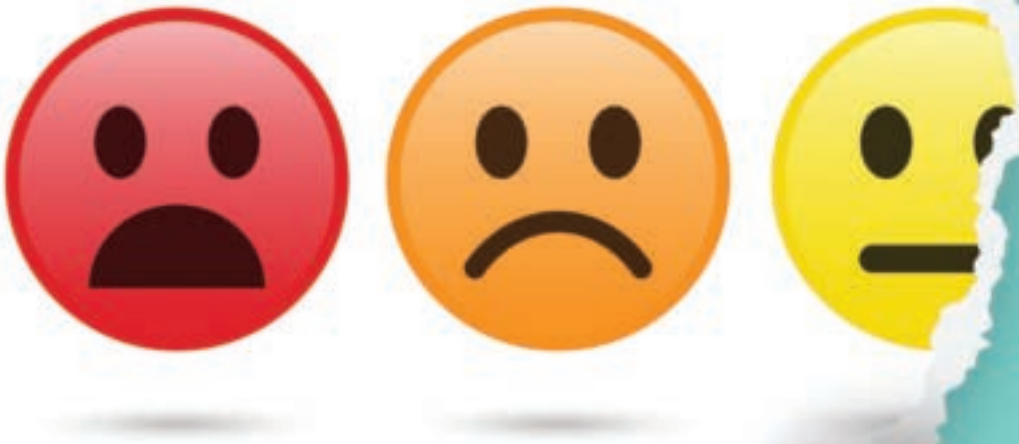
Tear Down Your



Behavior charts and similar public shaming methods don't teach self-regulation. They mainly harm vulnerable learners.

Lee Ann Jung and Dominique Smith

Behavior Chart!

Mr. Hill stops reading aloud to his 4th grade students and turns to Anisa. "Anisa, you're off task. Change your clip. I asked you once and you are still digging in your desk. Walk over and change it now."

Anisa stands and walks across the classroom. Several of her peers make condescending comments under their breath. Anisa moves her clip from green to yellow and returns to her desk and puts her head down. Her nonverbal behaviors indicate that she's angry, hurt, and frustrated.

A few minutes later, Josh raises his hand. Mr. Hill calls on him and Josh responds, "Anisa is off task again."

Mr. Hill looks at Anisa and says, "Again? Please change your clip to red. One more problem and it will be another call home. You have to learn to pay attention."

A Practice That Harms

Scenes like this are common in schools today. Pass through the halls of almost any elementary school and you are likely to at some point hear "pull a red ticket" or "you're on yellow now." Behavior charts—and their variants—are standard in elementary schools throughout the world. They represent a practice long overdue for retirement.

Nothing in the research literature suggests that we can shame children into being compliant.

In thinking about this strategy for managing student behavior, we challenge you to ask yourself a question: Why are you are an educator and why do you continue to be an educator? Did you respond with, "to show students who's boss?" or "to help the students who are already doing well to succeed?" Of course not. Your response was probably some version of, "I want to make a difference" or "I want to be the teacher students need in their lives." We posed this question because we can't move forward in the argument we're about to make until we share a strong understanding of our ultimate goal as educators. Most of us are in education to make a difference in our students' lives and help them become their best selves—aspirations that, in our view, aren't compatible with behavior charts.

In working with students, we've often seen adolescents display challenging behaviors that have evolved over years. We've wondered to what extent their behavioral paths could have been corrected in early-childhood classrooms rather than exacerbated by stigmatizing practices like behavior charts. Braithwaite's shaming theory (1989) highlights the connections between stigmatizing shame and later delinquency. According to Braithwaite, "shaming means all societal processes of expressing disapproval which have the intention or effect of invoking remorse in the person being shamed and/or condemnation by others who become aware of the shaming" (p. 100). Although the relationship between shame and later behavior is complex, empirical studies provide enough evidence to compel us to stop shaming young children and instead build strong relationships and seek alternative methods to promote prosocial behaviors.

We present here three reasons to abandon behavior charts. If such charts are used in your school, we encourage you to have an open mind as you consider our reasoning. And we hope you take down those charts tomorrow and consider trying the alternatives we propose to foster positive behavior.

1

Compliance Isn't Our Long-term Goal

Behavior charts do an excellent job of teaching children that they will be punished if they don't comply with directions or rules. Although this may work in the short-term to make some students compliant, compliance shouldn't be our end game. We can shoot so much higher than that! We want students to be engaged and excited about learning, to persist when their work is hard, and to interact with others in ways that will lead to positive social and academic outcomes in the future.

Art Costa and Bena Kallick (2000) have done beautiful work organizing and describing the skills and behaviors educators should cultivate in all our students, what they term *habits of mind*. These lifelong skills—like persisting, managing impulsivity, and listening to others with empathy—improve students' competence, confidence, and ultimate success across the curriculum and in life. Such skills are arguably more important than the content we teach; the content is merely a vehicle for teaching them. Solidifying these habits is what teachers should aim toward. Otherwise, we run the risk of creating what William Deresiewicz (2015) called "excellent sheep"—students who play the game of school but lack true engagement and critical thinking.

2

Behavior Charts Can't Teach Self-Regulation

Teaching the whole child is our responsibility. If we are to be effective in our work, faculty at all levels must be able to *teach* habits of mind such as self-regulation, a key skill for shifting toward more positive behavior. Simply rewarding and punishing behaviors is not what helps students learn such habits and skills. It's particularly ineffective with self-regulation.

Punishments work to reduce behaviors by immediately following a behavior we don't want to see with a consequence that the child doesn't like (Alberto & Troutman, 2002). Thus, behavior charts can reduce a student's problematic behavior if the student dislikes negative public attention—or public shaming. This is a questionable strategy to begin with since it's based on stressing out the student rather than cultivating new aptitudes. But for many students, negative attention is something they've gotten used to, or worse, something over which they feel they have no control. Their identity has become "the kid who is bad." Have you noticed that most of the time the student who is "on red" today is the same one who was "on red" yesterday and the day before? And is likely to be "on red" all year long? What does it tell us if the intervention being put in place doesn't lead to a change in students' behavior? Clearly, the strategy isn't working. Why would we continue to use any strategy that isn't working?

Decades of research have led to a body of evidence on how educators can effectively support and teach key skills like self-regulation (Heckhausen & Dweck, 2009). Nowhere in the literature do researchers recommend that we shame children into being compliant.

3

Charts Hurt Students!

The most compelling reason to abandon behavior charts is this: They risk harming our students. Lee Ann still remembers the painful effect of the color behavior chart a teacher used when her son, Spencer, was in 1st grade. Spencer was a sensitive "people pleaser" as a young child. He preferred to do what he needed to do with little public attention, but he valued personal relationships. He was kind to everyone around him and worked hard in school. One afternoon, Spencer came home from school distraught because he'd had to "move his stick." He'd gone to school without a paper signed by Lee Ann and, in front of the class, his teacher reprimanded him and asked him to move his stick from green to yellow. Spencer felt as though he had failed and let his teacher down. He was embarrassed and affected by the event for days.

Fortunately, Spencer's experience was a one-time event. But consider the inner voice of the student who is "on red" nearly every day. When we reprimand a student in front of their peers, we risk changing that student's inner voice, shifting their identity to the "bad kid," isolating the student from peers, and disrupting their relationship with their teachers. At worst, we risk making a student feel unloved. Imagine the devastating effects for a child who gets most of her or his love at school.

Instead of using charts, we could just as effectively reduce undesirable behaviors by dumping ice water on a student or inflicting corporal punishment. Did you furrow your brow at that thought? We would *never* do that! We would never use physical punishment on a student in an effort to shape behavior—or

even *want* a student to learn to avoid certain behaviors out of fear of physical harm. So why don't we have the same visceral reaction to emotional punishment?

Consider who this practice harms the most. Not the student who has a handle on self-regulation and performs well in school. It's the students who need us the most who we are hurting. Behavior charts are a way to excuse ourselves from the hard work of meeting a student's self-regulation and behavior needs.

Stop asking "what's wrong with that student?" and start figuring out what happened to that student.

The fact of the matter is, when we use behavior charts, we are sacrificing student dignity in favor of teacher convenience.

Alternative to Sticks, Clips, and Charts

Perhaps we've convinced you to stand up right now, run down the halls of the school, and tear down the behavior charts. But before you jump out of your chair, you might be asking, "What do we do instead? If I don't have consequences in place, my classroom will be chaos." As we advocate for avoiding punitive approaches within schools, we often hear rumblings that alternative disciplinary strategies are too soft and "touchy-feely." Dominique has even heard restorative practices—that is, those based on reconciliation and understanding—referred to as the "hug a thug" approach.

Rest assured, we don't recommend removing structures or accountability. We advocate for putting behavioral structures in place, just not punitive ones. We want students to be held accountable in more natural ways and to have a chance to learn the impact of their actions on others. We want them to build empathy, persistence, or whatever skills they need to behave appropriately—and for those positive behaviors to become internally driven.

There *are* effective, humane, growth-producing ways to teach students that their behaviors impact others. True, there may be a bit of an adjustment period when changing to a new system. But our students' self-worth and long-term success are worth any temporary disruption we may encounter. To move away from the reactive approach of behavior charts, we recommend teachers put into place three proactive strategies.

1

"Take Ten" for Each Learner

Set aside 10 minutes each day to sit with one student (focusing on each of your students in turn). Talk about something non-school-related that's of interest to that child. When educators build strong, caring relationships with their students, each student naturally wants to protect that relationship and avoid anything that might damage it. Students' behaviors and approaches to learning in the classroom are then driven by relationships, not fear.

Teachers need to know as much as possible about what makes each student unique and special—her personal interests, what excites him, what delights her, what he fears. We need to understand much more than their academic strengths and needs; we need to know the whole child—who they truly are—and allow them to know our true selves, too.

Students should feel that teachers are on their side. Imagine how differently the opening

anecdote might have turned out if Anisa's teacher had built a strong relationship with her.

2

Keep It Off-Stage

Stop making discipline for poor behavior visible. Students tend to react negatively when they're called out in front of others. Instead, when a student's inappropriate behavior needs to be addressed, have a one-on-one conversation with the student, staying calm but firm. When possible, avoid publicly calling a student aside for this talk: Publicly—and perhaps angrily—telling a child to come talk with you can have the same humiliating effect as a behavior chart. Instead, after class invite that student to have a conversation with you or quietly ask them to talk with you at a time when other students are otherwise engaged.

Be calm and supportive in discussing the behavior. To maintain your relationship with the student, always conclude by ensuring the student understands that although you are unhappy with the behavior, you still care about them and are there to support them in their growth.

3

Hear Students Out

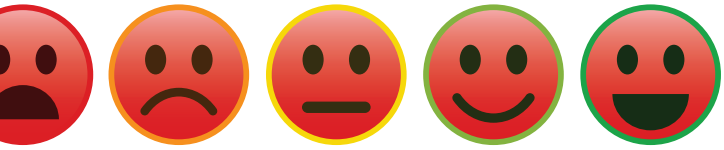
Before acting on any student behavior, try to understand why it happened. When a student needs a corrective conversation, first ask to hear his side of the story. Generally, students prefer to have a conversation *with* a teacher rather than having a teacher conversation happen *to* them.

There's always a reason why students are acting as they do. Stop asking "What's wrong with that student?" and start figuring out *what happened* to that student. This may mean asking questions that prompt the student to reflect on the behavior and its effects on others. Students often have a hard time knowing why they acted in a certain way. It's only once their emotion has calmed—and through a guided analysis—that they can identify the reason.

Once a learner understands the underlying reason, we can guide him or her to consider alternatives for next time and discuss any consequence that needs to follow. Even students who are caught in a pattern of disruptive or harmful behaviors—perhaps *especially* those students—benefit from being heard. Certainly, there are times when we must intervene and stop a behavior, such as if it is causing harm or severe disruption. We may need to remove the student from the situation immediately to restore a calm, safe environment—and later teach that student the self-regulation skills needed to prevent such behavior in the future. The key is that the subsequent conversation should be private and should be about the behavior rather than the person.

Students Deserve Better

Imagine how much better things might have turned out if, in the opening scenario, instead of scolding Anisa, Mr. Hill had tried some of the techniques described here. He might've noted that Anisa was having difficulty remaining engaged in the reading and lesson and, after finishing the group read-aloud, approached her while everyone else was gathering their things and



Behavior charts sacrifice student dignity in favor of teacher convenience.

moving to stations for the next lesson. Imagine if he'd said, "Anisa, I saw you were having trouble staying with me today. I'm worried that if you aren't paying attention to the lesson, you'll miss something important to your learning. What was going on today?" Mr. Hill might have found out that Anisa was actually looking for a pencil to write down ideas that occurred to her as he read aloud. He might then have affirmed, "That seems to be happening a lot lately—trouble finding your pencil and other materials. Let's find some time today to see if we can come up with an organization solution, OK?" With such a response, Mr. Hill would've acknowledged the need for a change in Anisa's behavior, but not stigmatized Anisa as a "bad kid;" rather, he would have helped her develop a solution.

All students deserve this kind of supportive response. We are calling out the practice of behavior charts for what it really is: public shaming of children into compliance. We have many good strategies available for teaching self-regulation; humiliation isn't one of them. Let's stop "managing behaviors" and instead guide and support engagement, persistence, and positive interactions. Let's build relationships that promote growth of the whole child—and the skills each student needs for a lifetime of positive interactions and success.

Now, go tear down some charts! EL

Authors' note: All teacher and student names are pseudonyms.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

› How does your approach for addressing student behavior issues square with your personal answer to the question Jung and Smith propose: "Why do you continue to be an educator?" Does how you deal with "problem" students fit your central purpose?

› What challenges might you or your school face in adopting Jung and Smith's three strategies for teaching positive behavior? What steps could you take to address those challenges?

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