

Using Precorrection to Manage Inappropriate Academic and Social Behaviors

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Abstract: This article illustrates a proactive strategy, precorrection, for addressing problem academic and social behaviors with students. Practical classroom scenarios are provided to give teachers a step-by-step guide of how to implement this seven-step preventative strategy. Empirical support for and the benefits of precorrection also are discussed.

“**O**h boy, here he comes. Why couldn’t he be absent today?” Many of us will not admit that we have engaged in this mental dialogue, but it happens. These thoughts can be triggered by the sight of a student with low academic skills and challenging behaviors. What we also fail to admit is the possibility that we may not be equipped with the necessary instructional strategies to address the academic and behavioral needs of such a student. One research-based instructional strategy that may effectively address this situation is precorrection.

Precorrection is a systematic way of anticipating and addressing inappropriate social or academic behaviors (Kauffman, Mostert, Trent, & Pullen, 2006). Research suggests that it is an effective means for improving the academic performance and social behavior of students with behavioral issues (Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998; Lewis, Colvin, & Sugai, 2000; Sprague & Thomas, 1997; Yu, Darch, & Rabren, 2002). The main benefit of using precorrection as a classroom management and instruction strategy is that it proactively addresses academic errors and inappropriate behaviors. Precorrection requires that teachers focus on possible antecedents and the contextual basis of possible student inappropriate behavior. Once the antecedents and context of the behavior have been identified, the teacher manipulates variables within the environment to prevent the problem behavior from reoccurring. As

a result, more time is spent teaching positive behaviors and less time is spent giving students consequences and reacting to their failures. In addition, students are provided with a new set of academic and social skills as opposed to being punished for their academic and social-skills deficits.

Several studies on the use of precorrection for students with academic and social challenges have demonstrated promising results. Sprague and Thomas (1997) found that precorrection increased the academic responsiveness and reduced problem behaviors for a 10-year-old male with severe disabilities. Yu et al. (2002) used precorrection as an academic and social-skills intervention. The results indicated improved accuracy in reading sounds, words, and on-task behavior of six students with learning and behavior problems. Other studies used precorrection as a means to manage inappropriate social behaviors. Lewis et al. (1998) explored the effects of a proactive schoolwide discipline approach on the frequency of problem behaviors of elementary school students in three settings: the school cafeteria, recess, and hallway transition. When paired with active supervision, precorrection was found to be effective in improving the student’s hallway transition behaviors. Lewis et al. (2000) also explored the effect of precorrection and active correction on the rate of problem behaviors during recess in an elementary school playground. The results indicated that precorrection

and active supervision was effective in reducing the rate of problem behaviors displayed by 475 students.

Precorrection is comprised of seven steps (see *Table 1*) and can be implemented with little disruption to daily classroom activities. To help teachers see the utility of precorrection, this article will present hypothetical case studies of a middle school student with reading deficits and an elementary school student with social problems. These case studies will serve as a guide for how teachers can apply the precorrection strategy to both academic and social behavioral situations. Once precorrection becomes a part of a teacher’s natural repertoire of teaching tools, it will be of use beyond one or two students and may be used as an overall approach in classroom management and instruction.

Waiting for Thomas and Jarvis to Fail

Thomas. Thomas is a 13-year-old seventh grader who was a new student at Malcolm Middle School. Thomas exhibited deficits in reading and read on a fourth-grade level. During independent reading time, Thomas’s teacher, Ms. Betty, attempted to engage Thomas in one-on-one oral reading exercises. During oral reading, Thomas stopped reading after each word and typically had problems pronouncing sight words, such as *would*, *could*, and *should*. Ms. Betty typically stopped and corrected Thomas after each mispronounced word. For example,

Ms. Betty said, “That’s not *won’t*, Thomas, that’s *would*” or “You skipped this word, it’s *should*. Are you sleepy?” This slowed the reading process and, as a result, Thomas became annoyed, took deep breaths, rolled his eyes, smacked his lips, and said to Ms. Betty, “This is stupid! Don’t you have something better to do?” Following these inappropriate behaviors, Ms. Betty decided to discontinue the oral reading session. The next day Ms. Betty attempted to engage Thomas in another oral reading activity, but he was reluctant to comply with her requests. Thomas told her that he had to use the restroom. Ms. Betty gave Thomas a hall pass. She did not see Thomas again until the next day.

Jarvis. Jarvis was a 7-year-old elementary school student who was considered to be a bright student but had a history of exhibiting disruptive classroom behaviors. One morning, while transitioning from his seat to the carpet area for daily alphabet-rhyme activities, Jarvis became excited and ran from his seat. As he ran toward the carpet area to sit in his favorite spot, he accidentally bumped and pushed his classmates. This caused a wave of reports from individual students telling Ms. Brown what Jarvis had done to them: “Jarvis hit me!”; “Ooooo, I’m telling, Jarvis kicked Brittney!”; “Jarvis stepped on my shoe!”

Ms. Brown became visibly upset by the whole scene. None of her students were focused and it was almost time for lunch. Brittney was crying and another student threatened to hit Jarvis with a shoe. “Stop running in my classroom, Jarvis!” screamed Ms. Brown. “Where is my cell phone? I’m calling your mother.” Ms. Brown took her cell phone out of her pocket and pointed it in Jarvis’s face. “You know better than that. You know how to walk to the carpet!” Ms. Brown then instructed Jarvis to walk back to his seat. Jarvis complied but took the long route back to his seat. Then he walked slowly back to the carpet area where he had to apologize to his classmates for bumping into them. “I’m sick of this and I’m sick of you! You know better!”

said Ms. Brown. She looked at her watch. It was lunch time.

Precorrection: An Instructional Strategy to Prevent Student Failure

Use of precorrection is a proactive way to address predictable inappropriate academic responses and social behaviors. It does not negate the necessity of administering consequences to manage inappropriate behavior. Use of precorrective strategies does, however, represent a shift in focus from the consequences of behavior to antecedents of behavior. It requires teachers to anticipate the conditions under which inappropriate behaviors are highly likely to occur, teach the student how to avoid the mistake, and then teach the student what is expected (Kauffman, 2001).

Precorrection typically involves seven steps (Colvin, Sugai, & Patching, 1993): (a) identify the context and the predictable behavior of concern; (b) specify expected behaviors; (c) modify the context; (d) conduct behavior rehearsals; (e) provide strong reinforcement for expected behaviors; (f) prompt expected behaviors before performance; and (g) monitor the plan. What follows is a discussion of the seven precorrection steps within the context of the hypothetical case studies (see *Table 1* for highlights).

Identify the context and the predictable behavior of concern. To identify the context of the behavior, the teacher must identify what is causing the behavior of concern. For example, Ms. Betty must identify Thomas’s behavior of concern (a reading fluency deficit) and the context in which the behavior occurs (unfamiliarity with sight words). In regard to Jarvis, Ms. Brown must identify the inappropriate behavior: running and bumping into peers. She should further determine that these inappropriate behaviors occur during transition from the seated area to the carpet area (context).

Specify expected behaviors. After determining the inappropriate behaviors of both Thomas and Jarvis, alternative appropriate behaviors must

be identified. Thomas is expected to read each word fluently. To do so, Thomas must perform academic behaviors that will lead to the ability to read fluently. For example, Thomas could be expected to look at, point to, and sound out each word phonetically.

Ms. Brown must identify appropriate behaviors that she would like Jarvis to exhibit. For example, in order to transition appropriately, Jarvis should be expected to walk from his seat to the carpet area without coming into contact with his peers by keeping his hands to himself. All expected behaviors, whether they are social or academic, should be defined in observable terms so that student performance can be monitored effectively.

Modify the context. The goal of modifying the context is to increase the likelihood of the desirable behavior and to decrease the likely occurrence of the undesirable behavior. Teachers can modify the context by making instructional, task, or activity accommodations or by altering the mode of instruction, activity scheduling, and seating arrangements. For example, Ms. Betty could alter her mode of instruction by incorporating a modeled review element to Thomas’s oral reading session. In addition, she could instruct Thomas to point to each word as he pronounces them phonetically. Ms. Brown could move Jarvis’s seat to a position closer to the carpet area to decrease the likelihood of coming into physical contact with his peers. Given the fact that poor transitioning could occur again with other students, and given that moving every student closer to the carpet area is unpractical, Ms. Brown could act proactively by teaching the entire class how to transition to the carpet area appropriately. She could also make sure to include a discussion on the importance of keeping one’s hands to oneself and to be mindful of each other’s personal space. By teaching the entire class how to transition, Ms. Brown would not have to expend valuable instructional time correcting individual students in how to

transition. Instead, she would provide brief reminders to the entire class on how to transition appropriately prior to transitioning. Because Jarvis is the principle subject of instruction, Ms. Brown could give reminders to Jarvis prior to his transitioning to a new area. This would provide Jarvis with continual information on how to move to the carpet area in an appropriate manner.

Conduct behavior rehearsals. Behavior rehearsals allow the student to see and hear what is expected. Behavior rehearsals also allow teachers to monitor the expected appropriate behavior for accuracy. For example, Ms. Betty could model for Thomas how to read unfamiliar vocabulary words and then encourage him to repeat the sight words. After Thomas has practiced reading the sight words, she could allow him to read the oral reading passage independently.

Ms. Brown could engage her students in several behavior rehearsals to reinforce how to move from their seats to the carpet area while keeping their hands to themselves. First, she could model the desired behavior, then she could allow Jarvis and four other students to perform the behavior as modeled. Finally, a rehearsal involving the entire class could be conducted.

Rehearsals also can be in the form of a teacher question-and-answer session. For example, prior to transitioning to the carpet area, Ms. Brown could pull Jarvis to the side and provide reminders, "We're about to have alphabet-rhyme time. Do you remember how we are supposed to move from our seats to the carpet? You do? Tell me! . . . Good!"

Provide strong reinforcement for expected behaviors. The new expected, appropriate behavior must be associated with a strong reinforcer that will encourage the likelihood of the desirable behaviors reoccurrence; otherwise, the new appropriate behavior will not be as reinforcing as the old inappropriate behavior. For example, Ms. Betty could reinforce Thomas's fluent letter-sound

pronunciation and overall cooperation by allowing him 5 minutes of academic computer time on a daily basis. Once it appears that he is making progress with the new oral reading routine and his basic sight-word vocabulary increases, Ms. Brown could alter the reinforcement schedule to allow Thomas computer use every other day and then every two or three days. A reinforcement schedule could be used with Jarvis (e.g., a note to take home to his parents that informs them of the progress he is making in being a "good citizen" in the classroom) and/or the entire class.

Prompt expected behaviors before performance. Prompting expected, appropriate behaviors serves as a reminder to students of what is expected of them. Thus, the teacher focuses her attention on appropriate student behaviors rather than on inappropriate student behaviors. Providing reminders to students may increase the likelihood that the desirable behavior will occur again and increases the likelihood of success for the student. This allows the students to have positive experiences within their classrooms. For example, prior to Thomas reading, Ms. Betty could say to him, "Remember to point to the first letter and to sound it out if you see an unfamiliar word" or "How do you begin to pronounce this word? Do you remember what steps we took to pronounce it yesterday?" For Jarvis, Ms. Brown might pull him aside and say, "We are about to move to the carpet area, so remember to walk" or she might make a blanket statement to the entire class "When its alphabet-rhyme time, walk to the carpet and keep your hands to yourself like big boys and girls."

Monitor the plan. Keeping a record of a student's performance allows the teacher to monitor progress. Documentation of student performance during the use of the precorrection strategy enables the teacher to determine whether or not the strategy is effective. For example, Ms. Betty could time Thomas prior

to implementing precorrection. At the end of each week, she could time Thomas as he reads to determine if his rate of fluency has improved. If his fluency rate appears to be increasing, she might decide to increase the difficulty of the oral reading session. On the other hand, if his reading fluency rate appears to decline, Ms. Betty would alter her mode of instruction, making accommodations to the reading passage as well as providing additional phonemic and phonological activities. For Jarvis, Ms. Brown may record whether or not he is complying with her prompts. If, after two days, Jarvis does not appear to be responding to prompts, Ms. Brown may alter the nature of the reinforcer and/or the schedule of the reinforcer.

Overall, precorrection instruction is a proactive and preventive method of creating positive educational experiences for students. It is an antecedent-based instructional strategy that provides a context for students to succeed. With the use of precorrection, appropriate behaviors are systematically taught, modeled, and reinforced. Teachers focus less on providing consequences for inappropriate behavior and focus more on creating an environment in which inappropriate behaviors are less likely to occur.

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Table 1 PRECORRECTION STEPS APPLIED TO TWO CASES

Precorrection Step	Reading Difficulties Thomas		Transition Difficulties Jarvis	
	Without precorrection	With precorrection	Without precorrection	With precorrection
1. Identify the context and the predictable behavior of concern.	Ms. Betty engages Thomas in a reading activity without knowledge of his reading ability. Thomas exhibits fluency deficits.	Ms. Betty reviews work samples and identifies words that Thomas could potentially have difficulty with during oral reading activities.	Jarvis transitions inappropriately by running from his seat to the carpet area and bumping into his peers. He is reprimanded after the behavior is exhibited.	The teacher recognizes problems occurring during transition and hypothesizes that the problems are the result of Jarvis running to the carpet area.
2. Specify expected behaviors.	Thomas is unaware of how to pronounce the target words correctly.	When presented with flash cards and/or a reading passage, Thomas is instructed to look at, point to, and sound out each word phonetically.	No instruction is provided about how to transition to the carpet area appropriately.	Students are instructed how to walk during transition and to keep their hands to themselves.
3. Modify the context.	The context is not modified to meet Thomas's needs. Instead, due to Thomas's inappropriate behavior, oral reading activities are discontinued entirely.	A modeled review is incorporated into Thomas's oral reading session.	No modifications are made. Jarvis is publicly reprimanded for his inappropriate behavior.	Jarvis's seat is moved closer to the carpet area.
4. Conduct behavior rehearsals.	No sight-word pronunciation practice is provided.	Thomas is encouraged to repeat the sight words independently.	No practice in how to transition appropriately is provided.	Three rehearsals of how to transition appropriately are provided.
5. Provide strong reinforcement for expected behaviors.	Ms. Betty reinforces Thomas's escape behaviors by discontinuing oral reading activities.	Thomas is provided 5 min of academic computer time on a daily basis and verbal praise for performing expected behaviors and for overall compliance.	No reinforcement of appropriate behavior is provided.	Jarvis is given verbal praise for appropriate behavior.
6. Prompt expected behaviors before performance.	Thomas is not prompted about what is expected of him during oral reading activities.	The following verbal prompts are provided: "Remember to point to the first letter and to sound it out if you see an unfamiliar word"; "How do you begin to pronounce this word? Do you remember what steps we took to pronounce it yesterday?"	No prompts for appropriate behavior are provided.	Prior to transition, the teacher reminds the entire class to transition as rehearsed. Jarvis is privately provided with an additional reminder.
7. Monitor the plan.	No plan is in place	Pre- and post-fluency assessments are conducted with periodic assessment probes. Assessment results drive instruction.	Jarvis's behavior is not monitored.	The teacher uses a tally sheet to record whether or not Jarvis transitions as instructed.

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