

Verbal Motivators: How They May Affect Behavior Change

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Verbal Motivators

Abstract

Verbal motivators are an easy way to think about exchanges that educational professionals have with their students. **Positive verbal motivators** include *praise* while **negative verbal motivators** bear resemblance to *reprimands*. There are many findings in the literature that support using praise and, especially, behavior-specific praise in the classroom. Utilizing more praise and fewer reprimands results in benefits for students as well as education professionals.

Positive Verbal Motivators & Behavior-Specific Praise

(+) POSITIVE VERBAL MOTIVATORS

Approve	<i>To have or express a favorable opinion of; to accept as satisfactory</i>
Compliment	<i>An expression of esteem, respect, affection, or admiration; an admiring remark; formal and respectful recognition, honor</i>
Encourage/Support	<i>To inspire with courage, spirit, or hope; to give help or patronage, foster; to promote the interests or cause of</i>
Praise	<i>To express a favorable judgment of, commend</i>

EXAMPLES of Positive Verbal Motivators & Behavior-Specific Praise Statements

- “Keep up the good work, Donna.”
- “You got this.... You can do this.”
- “Jane, if you try your hardest, you will know you’ve given it your best shot.”
- “I really admire all the effort that you put into your writing assignment, Craig. You’ve created something original and weighed the pros and cons of the author’s opinion on the death penalty.”
- “Class, I really appreciate how you all quietly lined up for lunch and waited until everyone was ready to go.”
- “Thanks so much everyone for paying attention to what our guest talked about during her presentation. You all showed her respect and let her speak without talking during her lecture.”
- Your work on this group assignment is commendable, class. You’ve all put together a good group effort and came up with a lot of good ideas for your social studies assignment. They are all listed on the board. Outstanding!

¹Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

Negative Verbal Motivators & Reprimands

(-) NEGATIVE VERBAL MOTIVATORS

Criticize/Disapprove	<i>To find fault with; to pass unfavorable judgment on; to refuse approval to, reject</i>
Intimidate	<i>To make timid or fearful, frighten; to compel or deter by or as if by threats</i>
Threaten	<i>To give signs or warning of; to cause to feel insecure or anxious; to menace</i>
Ultimatum	<i>A final proposition, condition, or demand – one whose rejection will end negotiations and cause a resort to force or other direct action</i>

EXAMPLES of Negative Verbal Motivators & Reprimands

- “Jeremy, I don’t like the way you talked to Peter. It was demeaning.”
- “Class, you are being much too noisy. Quiet down or all of you won’t go to recess.”
- “Dan, if you don’t get to work, I’ll put your name on the board.”
- “One more sassy remark, Jack, and I’ll see you go to the office.”
- “Mark, quit bullying Peter. If you don’t stop, I’ll see that you stay after school and you’ll have to clean the boards. I’ll call your parents, too, so they know about this.”
- “Ann, you are behaving terribly. Sit down. If you don’t follow directions, you’ll go to the principal’s office.”
- “You’ve been horrible, class. Your behavior is totally inappropriate and you have not followed instructions. I’m keeping all of you after school.”
- “You should be aware of the consequences of your behavior, Josh. You could be suspended from school for yelling all that profanity and destroying classroom materials.”

¹Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

Verbal Motivators

Effects of Positive Verbal Motivators & Behavior-Specific Praise

- Brings forth happiness, joy, peacefulness, cooperation or satisfaction.
- Solves the problem or leads to a negotiation that likely solves the problem.
- Makes it easier to discuss the issue.
- Improves self-confidence, self-esteem, or self-worth & increases intrinsic motivation.
- Feels good about the interaction or what was said.
- Sets the stage for reciprocal interactions that benefits both sides.
- Is more open-minded towards the other's point of view.

Effects of Negative Verbal Motivators & Reprimands

- Are punishing and punitive in nature.
- May result in aggression.
- Show a decrease in “appropriate behavior” or an overall response “suppression.”
- The person may “shut down” and stop responding entirely.
- May generate fear, hurt, anger, or other negative emotions and not the desired behavior.
- Makes it harder to respond positively or appropriately to any request or direction.
- POSITIVELY – may tactfully be used to set limits or lay down a boundary.

Praise in Schools – Research Findings

- Increase academically engaged behaviors – like working on homework or asking the teacher for help (Caldarella et al., 2019; Drake & Nelson, 2021; Eaves et al., 2021).
- Decrease off-task behaviors – like talking out of turn or not staying seated during class (Clair et al., 2018; Sutherland et al., 2000).
- Decrease disruptive behaviors – like aggression, noncompliance, or property destruction (Drake & Nelson, 2021; Eaves et al., 2021; O’Handley et al., 2020).
- Improve prosocial behaviors – like cooperative learning and sharing (Clair et al., 2018; Pisacreta et al., 2011).
- Improve teachers’ relationships with students by using less reliance on reprimands and increased use of praise (Drake & Nelson, 2021; Eaves et al., 2021; O’Handley et al., 2020; Pisacreta et al., 2011).

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