka would probably stop using this program if it interfered with her teaching, I suggested that we develop a signal system for the students to use. This way the students would not have to ask for permission, or inadvertently disrupt class, to take a break, or engage in a strategy to help change their engine levels.

Mrs. Zapka and I brainstormed together and decided to have the students make place tents which said “I’m working” on one side and “I’m taking a break” on the other. We taught the students to flip the tent so that Mrs. Zapka would know what they were doing throughout the day. The tent system would also serve as a visual reminder to Mrs. Zapka of who was taking breaks and when. Mrs. Zapka was realistic. She knew that at times some of her students might take unnecessary breaks to avoid work. The tents would enable her to mentally keep track of how often students were taking breaks, as well as the length of breaks, so that they wouldn’t abuse the system. In addition, the tents would cue her to pay attention to the students who just finished a break and observe their patterns of behavior. For example, if a student changed his tent to “I’m taking a break” and stopped working to fiddle with a sponge ball three or four times during a 30 minute long independent work time, she could provide the student with feedback. As the “engine expert,” Mrs. Zapka could inform the student that the frequency of his breaks pointed to them being ineffective for keeping his engine just right. She could then suggest that the student try something else, like doing five chair push ups and then returning to work.

Mrs. Zapka and the Alert Program for Self-regulation

Mrs. Zapka embraced the Alert Program and continued to use it as her classroom management system until her retirement. She appreciated the value in teaching students how to self-regulate and be responsible for managing their own behaviors. As an occupational therapist, my collaboration with her was very rewarding. I learned an enormous amount from an expert teacher and was honored that she valued my collaboration. Mrs. Zapka never lost her strict reputation, but she did become an expert in deciphering which strategies were the most beneficial for her students - and she was never heard referring to a student as a “bad apple” again.

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