Cuing...
a proactive intervention for the classroom

This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

Introduction

 "A cue is a signal that stimulates a person (e.g., a student) to exhibit a previously learned voluntary behavior pattern" (Cangelosi, 1988, p. 225). Cuing, also referred to as prompting, is an intervention which stops disruptive behavior before it starts by drawing attention away from inappropriate behavior and redirecting attention to appropriate behavior.

With what kinds of behavior is cuing useful?

Cuing is beneficial in modifying behaviors which are being displayed by a whole classroom, such as noise level and behaviors exhibited by one or few individuals (for example, on-task behavior and hand-raising). Once you are able to recognize the warning signs of inappropriate behavior, you can begin to use cuing to help the student prevent his or her behavior from escalating. *However*, if a behavior has escalated to the level where there is conflict and the student is defensive, cuing is no longer an effective intervention.

What kinds of cues are there?

Four general categories of cuing are: visual, verbal, gestural, and physical.

Visual cues are unobtrusive, can be used with little effort, and are useful with groups of students. Posting classroom rules and daily schedules are two examples. When a rule is not being followed, the cue can be strengthened by pointing to the rule or asking the students which rule is not being followed. Another useful cue for the classroom is a noise level indicator. This could be in the form of a stoplight and would be changed according to the acceptable noise level. Red could represent no talking during testing or quiet time, yellow could represent quiet whispering during seat work, and green could represent reasonable talking during group activities or free time. A useful visual cue when working with an individual is using notes to remind him or her of task instructions.

   Students can implement cuing systems for teachers, too. A student with mood swings could use a "mood indicator" to let the teacher know how things are going. This can be done by putting a smile or frown face on his or her desk. Students who demand lots of attention during work time by asking many questions could implement cuing by placing a sign reading, "I have a question" on their desk.

Verbal cues are commonly used by teachers. These remind students of the task at hand ("We are on page 21 in our math books"), giving instructions ("Michael, would you please sit down in your chair now"), and encouraging appropriate behavior ("Keep up the good work," "This is what a hard-working student looks like"), etc. Verbal cues are very powerful because even if directed only at one student, they can affect an entire classroom's behavior.

Gestural cues involve a gesture or movement which is understood by students as indicating a desired behavior. Putting a finger to one's lips for silence, raising one's hand before asking students a question to remind them to raise their hands before answering, and pointing to a class rule on a rule sheet are common gestural cues.

Physical cues physically direct the student's behavior. Putting a hand on a student's shoulder if they are talking during quiet time is a common example of a physical cue. Simply positioning oneself in a specific area of the classroom can serve as a physical cue. For example, if a student is antagonizing another, walking over to them and standing next to them is a physical cue to stop this behavior.

Physical cues must be used with caution. Many students react negatively to being touched--this must be respected. As students move into adolescence, issues of privacy and personal space make physical cues involving contact less viable.

What are the qualities of effective cues?

In order to be effective, cues should be nonintrusive, discrete, nonhostile, and understood by the student. Nonintrusiveness is important for several reasons. If the student feels he or she is being put on the spot or is receiving negative attention, he or she will become defensive. Also, if the cuing is always intrusive, the student may inadvertently learn that they need to be prompted in order to behave correctly. Discretion is advisable so that cuing does not interrupt the flow of the class.

Making sure that the student understands the cue is easy to overlook if you assume that the student is aware of his or her behavior. You must communicate with the student what is going on.

Finally, it is important that you do not let any frustration or anger come through when cuing. If you are hostile (or even if the student perceives there to be hostility), the intervention will not be effective.

How do I prepare to use cuing?

First, consider student capabilities. Make sure the student knows or can decode your cue. Some students may react very negatively to physical contact; with such students, a physical prompt would be inappropriate.

Second, prioritize behaviors to be changed. Is it more important to reduce the class noise level or to increase a student's in-seat behavior? These decisions must be made before a cuing intervention can be implemented.

Third, involve students in preparing for implementation. This can begin with a discussion of what a cue is and examples of everyday cues: fire alarms, alarm clocks, ambulance sirens, etc. Discussion of what these cues indicate and how people respond should help students put classroom cuing into context. "Social perspective taking" (Slade & Callaghan, 1988) is another useful tool to get students involved in cuing. Give the students a hypothetical situation, such as a lifeguard or police officer, and have them construct a set of rules they would use and cues used to alert others to the rules.

Finally, clearly convey your expectations and the methods you will use to cue students. Role-playing and modeling are useful to clearly demonstrate to students what your cues are.

How do I fade a cue?

When you have reached a desired, consistent level of response, you are ready to begin fading it. Gradually design the cue to be less intrusive, maintaining the level of response until the cue is no longer necessary.

Special Considerations...

Keep in mind that cuing is extremely effective in promoting positive behavior. Telling a student or group of students, "What a great job you are doing concentrating on your homework" cues the student to continue working and helps instill positive feelings about the self and about school. Cuing for positive behavior should be a significant and integral part of any cuing intervention.

References

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