I'm pleased to publish this guest post by my colleague **Heather Bleakley Chang**, who served 11 years as a K-2 teacher and school leader in Philadelphia, and now supports schools as a consultant specializing in instructional coaching. Heather earned her Ph.D. in Urban Education from Temple University, and you can contact her at: **heather.chang@temple.edu**

Early in my K-2 teaching career, I felt panic when my attempts to redirect disruptive students failed. I demanded that students move their names on the traffic light behavior chart, which typically elicited one of two responses: 1) a sad face, which I interpreted to mean the student felt remorseful and would quickly shape up, or 2) a full meltdown, which I still interpreted as effective because, "Hey, it shows they care." I've observed this same scenario in dozens of other classrooms, often accompanied by the ever-popular teacher line, "That's your clip!"

Reflecting on my teaching experience and observations in classrooms as a supervisor and coach, I've concluded that teachers use behavior charts to exert power over children they perceive as disobedient. In moments of frustration, teachers resort to the behavior chart to shame and threaten students into submission. It sounds harsh, but that's what I was doing when using a behavior chart. I expected that students' embarrassment would motivate them to stop the disruptive behaviors. I wanted students to consider that if their end-of-day color was red, their parents would be mad, and that should motivate them to get themselves together.

I see three problems with using a behavior chart to motivate students to change their behavior. First, children's responses to the behavior chart vary, with some children placing tremendous value on it and others placing none. Factors contributing to this difference include: students' level of sensitivity to pleasing or disappointing the teacher; students' sensitivity to peers' perception; and parents' follow-through on rewards and punishments at home. Teachers have little or no control over each of these factors.

A second problem with behavior charts is that they teach children to focus on the chart, not on the precipitating behavior. When teachers threaten to move a child's name on the chart, using statements such as, "If you do that again, I'm going to have to move your clip," they communicate that the chart is the reason to follow classroom rules and expectations. Similarly, when teachers yell, "That's your clip!" in response to a child's action, they send the message to students that the chart is the ultimate judge in the room and only the teacher has the power to control it. The chart becomes a tool for teachers to maintain their power and control while children are publicly sorted into levels of obedience on the chart.

Third, and perhaps most concerning, behavior charts don't help teachers or students understand why a behavior occurred. Moving students' clips doesn't help them identify the feelings that may have caused them to act out. Young children are still learning how to respond to others and how to manage their feelings and behaviors. When children act out, teachers should talk to them about their feelings and actions, and coach them through difficult situations. With teacher guidance, children learn how to manage their emotions more appropriately. In addition, talking to students about their feelings and actions builds student-teacher trust, and provides teachers with valuable information about each child's needs. Some teachers do talk to students after an incident, but still use the behavior chart. Why? What purpose does it serve, other than communicating a student's "bad" day to parents?

When a child's behavior commands our attention, we need to ask ourselves, "What do I want this student to learn from my response to his/her action?" We all want students to be productive citizens of our classroom communities. We want them to be kind to their classmates and engaged in their learning. While I empathize and relate to teachers' fear of losing control, the behavior chart system does more to maintain teachers' sense of power and control than it does to teach students how and why to respect their peers, their teachers, their classrooms, and
Do you use a behavior chart in your classroom? If so, reflect on its purpose and effectiveness, and consider an alternative approach that is rooted in meaningful student-teacher communication. Here are a few resources to get you started:

- TLPI (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative)
- CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning)
- Responsive Classroom

*Image provided by GECC, LLC with permission.*

*Join my mailing list for announcements about the work I do to improve teaching and learning.*

**Categories:** Behavior Management

**Ground Rules for Posting**

We encourage lively debate, but please be respectful of others. Profanity and personal attacks are prohibited. By commenting, you are agreeing to abide by our user agreement. All comments are public.