

Praise, rather than punish, to see up to 30% greater focus in the classroom

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To improve behavior in class, teachers should focus on praising children for good behavior, rather than telling them off for being disruptive, according to a new study published in *Educational Psychology*.

Researchers spent three years observing 2,536 students, across three US states, from kindergarten age through to sixth grade (5 to 12 years of age).

The children observed were shown to focus on tasks up to 20% to 30% more when teachers were required to consider the number of praise statements given, compared to the number of reprimands.

The study lead by Dr. Paul Caldarella, at Brigham Young University, involved a research team that sat in 151 classes, in 19 [elementary schools](#) across Missouri, Tennessee and Utah.

In half of the classrooms, teachers followed a behavioral intervention programme called CW-FIT, where students are told about the social skills they are expected to show in lessons and rewarded for doing so. In the other half of the classes, teachers used their typical classroom management practices.

The study showed a relationship between the ratio of praise to reprimands (PRR) used by the teachers and the extent students focused on class activities. In other words, the more teachers praised and the less that they scolded, the more students attended to the [teacher](#), or worked on assigned tasks.

The difference was such that children in classes where the PRR was highest, the pupils spent 20-30% longer focusing on the teacher or task compared to those in classes where the praise to reprimand ratio was lowest. This relationship was present across both CW-FIT and ordinary classes.

"Unfortunately, previous research has shown that teachers often tend to reprimand students for problem behavior as much or more than they praise pupils for appropriate behavior, which can often have a negative

effect on classrooms and [student](#) behavior," says Dr. Caldarella, from the David O. McKay School of Education at Brigham Young.

"Praise is a form of teacher feedback, and students need that feedback to understand what behavior is expected of them, and what behavior is valued by teachers.

"Even if teachers praised as much as they reprimanded, students' on-task behavior reached 60%. However, if teachers could increase their praise to reprimand ratio to 2:1 or higher, they would see even more improvements in the classroom."

The results suggest that praise is a powerful tool in a teacher's arsenal, inspiring students to work harder—particularly those difficult to reach children who may struggle academically or be disruptive in class. Previous studies have shown a clear link between the time spent by students attending to lessons and their academic achievement, suggesting that praise could boost learning and improve children's grades too.

"Everyone values being praised and recognised for their endeavours—it is a huge part of nurturing children's self-esteem and confidence," Dr. Caldarella adds.

"Also from a behavioral perspective, behavior that is reinforced tends to increase—so if teachers are praising students for [good behavior](#)—such as attending to the teacher, asking for help appropriately, etc—it stands to reason that this [behavior](#) will increase, and learning will improve."

Although the study shows that praise plays an important role in boosting student's focus in class, the researchers are keen to stress that sound instructional techniques and other evidence-based classroom management strategies must also be used to maintain children's attention.

More information: *Educational Psychology*,
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