



Behaviour Management Systems – More Harm than Good?

Part Two: Digital Behaviour Management Systems

As I deepen my knowledge and understanding of the optimum conditions for helping our children reach their full potential, I have come to realize that development comes in a context of rest. Recent research on the importance of sleep serves to support this conclusion. The Neufeld developmental paradigm reminds us that children can be at rest only when they can count on the adults in their lives to care about them unconditionally and to take charge of them and keep them safe.

It is coming from this perspective that I have become very concerned about a new development in classroom management, that is, the emergence of digital behaviour management systems. Without reference to any specific one, I want to alert those working in schools to some unanticipated side effects that would warrant a re-examination of the use of these programmes.

It is understandable that when teachers are faced with an unruly and difficult-to-manage group of students they want to find an effective and fast-acting solution. After all, if students constantly interrupt, don't follow directions, and frequently bother other students, teaching becomes nearly impossible.

These digital behaviour management systems are relatively easy to use. They usually allow teachers to use their smart phones and/or Smart Boards to track children's behaviour in the classroom, and they have many features that make them very attractive to adults and students alike. In the short-run, teachers see results quite quickly as their students respond to the immediate feedback about their behaviour and the rewards given. And so their popularity has dramatically increased as teachers share with each other their satisfaction with this new intervention.

There are aspects of these programmes that I find of interest. Teachers can use them as a way to securely share with parents photos and videos of the activities that they are doing with their students in class. Parents appreciate the fact that they can "see" what their child was doing throughout the day. And these photos and short videos can be great discussion starters between parent and child.

However, there are other features of these programmes that are of concern, even though on the surface they may seem to be simply an extension of common classroom management strategies, i.e. positive reinforcement systems for encouraging appropriate classroom behaviour. Behavioural and learning theorists have long advocated that if we wish to change a child's behaviour, this happens best with immediate feedback and positive reinforcement of the desired behaviours.

When using one of these systems to "enhance" student behaviour in the classroom, the teacher can record when she notices the child using the expected behaviour by tapping on the child's name, or in some cases, a "persona," as she circulates in the classroom, smart phone in hand. By using a smart phone, the teacher is able to provide frequent and consistent feedback on the targeted behaviours. The results are recorded on a digital chart, which at times is made public on a Smart Board, so that at the end of the day each child knows how many times he or she used the expected behaviours. This information can also be shared with parents via their phones.

Initially, when these programmes are used, the children are entranced by their persona (if that is part of the programme) and they enjoy being acknowledged for their behaviour and seeing their points appear on the Board. Children are encouraged to try harder each day to earn as many positive points as they did the day before. And many try to do as well or better than their classmates. In some systems, children can trade in their points for tangible rewards. And, so, of course, behaviour in the classroom improves. The children become more conscious of the expected behaviours and engage in them to receive external acknowledgement and rewards. The classroom environment improves and the teacher now believes that he or she can start teaching again.

But let's take a more in-depth look in what else might be happening.

One of the features making a system like this so attractive is that the teacher can monitor and give feedback on behaviour from any spot in the room or the school and in the moment when it happens.

I ask myself, "How well would I perform if I knew someone was watching me and recording how well I did all the time?" Even if I could "get it right," how much effort would it take and how would I feel? Think back to the last time that you noticed a police vehicle following you. All of a sudden you started to focus on all the tiny and specific aspects of good driving behaviour. It was exhausting, even if that is how you normally drive. When the police vehicle turned away, what a huge sense of relief. Is this how the students feel when their behaviour is continually being monitored, recorded, and reported?

The child in such a classroom is now very aware of what behaviour is expected, and wishing to be "acknowledged" will put a lot of effort into acting in a way that will get noticed by the teacher. But our brains are not all that great at multi-tasking. When children focus energy on acting appropriately, it is likely that they will have less energy to engage in real learning. They may look more engaged in the task assigned, but are their brains fully engaged in the learning process?

Even though teachers assure us that they are only recording and reinforcing expected behaviours, children are very aware of how much more they could do; of how others are doing, and of what is expected of them. Even our "good" children, for whom behaving appropriately is usually not a problem, become worried about not doing well enough.

What if a child is having a bad day (they are tired, feeling sick, were just rejected by a friend)? What if a child is immature and over-reactive and finds the behavioural demands of a full day in school overwhelming? What if a child is trying very hard and the teacher doesn't notice? What if a child consistently receives fewer points than her classmates? And, ultimately, what happens when this information is given to the parents?

Now, instead of a "happy face" that summarizes the day, Mommy and Daddy can know exactly how many times the child behaved appropriately. A child said to his mother, "Mommy, I could have gotten 45 points today, but I only got 35 points. Can you still love me?" Of course, his parents were appalled that their child thought that he had to earn their love by his "good" behaviour. However, this response is not surprising to a developmental theorist. Humans are wired to be sensitive to disruptions in their attachment relationships. When we put a lot of emphasis on how we want a child to behave, it is natural that the child will focus on the obvious and come to believe that his or her behaviour has a significant effect on the quality of the relationship.

Of greater concern is that communication with parents can also be about what is not going well. Some systems allow a teacher to digitally alert a parent via their smart

phone or computer when their child has behaved “inappropriately” as soon as it happens. Imagine knowing that your parent is aware of your “inappropriateness” at 10 a.m. and that you still have a whole day to get through. For the immature and/or over-reactive child, or even for a well-behaved child, this is very distressing.

Now think about how the parent must feel, knowing that their child is in “trouble” at 10 a.m. Often the context is not reported and so the parent can only imagine the worst. They spend their day ruminating about what else they need to do to “fix” their child.

Both parent and child are in a state of alarm, a state which is difficult to tolerate. This can lead to frustration, which can lead to eruptions (both child and adult). Children who can hold themselves together at school will often have long and prolonged tantrums at home. Others, fearing the reaction of their parent, will erupt at school. Because the message has been transmitted via the smart phone, other school personnel, who are unaware of this previous communication, might not understand why the child is blowing up in response to what seems to be a simple request or a simple denial. The real reason is that the child has been worried for hours about their parent’s reaction to what happened earlier in the day.

To those in the helping professions, I would like to suggest that if a parent comes to see you with a child who seems to have just recently become significantly more anxious, it may be helpful to ask if one of these systems is being used in the classroom. I have heard of children who, especially on Sunday nights, have trouble falling asleep, experience nightmares, have a recurrence of bed-wetting, and other symptoms indicative of alarm. Some children are able to voice their worry about not being able to “behave well enough” in the coming week, but many children cannot. Nevertheless, their behaviour is indicative of an increase in alarm that may well be based in what is happening in their classroom.

Ultimately, we need to ask ourselves if this focus on “good” behaviour is in our children’s best interest. Can positive reinforcement really grow a brain up? Is a constant preoccupation with getting a recognized for behaving well conducive to learning in the classroom? How can a child rest in adult relationships when everything that they do is being continually monitored and reported?

Is this what was intended? I don’t think so, but unfortunately many who work in schools are noticing an increase in alarm, agitation, and anxiety. It is ironic that an intervention that was meant to improve the classroom environment seems to be having this unintended side effect.

There are no easy answers. Growing children up requires the patience of a gardener. Just as with the tomato plant, whose flowers are yellow and spikey but whose fruit is round and red, we must believe that given the right conditions – strong, safe, generous attachments with caring adults – children will ultimately grow into mature human beings. They need rest in order to grow and they need to be able to make mistakes. Let’s find better ways to help them to manage the behavioural expectations of school.

In my next editorial, I will share interventions that are being used by teachers and schools who are using a developmental approach for helping their students.

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