

“Meeting Individual Needs” by Angela Powell

Excerpted and adapted from [“The Cornerstone: Classroom Management That Makes Teaching More Effective, Efficient, and Enjoyable”](#).

Behavior modification encompasses several important components, such as developing a rapport with your kids, establishing procedures and routines, and setting up a positive behavior management or reward system for your whole class. However, there are children who need additional structure and support through special behavior modification systems. You will encounter students who appear to be uninterested in pleasing you or being successful in the classroom. Many of these children have disadvantaged home lives, disabilities and disorders, social difficulties, and other issues that have been working against them for a very long time. These deep-seated problems will cause the kids to struggle to meet your expectations, even though deep down they want to make good choices.

These challenging students are the kids who fail at whole class systems. They’re the ones who are constantly losing their recess, being isolated from the group, not earning the sticker or treat, and so on. While one set of consequences should be set up for the entire class, it's unreasonable to expect all kids to act the same way, and therefore it's unfair to try to treat them all the same way. Rather than striving for equality, work for equity—treating students in a way that is appropriate and reasonable for their unique temperaments and personal situations. Equity involves encouraging students to develop and perform at their personal best. Every child brings a unique personality and set of experiences to the classroom, and therefore, not only will each child have different capabilities, each will need to be disciplined differently.

Modifying Your Whole Class System for Individual Needs

Individual behavior plans do constitute additional work for teacher, no matter how simple they are. Therefore it is advisable to first try adapting the whole class system(s) already in place. Here are a few ideas:

- ◆ **Use your whole-class rewards (beads, tokens, etc.) to reinforce your troubled students’ efforts toward behaving.** "Wow, he bumped into you and you chose not to push him back!" or "You took your paper out and put your name on it right away, without any reminders. Thank you!" After the first few months of school, these accomplishments might be too minor for the rest of the class to earn beads for doing. However, you can always whisper to an individual child and reward her privately if that’s what she needs in order to be as successful as the other children.
- ◆ **Structure your routines and procedures so that there are more immediate and concrete rewards and consequences for the child ("Three Strikes").** For example, my students know if they are continually disruptive, they will have to move their desks and sit alone. But there are some kids that aren't able to monitor their behavior well enough to understand when this consequence will apply. Rather than developing an entire behavior plan for the child, I just say, "You're going to get three warnings a day about that behavior. If I have to say something to you about that more than three times, you will need to move your desk away from the group for the rest of the day. It's just like in baseball, except I'm giving you one extra chance—three strikes and THEN you're out!" When that fourth correction comes (and it normally won't using a consequence this immediate and clear-cut), I simply say in a firm and disappointed (not angry) tone, "I've had to stop teaching four times today because of that behavior. Your three strikes are up and you're out. Please move your desk back from the group. Thank you. I hope you will do better now that you are sitting alone."
- ◆ **Never underestimate the impact of a private word with an encouraging teacher.** Talking individually with the child usually has a powerful influence on behavior. Taking a few minutes at various points in the day to comment on good decisions and the reasons for bad decisions may be all a child needs for success the majority of the time. Call the child over to your desk first thing in the morning and say, "You've got a fresh start today! I know you're going to do the right thing. How are you feeling? Are you ready to do your best work? Go for it!" Whisper to the child in the hallway on the way back from specials, saying, "I loved how on-task you were during reading groups today! Keep up the great work when we do math this afternoon!" At the end of the day, stand in the doorway and pat the child on the back. "Hey, what happened today during science? You seemed really

spaced out and you were playing in your desk a lot. [Help the child reflect on what she did and why]. Everybody gets distracted sometimes. I know you'll be more focused tomorrow. Have a great afternoon, honey!" The purpose is to let the child know you pay attention and care about everything she does. This is the personal touch that makes a world of difference to most kids. Taking a few minutes to talk everyday can eliminate the need for a more formal behavior plan—which is easier on you in the long run.

Creating Effective Plans for Individual Students

When is the Whole Class System Insufficient?

There are several ways to tell if your whole class positive reinforcement system isn't meeting the needs of a particular child. Here are a few possible signs:

- The student is rarely successful in meeting your whole class goal (earning the required number of beads, getting tokens, staying on 'green').
- The child's parent has asked to be notified daily about the child's behavior—or you think the parent should be, so the student is accountable and the parent can hopefully reinforce expectations at home.
- The child is getting into serious trouble at school, resulting in administrative referrals.
- The child is so needy that you're having to give almost constant reinforcement, encouragement, and redirection as a motivation to behave.

Designing Personal Improvement Plans

I prefer the term 'Personal Improvement Plan' to the more traditional 'Individual Behavior Plan', despite its unfortunate acronym, PIP. That's because my purpose is more focused on helping the child become a better person than on modifying his behavior. The PIP is designed to help the child reflect on her actions and connect them to logical consequences (and motivating rewards if needed). It is typically a contract or evaluation that is created in conjunction with the child and parent. Here are guidelines to help you design a plan that meets individual student needs, followed by examples of plans that I have successfully used with children:

- **Choose ONE specific area you want the student to improve upon.**

Some kids are just a mess all the way around, and there's no way you can address everything at one time. Choose one behavior that most interferes with learning, e.g., calling out, playing around in the desk instead of listening to the teacher, talking back, or arguing and fighting with peers. As you see improvements, you can add other criteria. The idea is to break down the task of being a responsible student into small, manageable steps so the child can experience success and build self-confidence.

- **Explain the need for a plan to the child.**

Form an idea about what you want to do, and then speak to the child about it. You could say, "I know how hard it is for you to control yourself when you get angry. I want to help you. I'm thinking of a plan that would have us talk about your choices at the end of every day. I have a paper that looks like this, and what will happen is, I'll give it to you each day during dismissal. We'll discuss your decisions and then I'll send the paper home for you to look at with mom. Do you think it would be helpful for you to talk about your behavior with me? Do you think that showing mom will help you? I'd like to bring her in so we can decide on this together. We'll meet with her tomorrow morning, and then start the plan right away. Does that sound like it will work? I'm proud of you for wanting to do the right thing, and I feel good about our plan. If we need to change anything later on, we'll talk about it, but let's give this a shot. I believe in you."

- **Involve the child and parent in setting up the plan.**

When you meet with the parent, leave things open-ended for his feedback, and emphasize that the plan's purpose is to provide the support the child needs to be successful. Present the information in a nonchalant way that clearly communicates you don't think the child is 'bad' and needs 'punishment'. Show enthusiasm and optimism about the entire process, and let both the parent and child know you are confident that the three of you will be able to work together and find a way to help the child be the best she can be.

- **Make sure the rewards and consequences are effective for the particular student.**

Not all PIPs have built-in rewards or consequences, because sometimes the child just needs verbal accountability and attention. If you feel that the plan will work better with incentives, by all means discuss those with the child and parent. To achieve the optimal results, you should not determine the reinforcements on your own. Some kids will work hard for privileges in the classroom (extra computer time) or to avoid consequences (having to sit alone). If you have a very supportive parent whom you know will follow through consistently at home, you can add rewards/consequences for there as well (extra video game time, or loss of it). If the parent wants to reinforce the plan at home but you have reason to believe that this will not be enough for the child, or the parent won't follow through effectively, provide classroom reinforcements as well.

There's lots more in The Cornerstone book!

- ***Considering the 6 student positions (needs/motives): identify WHY the child is acting out so you can choose an appropriate response**

- ***5 student responses to correction, and how the teacher should enforce consequences for each response type**

- ***Being consistent while differentiating for students' needs: handling jealousy by getting kids to recognize and accept that your job is to be equitable, NOT fair**

- ***The secrets of low-key rule enforcement and the importance of revealing your reasoning**

- ***2 critical strategies for dealing with violent, defiant, and emotionally unstable children**

- ***How to avoid power struggles with a calm, unemotional demeanor and through replacing repeated demands with expectation reminders**

- ***What to do in a stand-off with a defiant child: step by step directives on what to say and do in the most extreme and/or violent encounters**

- ***4 examples of personal improvement (individual behavior modification) plans that work with real kids (read their before and after stories!)**

- ***Plus, examples of Personal Improvement Plans for 4 different types of kids:**

- "Andre": The devious smart-aleck who could care less about school

- "Claire"- The emotionally disturbed child who wants to succeed

- "Elijah": The kid with a good heart who just doesn't get it

- "Derick"- The kid with the hot temper and bad reputation