NASP

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
School Psychologists

Self-Management: Helping Handout for School and Home

AMY M. BRIESCH & BRIAN DANIELS

INTRODUCTION

Self-management refers to one's ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to meet the requirements of a given situation. It is considered to be one of the five core competencies of social–emotional learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.). Unfortunately, many students struggle to regulate their own behavior across both school and home settings. In the classroom, some students may call out in class, others may have trouble keeping their attention on a task, and still others may struggle to work well with peers. At home, students may lack the motivation or organizational skills to finish their homework, or may struggle to follow directions or routines.

Often the strategies used to help regulate student behavior have been ones that are largely directed by the adults in the student's life. Although we hope that students will leave school prepared to function independently in the larger world, unfortunately some of the strategies that adults use to manage student behaviors may work against this goal. For example, teachers often praise students for desired behaviors or remove privileges for undesired and disruptive behaviors. Such strategies are often effective in changing student behavior in the short term; however, they may be harmful in the long run. That is, instead of learning skills that they can take forward into the future, students may become too dependent on the external supports provided by their teachers and parents. Consequentially, students may struggle to regulate their behavior in the absence of adults.

Self-management strategies, on the other hand, aim to shift responsibility from adults (i.e., teacher, parent or guardian) by having students play a more active role in changing their own behavior. Use of

self-management is therefore believed to lead to greater levels of independence and self-reliance among students—both in school and beyond. Although having self-management skills is obviously important as students graduate from school and prepare to function independently in the larger world, self-management skills are also important for young children to develop as they learn to successfully navigate relationships with peers and adults.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below focus on behavioral self-management strategies. They may be used individually at school or home to increase students' independence and self-reliance. Three general types of self-management strategies are described below: *self-instruction*, *self-monitoring*, and *self-evaluation*. Recommendations on how to use them are given for school and home. What each strategy has in common is that the student is responsible for carrying out the strategy. One of the key advantages of a self-management approach is therefore that the intervention exists within the student as opposed to within a particular setting. As a result, the same strategies can be effectively used across both school and home settings. Although each strategy can be used individually, they can also be combined to promote self-control.

Self-Instruction

One simple strategy that can be taught to students is self-instruction, or self-talk. With self-instruction, students are taught to say the steps that they need to take to do a task. This makes the student responsible for providing instructions rather than having to rely on an adult. As adults, we use self-talk on a daily basis to

navigate the world. We ask ourselves what needs to be done today when we sit down at our work computer, whisper to ourselves to pick up milk when we enter the supermarket, and mutter words of encouragement as we jog the final stretch home.

1. ***Teach the student self-talk.*** The first step involved in teaching self-talk is for the adult to break down a task into individual steps. In this way, students will have a clear sense of what they need to do first, second, and so on. For example, students who are having trouble getting started on homework assignments might be told to first tell themselves "Okay, what did I write down in my assignment book?" Or on the playground, students who struggle to find friends to play with might tell themselves "Okay, I need to tap Joe on the shoulder to get his attention before asking him if he wants to play."

    The second step involved in teaching self-talk is to provide students with some self-statements that they can use to motivate themselves. For example, students who are struggling to complete a task may be taught to say something like "I know I can do this because I've done it before." Or students who are too nervous to raise their hand before speaking might be taught to say "It's okay if I'm not right—I just need to give my best guess." Although students begin by saying these self-statements aloud, over time the goal should be for them to simply say the instructions in their heads rather than to speak them aloud.

Self-Monitoring

Many people believe that we can change our behavior by simply paying closer attention to what we are doing. Self-monitoring therefore involves observing and recording one's own behavior. In daily life, we engage in self-monitoring every day when we use an app to log the number of glasses of water we drank or enter our purchases into financial management software. In these situations, our hope is that becoming more aware of our water consumption or spending patterns will help us better regulate our future behavior. Students may be taught to self-monitor any number of behaviors, but behaviors that can be seen (i.e., not thoughts) are easiest to monitor. Self-monitoring might range from the number of times the student got out of his or her seat without permission to how well the student ignored distractions when completing homework at the kitchen table.

2. ***Encourage the student to self-monitor.*** If the behavior is one that can be counted, self-monitoring is typically done by having the student mark a tally on a sheet each time that the target behavior occurs. If, however, the behavior is not easily counted, the behavior may instead be rated as occurring or not (e.g., "Did I complete my assignment?") or rated using a scale that reflects the student's effort (e.g., "How well did I listen to the teacher's directions today?"). Figure 1 shows examples of self-monitoring forms.

3. ***Have the student graph the behavior.*** Teach the student to graph performance of the target behavior each day to see improvement over time. Graphing is believed to be particularly effective because students receive more concrete feedback that they can actually see. In the classroom, a student who struggles to stay on task during independent seatwork may be taught to graph the percentage of math problems completed each day. Graphing in the home setting, however, might focus on the number of minutes spent on the computer or mobile device, with the goal of staying below a particular weekly threshold. Even very young students can be involved in graphing if the graphs are made age appropriate. For example, kindergarten students could be taught to shade in bar graphs to track their behavior over time.

Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluation involves comparing self-ratings of behavior to some criterion. We self-evaluate in everyday life when we compare how much we have spent on coffee with the amount that we allotted at the beginning of the month, or how many steps we took in a week compared with how many our best friend took. What criterion is selected, however, may differ from one context to the next, as seen in the following recommendations.

4. ***Have the student evaluate performance compared with a goal.*** One way in which self-evaluation may be done is by comparing one's behavior with a preset goal. Although goals for students' behavior are often set by the adults in their lives, goal setting is likely to be more meaningful for students if they are involved in the process. Having the student help to develop a goal is important, because it helps to ensure that the goal is meaningful to the student and that the student

Figure 1. Blank Rating Scales for Self-Monitoring

Did I ...	Yes	No
?		
?		
?		
?		
?		

How well did I _____? 0 = poor 1 = fair 2 = good 3 = very good 4 = excellent	How often did I _____? 0 = never 1 = rarely 2 = sometimes 3 = often 4 = almost always
0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4
0 1 2 3 4	0 1 2 3 4

is sufficiently motivated to achieve it. Also, goals that are both specific and challenging are the most effective. Making the goal specific means that the student can see exactly what needs to be done to meet the goal. For example, setting a goal of "doing a better job of staying in my seat" leaves too much room for interpretation, whereas "I will get out of my seat no more than one time during a lesson" is much more specific. Also, setting a goal that is challenging means that the goal should not be too easy, causing the student to lose motivation, as long as it is also possible to meet. Having no chance of reaching the goal will quickly lead to the student's frustration and disinterest.

Although goals are often fixed (e.g., 80% on-task behavior and fewer than five callouts), in some situations it may not make sense to compare student performance with an external goal. Imagine, for example, that a student often makes inappropriate remarks to classmates. Although this student's final goal may be to eliminate the inappropriate comments entirely, a goal of zero inappropriate comments may not be realistic in the short term. In such cases, the student can evaluate current performance compared with previous performance to measure progress toward the goal (e.g., "How many fewer inappropriate comments did I make this week than last week?"). Or the student can compare personal performance with how others are doing (e.g., "How many fewer inappropriate comments did I make than my neighbor?").

5. ***Examine the accuracy of the student's ratings.*** Finally, self-evaluation may involve comparing a student's self-ratings with those made by an adult (i.e., teacher, parent) to see how accurately the student's self-ratings reflect actual behavior. In some cases, adults may be reluctant to have a student independently self-monitor because they do not believe that the student is able to do so accurately. It may be that the student is not fully aware of his or her own behavior and therefore is unable to judge when a target behavior occurs (e.g., not realizing that whispering to a neighbor is considered disruptive behavior). However, it may also be that the student is fully aware of a disruptive behavior but deliberately chooses not to record it as such. Either way, having the student meet with a teacher or parent to compare the evaluations that each conducted independently may provide the student with the feedback needed to promote more accurate ratings.

6. ***Where appropriate, have the student evaluate the appropriateness of the behavior, its likely impact on others, and satisfaction with the behavior.*** Self-evaluation can be effective in changing student behavior in and of itself; however, it is also possible to add additional components to potentially enhance the effectiveness of a self-evaluation strategy. For example, the student may be prompted to (a) pause and reflect on how appropriate the behavior is within the current context (e.g., "Are the comments I am making appropriate during small-group work?"); (b) consider what effect the behavior is having on other individuals nearby (e.g., "How do I think my comments are making other students feel?"); and (c) evaluate self-satisfaction with the current behavior (e.g., "Am I doing as good a job of paying attention as I had hoped to today?").

7. ***Consider providing reinforcement based on the student's self-evaluation.*** When a reinforcement component is included, the student receives a reward based on the results of the self-evaluation (e.g., how behavior compared with a goal, how accurate the student's ratings were compared with the teacher's). Rewards may be tangible (e.g., stickers, pencils) or activity based (e.g., extra computer time, extra 5 minutes for lunch). Although adults often tend to be responsible for administering rewards, self-management may be further enhanced by charging the student with this responsibility (i.e., self-reinforcement).

In elementary school classrooms, for example, students may be instructed to select a small prize from the prize bin at the end of the week if they did not have to be redirected by the lunchroom monitor for inappropriate behavior. In a high school classroom, students may excuse themselves for lunch early if they rated themselves as being on task during the majority of the period. At home, the student might take a 5-minute break on the computer after completing a worksheet that was assigned for homework.

Self-Control

Although self-instruction or self-monitoring may be used in isolation, the argument has been made that individuals will come to fully control their own behavior only if these components are used in combination. That is, long-term behavior change is the result of a three-phase feedback loop consisting of self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement (Kanfer, 1970). First, within the self-monitoring phase, students are prompted to observe and record their own behavior, often as the result of self-instruction (e.g., "I need to raise my hand and give the teacher my best guess."). Second, within the self-evaluation phase, students compare their behavior (as recorded during the self-monitoring phase) to a preset criterion (e.g., "Did I raise my hand more today than I did yesterday?"). Finally, during the self-reinforcement phase, students either reward or punish themselves based on the information obtained during the self-evaluation phase. For example, if a student has a goal of making five contributions to class discussion over the course of the day and ends up making six, the student might then self-reward with some free reading time for achieving the goal.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN IMPLEMENTING SELF-MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The literature contains examples of the successful use of self-management strategies with students across a wide range of ages, disabilities, and target behaviors (Briesch & Briesch, 2016). However, both teachers and parents must consider a couple of important factors when selecting such strategies to ensure that the intervention is most appropriate for a given situation.

One important consideration is which self-management strategy is best for a given behavior. Self-instruction may be the best approach to help students navigate routines and procedures that involve

multiple steps. For example, students may use self-talk to guide themselves through the morning routine of entering the classroom and getting prepared to begin the day. Self-monitoring, on the other hand, is believed to cause behavior change simply because students become more aware of their behavior. Thus, self-monitoring, when used alone, is typically best for students who are not lacking specific skills, but simply need to monitor the use of those skills (e.g., raising one's hand instead of calling out). In still other situations, however, self-evaluation may be the most appropriate strategy, such as when students need to reflect on the appropriateness of their behavior (e.g., comparing their behavior with the behavior of others, or reflecting on its impact on learning or on others).

Another important consideration when selecting from among self-management strategies is the age or developmental level of the student. For example, it is likely that basic self-monitoring procedures can be used broadly, as the observing and recording of behavior has been successfully used with students as young as preschool age (e.g., Shearer, Kohler, Buchan, & McCullough, 1996) and with students with intellectual disabilities (e.g., Boyle & Hughes, 1994). However, the type of self-evaluation procedures used is more likely to vary depending on whom the strategies are being used for. Whereas younger students or those with cognitive delays may be able to evaluate their behavior in relation to very concretely defined criteria or goals (e.g., "Did I complete the task I was given?" and "Did I record myself as on task three out of five times?"), the evaluation of behavior in relation to established norms requires a greater degree of social cognition (e.g., "Was my behavior appropriate for the given situation?"). In some cases, it may also be important to identify a time frame for monitoring that is appropriate for the student's age or developmental level. For example, although it is possible to ask students to rate their behavior over the course of a period or a day, younger students may have difficulty accurately reflecting on their behavior over an extended period of time. In such a situation, it may therefore be more appropriate for the students to record their behavior at the time of a prompt or each time that a behavior occurs.

Finally, the appropriateness of adding a reinforcement component to self-evaluation procedures should also be considered. The use of rewards may be more appropriate, and effective, with younger students than with older students, with students with disabilities, and with students lacking in motivation.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

https://www.interventioncentral.org/self_management_self_monitoring_behavior_checklist

This page within the Intervention Central website outlines procedures for implementing self-monitoring in the classroom. Self-monitoring procedures are provided for using a checklist at the end of class or for conducting ratings at various points during class.

http://ebi.missouri.edu/?p=762

The Evidence Based Intervention Network website, hosted by the University of Missouri, provides a number of intervention briefs for teachers and school-based practitioners. The self-management intervention brief outlines procedures for self-monitoring, goal setting, self-charting, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement.

Books

Shapiro, E. S., & Cole, C. L. (1994). *Behavior change in the classroom: Self-management interventions*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

After reviewing the literature base, this practitioner-friendly book describes the use of self-management interventions for students with and without disabilities. Potential obstacles to implementation are discussed and case examples are provided.

Related Helping Handouts

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

REFERENCES

Boyle, J. R., & Hughes, C. A. (1994). Effects of self-monitoring and subsequent fading of external prompts on the on-task behavior and task productivity of elementary students with moderate mental retardation. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, *4*, 439–457. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF01539544

Briesch, A. M., & Briesch, J. M. (2016). Meta-analysis of behavioral self-management interventions

in single-case research. *School Psychology Review*, *45*, 3–18. http://dx.doi.org/10.17105/SPR45-1.3-18

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. (n.d.). Core SEL competencies. Retrieved from http://www.casel.org/core-competencies/

Kanfer, F. H. (1970). Self-regulation: Research, issues, and speculations. In C. Neuringer & J. L. Michael (Eds.), *Behavior modification in clinical psychology*. New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Shearer, D. D., Kohler, F. W., Buchan, K. A., & McCullough, K. M. (1996). Promoting independent interactions between preschoolers with autism and their nondisabled peers: An analysis of self-monitoring. *Early Education and Development*, *7*(3), 205–220.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Amy M. Briesch, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Applied Psychology at Northeastern University. Her research interests include the role of student involvement in intervention design and implementation, as well as the development of feasible and psychometrically sound measures for the assessment of student behavior in multitiered systems of support.

Brian Daniels, PhD, is an assistant professor in the school psychology program at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. His research focuses on improving the feasibility and treatment utility of assessment tools for monitoring student progress in response to social–emotional and behavioral intervention.