

Using Behavioral Momentum to Improve Student Behaviors

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Think about this familiar scene. In a kindergarten classroom, it is time to clean up an art activity and move to the carpet for reading time. You give the instructions for cleaning up, and most of your class starts putting materials away. One student does not; instead, she stays at her table, continuing to color and play with her materials. When you ask her to put her materials away and join the group, she says no and turns away. You repeat the direction more firmly, then walk over to her and ask her to join the group. Many teachers in this situation might continue to restate the expectations and become frustrated if one student is not able to listen. Even when classroom norms and rules are well implemented, some children will not comply for various reasons. Instead of struggling with compliance, teachers can add another approach for those students who need additional help. Called behavioral momentum, a teacher instead asks students to do smaller, easier-to-complete tasks that lead up to the main, more challenging tasks. It's one of many research-backed methods for improving student behavior and helping to move them from refusal into cooperation. This article explains in more detail what behavioral momentum is, where the idea comes from, and how to use it in your classroom.

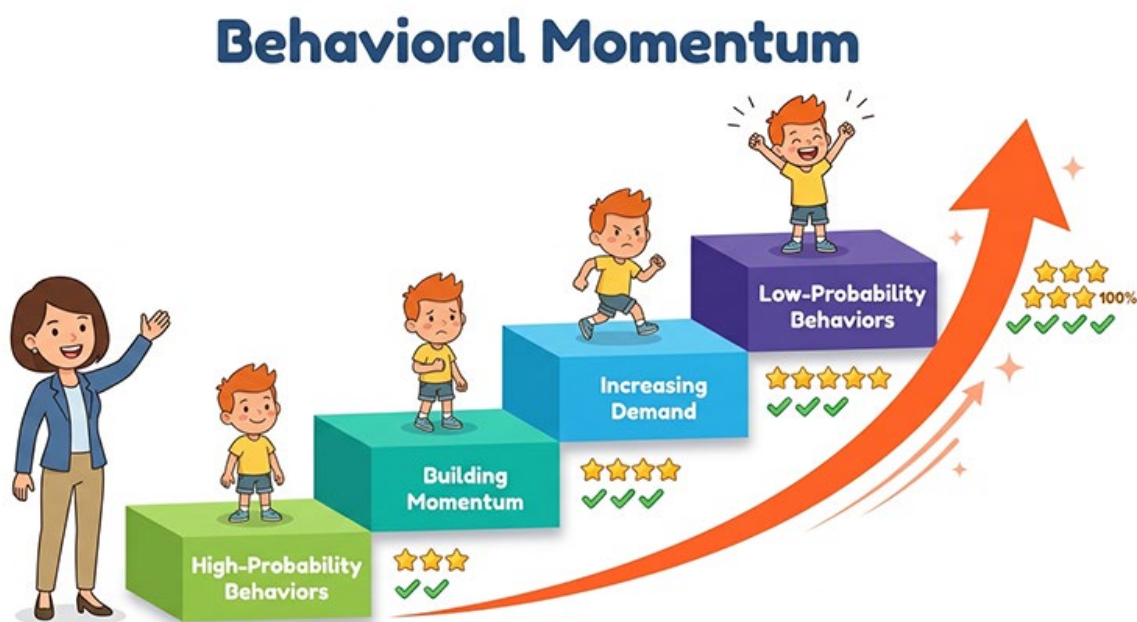
Student behavior and classroom management

Student behavior can generally be defined in two ways. You have student behaviors that support learning, such as starting work, following directions, and persisting through a difficult task. Classroom management is the set of routines, expectations, and responses you use to create an environment where learning can happen, thereby reducing unwanted behaviors and increasing the positive behaviors you wish to see in your students. Teachers who set clear expectations, build predictable routines, and reinforce desired behavior tend to prevent more problems than teachers who rely mainly on consequences after a behavior occurs <https://www.edutopia.org/article/8-proactive-classroom-management-tips/>. Many schools also organize these practices within tiered frameworks such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which match the level of support to the level of student need. No single strategy works for every student or every situation. While some classroom management procedures are standard

components of every classroom, such as a set of class rules a student must follow, effective teachers will also draw on research-supported tools and choose additional behavioral support strategies that fit and work in the moment or for specific students. Behavioral momentum is one of those tools.

Behavioral Momentum

Behavioral momentum is a theory that explains a strategy of managing behaviors by beginning with easy, high-probability tasks and gradually shifting to lower-probability tasks with the momentum gained from the earlier tasks. Behavioral Momentum Theory was first introduced in the 1980s by psychologist John Nevin. Nevin found that behaviors could have momentum similar to that of physical objects. In other words, if good behavior leads to a positive outcome, and that is quickly followed by another, and another, and another, etc., the momentum will quickly gain speed, and the positive behaviors are likely to continue. Unfortunately, this kind of momentum can also happen with undesirable behaviors.



The application most useful to teachers is the high-probability request sequence, sometimes shortened to the "high-p" procedure. The idea is pretty straightforward. Before you ask a student to do something they are likely to resist (or have a low probability of completing your required task), you first ask for two or three small things they are very likely to do. Each small request is followed by a brief acknowledgment or praise. By the time you reach the harder request, the student already has some experience with complying with

the request, some success, and some praise, so the student is more likely to continue.

<https://asdnetwork.unl.edu/virtual-strategies/behavior-momentum/>

Researchers who study behaviors found that presenting a series of easy, high-probability requests before a difficult one increased the rate at which participants completed the difficult request. So, compliance with a demanding request improves when it follows a short sequence of requests the learner readily completes. In short, sequencing tasks from easy to hard and reinforcing early successes helps give students the motivation needed to continue choosing the positive behaviors.

This theory is often applied in behavioral therapy for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder, but it can be applied to typically developing children as well. As classroom teachers, our goal is to focus on the momentum from positive and desired behaviors.

A classroom scenario.

Picture this classroom scenario. Sophomore English teacher, Ms. Frederick, assigns a four paragraph essay to her on-level class. While the majority of her students begin working immediately, one of her most reluctant writers throws down his pencil, angrily crosses his arms, and loudly proclaims, “This is stupid, and I’m not doing it!”

How can she use the principles of Behavior Momentum Theory to guide this student to better behavior?

The task of writing a four-paragraph essay is likely quite overwhelming to this reluctant writer. Instead of a huge goal like that, Ms. Frederick would benefit from breaking this task down into smaller, manageable chunks that the defiant student could accomplish with appropriate scaffolding. For example, she could ask the student to first complete a graphic organizer of his ideas. Then, ask him to write the introduction paragraph and tell him she will check it and give him feedback before he moves on. With each small step where he can more easily complete the task and feel some success, Ms. Frederick would also be building positive behavioral momentum with her student.

Some Simple Behavioral Management Strategies

As a reminder, behavioral momentum is a strategy of managing behaviors by beginning with easy, high-probability tasks and gradually shifting to lower-probability tasks with the momentum gained from the earlier tasks. Often used in ABA (applied behavior analysis) therapy for students diagnosed with autism, it easily translates to the classroom as well

<https://asatonline.org/research-treatment/clinical-corner/high-probability-instruction-sequence/> . In this section, you will learn several strategies to help your students build on the momentum of simple tasks as they tackle harder tasks. These strategies include:

- Chunking Tasks / Checklists
- Transition Momentum
- High and Low Probability Behaviors

Strategy 1: Chunking Tasks / Checklists

One of the simplest ways to gain behavioral momentum is by helping your students not be overwhelmed by a big task. Oftentimes, misbehavior is a result of a student feeling overwhelmed and incapable, so by breaking down a daunting project or assignment into manageable steps, you help them to take it one simple step at a time. Let's consider some practical ways to do this.

- Project Checklist – give each student a list of tasks they can physically check off as they complete each one.
- Chunking the Work – if you have a long worksheet with multiple problems to solve or questions to answer, fold the paper up into 3 or 4 chunks that can unfold slowly to reveal each new section as the one above it is completed. You may consider offering a “reward” for each completed section, such as a brain break, a walk around the room, or a trip to the water fountain.
- Calendars – provide each student with a calendar for each grading period on which you record major deadlines or progress check dates. Let them cross off each day, or cover it with a sticker for younger students, for a visual model of progress.

Strategy 2: Transition Momentum

Transitions between activities can often be a chaotic time and an opportunity for students to misbehave. By keeping momentum going during transitions, you increase the chance that students will stay on task and exhibit positive behaviors. Here are some general tips for keeping this momentum strong!

- Use countdown timers and warnings – “In five minutes, we are going to clean up” or “Finish the sentence you are writing in 45 seconds” or “On my signal, you will...”

- Rather than just saying “clean up,” give specific tasks to be completed quickly, pausing for a few seconds in between each one while students comply. “Put your pencil in your pencil bag....stack your papers in the center of each table...stand up and push in your chair...quietly walk to the carpet and sit on your spot.”
- Avoid wordy descriptions, and do not give the next direction while students are still working through the first step.
- Praise success, but do not turn it into a race. That will only lead to frantic chaos!

Strategy 3: High and Low Probability Behaviors

This specific strategy is probably not necessary to implement with the majority of your students. It can be geared more toward those students who struggle more with emotional regulation and often exhibit undesirable behaviors. As a part of ABA therapy, many trained therapists rely on a pattern of 3 high-probability behaviors followed by 1 low-probability behavior. In fact, as you have read earlier in this article, this strategy is the crux of Behavior Momentum. Here are a few examples of this pattern in action.

The situation	Task 1 – High Probability	Task 2 – High Probability	Task 3 – High Probability	Task 4 – Low Probability
Reluctant 1 st grade writer	Write your name here.	Circle the picture you want to write about.	Tell me one thing you notice about that picture.	Now write a sentence about what you just told me.
Middle school student caught texting instead of completing an assignment.	Get out your math workbook.	Turn to page 42 and read the problem out loud.	Solve the first problem with me.	Put your phone away and complete the next problem on your own.
High school student off-task during a science lab	Gather the materials from this material list.	Put on your safety goggles.	Read steps 1-3 of the procedure with your group.	Begin the lab.

Considerations and Getting Started

Behavioral momentum is simply a support to your instruction and helps to improve your relationship with students and improve behaviors. Remember to keep the initial request very easy so that there is a high probability of success. Make sure to also reinforce behaviors immediately and celebrate the small wins that students experience in those high probability behaviors.

You can begin using behavioral momentum tomorrow without any special materials. You might consider choosing one reluctant student and one task that tends to trigger resistance in that student. Think through two or three smaller, higher probability tasks that

you can first offer the student to complete, to build up to that more difficult lower probability task. As you practice getting comfortable with behavioral momentum, you can extend this out to your entire class as well, for example by providing checklists for larger assignments, or building specific routines that lead up to a classroom transition. routine for one daily transition. Start small, watch what happens, and adjust the pacing to fit your students.

References

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