Caring Behavior Management: The Spirit Makes the Difference

By Karen D. Paciotti

In the current, test-based environment that exists in many United States classrooms within the context of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), many educators feel increased pressure to employ drill and practice strategies to ensure that every student succeeds on high-stakes assessments. In this climate, teachers must find strategies that facilitate a positive, caring classroom environment. This article describes Caring Behavior Management (CBM), a classroom management model that uses a motivating classroom theme, rubber ducks in this case, to implement positive reinforcement, as modeled and practiced in a field-based, preservice teacher education program at a kindergarten through fifth grade campus in a South Texas school district.

According to research, a caring and well-managed classroom is integral to the achievement of struggling learners (Alder, 2002; Elias & Weissberg, 2000; Jensen, 2000; Paciotti & Covington, 2007). Furthermore, brain-based researcher Jensen (2000) writes, “teachers who smile, use humor, have a joyful demeanor, and take genuine pleasure in their work generally have high-performing learners” (p. 108). However, as educators feel increased pressure to use drill and practice strategies to ensure that every student succeeds on high-stakes assessments, they may well ask, “Where did the fun go?” Joyful and caring behavior management is one way to bring back the fun.

Emphasizing positive aspects of a
behavior modification framework, caring behavior management (CBM) is characterized by the use of positive reinforcement and the use of a joyful classroom theme to give a positive twist to Kounin’s (1970) original description of the ripple effect. Rather than influencing classroom behavior through teacher desists and redirection, teachers use positive reinforcement to shape group and individual behavior. Then, as more students model positive classroom behavior, this behavior ripples through the classroom and gradually becomes the norm. Positive reinforcement also serves the function of group alerting, reminding the class to focus on positive behavior (Evertson & Emmer, 2009; Kounin, 1970). Through consistent application of positive reinforcement, teachers facilitate a positive, caring atmosphere by celebrating students who comply with classroom rules and/or participate in learning tasks. Moreover, students learn to equate positive experiences with achieving classroom goals, and they grow in responsibility as they learn that positive consequences result from good decisions (Curwin & Mendler, 1999).

The purposes of this article are to present a framework of important attributes of CBM and to give tips for implementing a caring behavior program. The suggestions draw on a CBM program modeled and practiced in a field-based, preservice teacher education program at a kindergarten through fifth grade campus in a South Texas school district. With minor modifications, these tips can be adapted for any age group.

Caring Behavior Management (CBM)
The first attribute of CBM is a caring, joyful spirit. Through the joyful use of social reinforcers, such as encouragement and praise, teachers must show, by way of positive behaviors such as body language and demeanor, that they value their students’ efforts and believe in student success. Teachers must celebrate students’ efforts with joy, using appropriate facial expressions and voice inflections. Teachers who say positive reinforcement does not work for them often do not openly display these joyful behaviors when reinforcing behavior. One way teachers can demonstrate this joyful spirit is by using fun celebration cheers, many of which can be found online.

The second attribute is that students develop a vested interest in CBM. This is accomplished through collaborative identification of classroom goals and reinforcers. For example, at the beginning of the year, students and teachers work collaboratively to write an agreement or declaration of classroom rules, which students and teachers sign and post in the classroom. Then, teachers and students work together to establish positive reinforcers to nurture a caring atmosphere in the classroom. In this way students are involved in CBM from the beginning of the school year. With the continued practice of CBM, students develop a sense of self-efficacy and autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2008) due to the collaborative atmosphere.

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Eventually, they experience volition, which is a “self-endorsement of their actions” (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Third, timing and frequency of reinforcement are critical to the successful implementation of CBM. Reinforcement must be given frequently and consistently. In other words, a generous spirit is the rule here, with no hoarding of encouragement or tangible rewards. At the beginning, reinforcement must be continuous; teachers must provide reinforcement each time a desired behavior occurs (Weber, 2005). As targeted behavior improves, a less frequent, more intermittent schedule may be adopted. Also, a good practice is to mix extrinsic rewards such as stickers, various classroom passes, and prizes with some less tangible rewards, such as specific verbal praise and non-verbal gestures, such as a “thumbs up” as the behavior continues to improve, so that students begin to see the intrinsic value of the behavior. Through the use of both extrinsic rewards and specific praise, CBM is consistent with the empirically researched Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), as CBM develops autonomous motivation, which “comprises both intrinsic motivation and the types of extrinsic motivation in which people have identified with an activity’s value” (p. 182). As the intervals between timing and frequency of the concrete reinforcers become longer, students begin to value the sense of well-being that comes from being a productive member of the classroom. However, as concrete reinforcement is important to the fun, joyful spirit of CBM, tangibles are not removed entirely, but continue to accompany and enhance the autonomous motivation. Additionally, as targeted behaviors become the norm, students can again participate in choosing new targets and reinforcers.

Fourth, “attainability” is an integral attribute of CBM. Students must believe that positive reinforcers are attainable for all, not just a few. An illustration of this concept occurred during a discussion of classroom reward systems in an undergraduate education class: A university student commented that a utility company had recently advertised a drawing for free vacations for new subscribers, but it was the fact that her own mother won that moved her to participate in the drawing. The same concept applies in the classroom. Teachers must show students that they are eager to celebrate positive behavior for all students, not only the best, as is too often the case. This can be accomplished by making sure students see that there are always enough concrete reinforcers for the entire class to be able to attain one.

Attainability is closely related to shaping, in which teachers encourage each step of improvement rather than waiting for complete behavior change. Just as parents encourage infants to walk by praising the effort made, rather than waiting for the child to successfully walk across the room, teachers must encourage and praise students for their incremental efforts. For the purpose of shaping behavior, it is imperative to provide reinforcers for even partial success. This helps to motivate all students to improve behavior, even those who may not be able to sustain the positive behavior for long amounts of time, such as students with Attention Deficit and Hyperactive Disorder (Jensen, 2010). Attainability is closely related to the characteristics of joy, generosity, and abundance. If students know there is an abundance of reinforcers, they will realize that not only the top few students will receive them, thus increasing their motivation to keep trying to...
improve their behavior. Again, the problem with teachers who say that positive reinforcement does not work for them is that they often focus on only rewarding those students who always behave well, rather than also shaping the behavior of less successful students. In addition, these teachers wait too long to reinforce, and they generally are parsimonious with their reinforcers, giving at most only one or two on any given day or class period.

Fifth, both individual and group reinforcers are incorporated in CBM. Students are reinforced individually, in their cooperative groups, and as a class. For example, in some ways, the types of reinforcers in CBM can be likened to a domino system. Success at one level triggers the next level, and so on. If a student does not achieve an individual goal, s/he can still work toward the group goals, thus encouraging continued effort.

Sixth, CBM must incorporate visual reminders of progress. Such visual cues can be used for “group alerting” (Kounin, p. 117, 1970), in which a teacher helps involve all students in a learning task or behavior. Stickers and tickets representing individual achievements and charts, bulletin boards, or other visible displays for group achievements may be used. However, as exemplified in the following case, a themed approach, using three-dimensional figures as rewards, can be a valuable visual tool for group alerting and provided for a fun and joyful implementation of CBM.

Application at a Field-based Site
In an undergraduate field-based experience at a K-5 elementary school, the university-based instructor modeled CBM through the use of a classroom theme of quirky rubber ducks, which was then implemented by preservice teachers, including student teachers, in their assigned classrooms. This idea sprang from the classroom use of well-known adages such as “Let’s get our ducks in a row” and “Shake it off like water off a duck’s back” to illustrate the importance of organization and flexibility in teaching.

Rubber ducks are an easy theme to implement as tiny rubber ducks are available in every conceivable costume and theme from various outlets such as local discount stores and online sources. However, any appropriate novelty item may be used. Teachers could tie the CBM theme to the school mascot, for example.

Not only did preservice teachers enjoy earning and collecting variously costumed rubber ducks as positive reinforcers in their education class, but they added them to their own practice of CBM by implementing the duck theme in their practice lessons. Soon, these humorous little creatures were visible reinforcers throughout the school, as preservice teachers began spreading the fun of CBM throughout the campus. As one preservice teacher wrote,

*I have used all of my ducks in my treasure chest.* *My students just love them; they would like for me to get more. The ducks were the first thing to go from the treasure chest. I used them as incentives for good behavior, and it worked great.*

There are numerous ways to use this whimsical theme. A class set of ducks makes “Desk Ducks” effective and fun. These are “loaner” ducks that sit on a student’s desk for an entire day or class period. However, generosity and attainability are key concepts here. It is imperative that an entire class set of ducks is available, because students will know that “Desk Ducks” are attainable, and this attainability will be an incentive for everyone to try to earn a “Desk Duck” for at least a portion of the day. Some students may even earn more than one. In addition, for older students, these “Desk Ducks” could be used as tokens to be traded at the end of the day for other types of reinforcers, such as free hall passes, or no homework. “Desk Ducks” can also be used to reinforce participation. For example, when students are actively engaged in a lesson, they are rewarded immediately, and with great fanfare, with a “Desk Duck.” In addition, “Desk Ducks” may be used as “Lucky Ducks.” On test days, in order to encourage lower stress levels for a test environment, the teacher may place a loaner duck on each desk before classroom tests to remind students that they are capable of doing well.
When working in the classrooms of their mentor teachers, preservice teachers used ducks not only for positive reinforcement, but also to add fun to the school day. For example, one student designated the leaders during cooperative group work by giving them each a duck. As the students took turns as leaders, they passed the duck to the next child, thus providing a visual and tangible clue to help the group transition. Also, during class discussions, each child passed the duck to the next speaker in turn. A different preservice teacher glued a rubber duck to a globe to show location when demonstrating the rotation of the earth in relation to the sun. Her students were able to identify the seasons based on the duck’s location relative to a flashlight representing the sun. One preservice teacher used the “Desk Duck” for a “Rainy Day Duck,” to encourage a student who had a difficult experience during the school day. Another preservice teacher instituted “Duck Points” by using ducks during cooperative learning groups. In this example, children sit in groups of 3 or 4. The preservice teacher explained her use of the “Duck Point” system:

_During a lesson, groups who are on task earn a duck. The group is in charge of their ducks for the day.” However, if the ducks are a distraction, they are taken away. At the end of the day, each group tells the teacher how many ducks they earned that day. Students then return the ducks to the treasure box in exchange for a duck point. The first group to ten points earns a special prize for each group member. . . This has significantly helped my class stay on task._

Another way to use rubber ducks as positive reinforcers is the “Duck Fairy” approach, in which several or all of the students are greeted at the beginning of the day by a surprise “desk duck” based on their behavior the previous day. Those who do not have a duck can still work to gain one for the next day. This may be tailored to whatever behavior teachers are trying to reinforce. Imagination is important, as is seen when the “Duck Fairy” visits students who kept their desks neatly organized for a day.

For group reinforcement, a “Desk Duck Day” is fun. Teachers provide a reward such as “free” time, no homework, computer time, free recess, etc. if the entire class has a duck on their desk on one day. Or, teachers can count the number of “Desk Ducks” every day, and when the class has earned a specified number, provide a group reward.

In addition, ducks can be given outright as “Keeper Ducks.” Students often collect and trade the different ducks with each other. Ducks may be used in a token economy as well. If they wish, students can accumulate tokens, such as tickets or stickers, to trade for a “Keeper Duck.” Hand out an “Admit-One” type of ticket or a small sticker every time a child exhibits a specified behavior, such as participating in class discussions, performing a kind or useful act without being asked, etc. Students may keep their tickets in individual zip-lock plastic bags, or they may use charts on which to paste stickers. The students must print their names on the backs of the tickets, and, at an agreed-upon time, may trade in their tickets for “Keeper Ducks.” Students love to collect series of items, which is what makes a variety of differently costumed ducks enjoyable to collect, and due to the large, often eccentric collections of rubber ducks available for purchase, it is easy to change the inventory of ducks to include the newest costumes. Even middle-school students
will join in the fun if this system is implemented in an enthusiastic and positive way.

Contributions of CBM
Not only does CBM contribute to better behavior in the classroom, it is a visible way of demonstrating care for students. This is especially important for students who are not used to being the “cared-for” (Noddings, 2003, p. 60) because those students “will at least receive attention and, perhaps, learn to respond to and encourage those who genuinely address them” (p. 61). In fact, Noddings (2003) observes that unless students themselves perceive that teachers care about them, caring does not really exist. Also, Knesting (2008) asserts, “educators must consider how they communicate their caring” (p. 8). The practice of CBM communicates care to students, and students who feel their teachers care about them work harder in school (Paciotti & Covington, 2007).

Through the use of CBM, with its caring, joyful spirit, its emphasis on collaboration in setting rules and consequences, its attention to timing and frequency, and its adherence to the attainability and abundance of individual and group reinforcers teachers can help their students learn to become responsible members of the classroom community. Joyful, generous, and concrete, CBM is an effective addition to a teacher’s classroom management toolkit.

Conclusion
Although different kinds of themes, such as rubber ducks, are fun to incorporate, all of the six attributes of caring behavior management (CBM) are important for students. Research shows that students try harder, learn more, and make higher test scores for caring teachers who make learning enjoyable (Elias & Weissberg, 2000; Noblit, Rogers, & McCadden, 1995; Paciotti & Covington, 2007; Plucker & Slavkin, 2000). Teachers who exhibit an enthusiastic and joyful spirit, even in such seemingly routine tasks as behavior management, can make their classrooms caring and inviting places where learning occurs. If teachers and students can share a few fun moments along the way, even struggling students will be more motivated to come to class and to do their best. In today’s high-stakes, high-stress environment, teachers must do everything possible to make school an effective, enjoyable experience for all students.

References


