



# EMBRACE CIVILITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

## Rethinking Token Rewards

The use of Token Rewards is not supported by current prevention science; discourages, shames, and excludes students with greater challenges; interferes with the development of intrinsic motivation to be kind; and models bullying behavior.

*Amanda has ADHD. She works very hard to maintain her behavior and school work, however, this is a challenge. Her school provides fun outings for those students who comply with expectations. Amanda never gets to go on these outings. Amanda frequently experiences being bullied—by the students who always go on the outings.<sup>1</sup>*

*James has high functioning autism and comes from a family with challenges. It is difficult for him to maintain his behavior and interact with other students. He more readily triggers. Several girls in his 4th grade class, who are regularly rewarded, have discovered that it is easy to cause James to trigger. They bug him until he does and then run with excitement to tell the teacher or playground aide. James then gets into trouble. When he has tried to explain what is happening, the principal does not believe him.*

Despite the lack of solid research evidence of effectiveness, schools have been encouraged to rely on Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) to reduce bullying.<sup>2</sup> The PBIS framework and current guidance incorporate excellent core features that are important for school management.<sup>3</sup> Maintaining a 5:1 positive to negative connections with students, especially those who have greater challenges is imperative!

However, reliance on behavior management principles and the use of school-wide Token Rewards, is an approach that requires rethinking.

### PREVENTION SCIENCE AND TRAUMA INSIGHT

The underlying foundation of PBIS is grounded in B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning thinking from the 1950's.<sup>4</sup> This thinking appropriately requires a focus on adult behavior and encourages positively acknowledging positive behavior. However, this thinking is out of date when considered in the context of current prevention science insight, especially in relation to the role and impact of trauma.

A very recent article published on the PBISApps website that addressed student misbehavior illustrates the concern.<sup>5</sup>

*A student's reasons for acting out are rooted in one of two motivations: getting something or avoiding something, specifically activities, attention, or stimulus.*

Clearly, this perspective demonstrates a lack of insight into the negative impact of trauma or the challenges associated with a range of neurological challenges on student behavior. This profoundly damaging impact has been explained:

*While behavioral methods are useful in some cases, problems arise when attempting to use these operant approaches with children who know what is expected of them and who are motivated to do well, but who lack skills to do so due to deficits in impulse control, frustration tolerance, flexibility, problem solving, or other adaptive skills. For children who are aware of the consequences of their maladaptive behaviors but who lack the skills to inhibit these behaviors, the operant approach falls short. In fact, these approaches can sometimes do more harm than good: first, by increasing*

*behavioral performance only in response to promise of reward; second, by negatively affecting the self-esteem of children who want to do well but lack the skills to do so, and who are told repeatedly that they are failing to meet expectations because they are not trying hard enough; and third, by increasing power struggles between adults and children that can be detrimental to the relationship. In sum, through increase of motivation, operant approaches can make the possible more probable, but they simply cannot make the impossible possible.<sup>6</sup>*

In 2013, the National Association of School Psychologists, in collaboration with other leading education organizations, released *A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools*.<sup>7</sup> This document included the following statement:

*In a growing number of schools across the country, response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) constitute the primary methods for implementing an MTSS (Multiple Tier System of Supports) framework. **Ideally though, MTSS is implemented more holistically to integrate efforts targeting academic, behavioral, social, emotional, physical, and mental health concerns.**<sup>8</sup>*

Thus, there is a recognition of the need for PBIS to shift to an approach that is better grounded in recent research in prevention science. This shift appears to be occurring but, as evidenced by the recent PBISApps article, current insight into prevention science and trauma has not yet sufficiently penetrated the foundation of PBIS thinking.<sup>9</sup>

### TOKEN REWARDS IN THE CONTEXT OF BULLYING

From the perspective of strategies to foster positive relations and reduce bullying, there are significant concerns associated with school-wide use of Token Rewards.

### SOURCES OF BULLYING BEHAVIOR

To understand these concerns it is helpful to have an understanding of the different sources of hurtful behavior. Most insight provided to educators casts those students who engage in bullying solely as having significant other challenges. This is a partially inaccurate understanding. The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report, *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice*, addressed the nature of bullying behavior:

*There is evidence that supports a finding that individuals who bully others have contradictory attributes. Research suggests that there are children and adolescents who bully others because they have some form of maladjustment or ... are motivated by establishing their status in a social network. Consequently, the relation between bullying, being bullied, acceptance, and rejection is complex. This complexity is also linked to a stereotype held by the general public about individuals who bully. This stereotype casts children and youth who bully others as being high on psychopathology, low on social skills, and possessing few assets and competencies that the peer group values. Although some occurrence of this "stereotypical bully"*

or “classic bully” is supported by research, when researchers consider social status in relation to perpetration of bullying behavior, a different profile emerges. These studies suggest that most children and youth who bully others wield considerable power within their peer network and that high-status perpetrators tend to be perceived by peers as being popular, socially skilled, and leaders. High-status bullies have also been found to rank high on assets and competencies that the peer group values such as being attractive or being good athletes; they have also been found to rank low on psychopathology and to use aggression instrumentally to achieve and maintain hegemony. Considering these findings of contrasting characteristics of perpetrators of bullying behavior, it makes sense that the research on outcomes of perpetrating is mixed. Unfortunately, most research on the short- and long-term outcomes of perpetrating bullying behavior has not taken into account this heterogeneity when considering the impact to children and youth who have bullied their peers.<sup>10</sup>

This insight into the two very different underlying motivations of bullying behavior is critically important in recognizing why the current approaches to reduce bullying have not demonstrated effectiveness and why reliance on school-wide Token Rewards is especially harmful.

### DISCOURAGED STUDENTS WHO MAY BE HURTFUL

As noted above, a significant problem emerges when students have challenges in maintaining their behavior so because they lack the skills, have neurological challenges, or have experienced trauma.<sup>11</sup> These students repeatedly experience the situation of failing to meet expectations and, thus, are shamed and excluded in front of their peers. This can be exceptionally damaging to their self-esteem—and their relationships with school staff and peers.

These students also match the description of some of the students who engage in bullying. It is highly reasonable to suspect that students who lack impulse control and who have become very discouraged because of the punitive nature of the Token Reward system, as applied to them, may also be much more likely to engage in aggression towards their peers—either because they feel so bad about themselves on in response to being treated badly or excluded by their peers.

### DECREASE OF INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Use of tokens that seek to increase behavior in support of positive relations, may actually decrease such positive behavior, especially when students are outside of the view of an adult. This is because use of tangible rewards has been found to decrease intrinsic motivation. A meta-analysis of 128 studies on the effects of rewards concluded that:

*“(T)angible rewards tend to have a substantially negative effect on intrinsic motivation (...) Even when tangible rewards are offered as indicators of good performance, they typically decrease intrinsic motivation for interesting activities.”<sup>12</sup>*

Consider this insight in the context of those students who are known to be the primary source of bullying behavior.

When students who, at a younger age, are highly motivated to receive extrinsic rewards from adults become teens, their desire for such external reinforcement from adults will wane. Their desire for external reinforcement from peers will significantly increase. Being hurtful to others to gain dominance and social status is behavior that is clearly motivated by the external rewards of attention and power.

Students who are intrinsically motivated to be kind and compassionate to others will be less likely to be eager to receive rewards at any age. When they become teens, their intrinsic motivation to engage in compassionate behavior can be expected to

continue—whether or not they are being directly supervised by school staff.

### SHAMED AND EXTRINSICALLY MOTIVATED STUDENTS

The combination of the above two factors can have a very damaging impact. Students who have disabilities, including behavior challenges, are among those who most often experience being bullied.<sup>13</sup> Students who engage in bullying to gain dominance are likely to be hurtful to those who have greater challenges. Consider how this dynamic then plays out when a student who is known to have behavior challenges reports to the principal that one or more students who are known to always receive rewards are the ones being hurtful.

### DISCRIMINATORY IMPACT

When a school implements Token Rewards, it generally becomes very apparent that some students are identified as the “good” students and students are the “bad” students. Approaches such as giving “self manager” buttons clearly identify for all students which students have lower social desirability in the eyes of the staff.<sup>14</sup> It is probable that implicit bias also plays a role in who does or does not receive rewards, as bias has been found to play a role in who receives punishment.

Some schools take the “good” students on field trips or allow them to engage in other fun activities. A visit to the school while these “good” students are away will readily reveal that the majority of students who were excluded from these fun activities are those who came from families living in poverty, were a minority, or had disabilities.<sup>15</sup>

### USE OF TOKENS MODELS RELATIONAL AGGRESSION

Relational aggression is a type of aggression in which harm is caused by damaging someone's relationships or social status.<sup>16</sup> Manifestations of relational aggression include:

- Excluding others from social activities;
- Damaging victim's reputations with others by spreading rumors and gossiping about the victim, or humiliating him/her in front of others;
- Withdrawing attention and friendship.<sup>17</sup>

The public designation of those students who are in the “green zone” and those who are not essentially creates a “PBIS caste system” in the school. Staff are modeling that it is acceptable to look down on some students and exclude them from groups and activities. School staff are engaging in shaming and exclusion that models relational aggression!

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<sup>1</sup> These are examples, among many, from students in my own community—Eugene and Springfield, Oregon. This is home of the University of Oregon, the birthplace of PBIS. The data clearly demonstrates that bullying of students is a significant concern—in schools in the region where PBIS has been implemented with great fidelity for decades. Local mental health professionals consider PBIS to have a very damaging impact on their patients.  
<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pbis.org/school/bully-prevention>.

<sup>3</sup> Sugai, G., and Horner, R. H. "Responsiveness-to-intervention and school-wide positive behavior supports: Integration of multi-tiered system approaches." *Exceptionality*, 17(4), 2009, p. 226.

<sup>4</sup> McIntosh, K., Filter, K. J., Bennett, J., Ryan, C., & Sugai, G. (2010). Principles of sustainable prevention: Designing scale-up of school-wide positive behavior support to promote durable systems. *Psychology in the Schools*, 47, 5-21.

<sup>5</sup> PBISApps (2018) Motive, Motivate, Motivation: Why Are My Students Doing That?! <https://www.pbisapps.org/community/Pages/Motivation-of-Problem-Behavior.aspx>.

<sup>6</sup> Pollastri, A.R., Epstein, L.D., Heath, G.H., & Ablon, J.S. (2013) The Collaborative Problem Solving Approach: Outcomes Across Settings. *Harvard Review of Psychology*. Volume 21, Number 4 at 189.

<sup>7</sup> Cowan, K. C., Vaillancourt, K., Rossen, E., & Pollitt, K. (2013). A framework for safe and successful schools. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

<sup>8</sup> Cowan, Vaillancourt, Rossen, & Pollitt. (emphasis added)

<sup>9</sup> Barrett, S. Eber, L. & Weist, Eds. (2015) *Advancing Education Effectiveness: Interconnecting School Mental Health and School-wide Positive Behavior Support*. PBIS. <https://www.pbis.org/school/school-mental-health/interconnected-systems>.

<sup>10</sup> National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2016. *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

<sup>11</sup> Pollastri, et. al., *supra*.

<sup>12</sup> Deci E.L. Koestner R, and Ryan R.M. (1999) Effects of reward on intrinsic motivation—negative, neutral and positive. *Psychol Bull.* 1999.

<sup>13</sup> National Academies, *supra*.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.pbis.org/common/cms/files/pbisresources/2\\_UsingRewards.ppt](http://www.pbis.org/common/cms/files/pbisresources/2_UsingRewards.ppt).

<sup>15</sup> Also based on witnessing this in action time and time again in schools in the UO region.

<sup>16</sup> Simmons, Rachel (2002). *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*. New York, New York: Mariner Books; McGrath, Mary Zabolio (2006). *School Bullying: Tools for Avoiding Harm and Liability*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press; Marion K. Underwood (2003). *Social Aggression among Girls (Guilford Series On Social And Emotional Development)*. New York: The Guilford Press.

<sup>17</sup> Steinberg, L. (2008). *Adolescence*, 8th ed. 101. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.