

# How To Use Verbal Reprimands In A Positive Manner

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There are times when inappropriate student behaviors that interfere with learning cannot be prevented and the physical educator must resort to techniques such as verbal reprimands that decrease or eliminate these behaviors (Siedentop & Rushall, 1972). Since verbal reprimands are easy to administer and are often quite effective in decreasing inappropriate behaviors, they are widely used by physical educators. Unfortunately, when verbal reprimands are given, they often attack the student rather than the behavior. This could make the student feel guilty about the behavior and conjure up negative feelings about him/herself as a person.

The purpose of this paper is fourfold. The first purpose is to discuss why verbal reprimands are used to make a student feel guilty about his/her behavior and impact on the social and emotional well-being of the student. The second purpose is to provide numerous approaches to prevent the need for use of verbal reprimands and the third is to suggest techniques that involve mild forms of punishment if the prevention approaches fail. The fourth and last purpose is to present guidelines for appropriate use of verbal reprimands with students in physical education.

## Using Verbal Reprimands to Make a Student Feel Guilty

Although there are no known studies in the literature that involve the examination of the relationship between guilt and a student's self-esteem, it is widely recognized that self-esteem is negatively effected by the use of guilt (Smith, 1971).

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For instance, guilt is a sense of wrong doing, blame, or remorse; it is feeling that one has transgressed morally or socially, and there is a need to make some form of retribution (Wolman, 1973). Students go through three steps in developing guilt: a) accepting certain standards of right and wrong as one's own, b) accepting responsibility to regulate behavior to conform to these standards, and c) recognizing any discrepancies between one's behavior and these standards. Some feelings of guilt may help a student conform to social standards, but too much guilt can have detrimental effects on how the student feels about him/herself (Goldenson, 1984).

There are two general types of verbal reprimands that involve guilt to control a student's behavior. In the first type, the physical educator verbally attacks the student as a person instead of attacking the inappropriate behavior. According to Murphy (1980), equating one's behavior with one's worth as a person often results in guilt feelings; that is, "I am a bad person if I do something bad." People tend to nurture guilt feelings when they believe that someone else has the ultimate responsibility for determining the rightness or wrongness of their behavior. The focus of the verbal reprimand should not be directed toward the student as a human being. The following are some examples of inappropriate verbal reprimands in which the physical educator attacks the student rather than addressing the problem which in turn causes the student to feel guilty:

1. "Don't you think any better of yourself?"
2. "How could you ever think of doing something that stupid!"
3. "Can't you do anything right?"
4. "Your mother or father would be so upset if they knew what you did!"

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5. "How do you feel being the only student in the class to mess up?"
6. "I had your brother in class last year, he would never have dreamed of doing that!"
7. "You're just *not* trying. what's wrong with you?"
8. "You should be ashamed of yourself."
9. "How did you ever get to the sixth grade?"
10. "The other students used to look up to you."
11. "You're too stupid to graduate."
12. "You will never make anything of yourself."
13. "You are fat because you do not exercise."
14. "You act like you have two left feet. What a Klutz!"
15. "You throw like a girl."
16. "Whenever anything goes wrong in your squad, it is your fault."
17. "Your gym clothes are dirty. You must not care about yourself."
18. "Can't you control yourself and act your age?"
19. "Don't be a sissy. Everybody can do that activity."
20. "Your team lost the game because of you."

The second type of verbal reprimand involving the use of guilt is one in which the physical educator shows disapproval by withdrawing respect for the student as a human being and using guilt to create the erroneous notion that the students directly caused other people emotional harm by their actions (Lazarus & Fay, 1975). Some examples of these types of verbal reprimands are:

1. "How could you do this to me?"
2. "You have lost my respect!"
3. "No student in all my years of teaching has ever done that to me!"
4. "That is the worst thing I have ever seen!"
5. "I'm disappointed in you!"
6. "I would have quit teaching years ago if I had other students like you!"
7. "I stand here and teach all day and you

8. "I have spent hours planning these activities today. Based on the way you are acting, you do not care."

Both types of verbal reprimands were actual statements that have been heard by the authors or used on college students in our teacher preparation courses when they were attending elementary or secondary school. These types of statements attack the student as a person or withdraw respect for the student which often results in a decreased self-esteem. As a result, the student may become anxious, hostile, angry, self-defeated, ashamed, etc. In addition, the student may develop a negative attitude toward the teacher, the class, physical education, the school, and in some cases, even learning in general.

## Prevention of the Need for Verbal Reprimands

Since one of our goals as physical educators is to create a nurturing environment conducive to learning, we need to examine our behavior management techniques being used to be sure we are not turning off the very students we are trying to motivate. The most effective way to decrease behavior problems is to prevent them (French, Henderson, & Lavay, 1985). Some problem behaviors can be prevented by modifying the physical and/or social environment that is triggering the inappropriate behavior. An example of modifying the physical environment is to remove extra equipment that is an attractive nuisance. A way to modify the social environment is to remove a student from friends who love to verbally socialize.

## Mild Behavior Management Techniques

When prevention is not successful in decreasing inappropriate behavior, the physical educator must go through a series of steps to manage that behavior (see Figure 1). It is recommended that milder intervention techniques be used before verbal reprimands. Examples of such techniques are:

1. **Time-out.** This technique involves removing a student from any opportunities for rein-

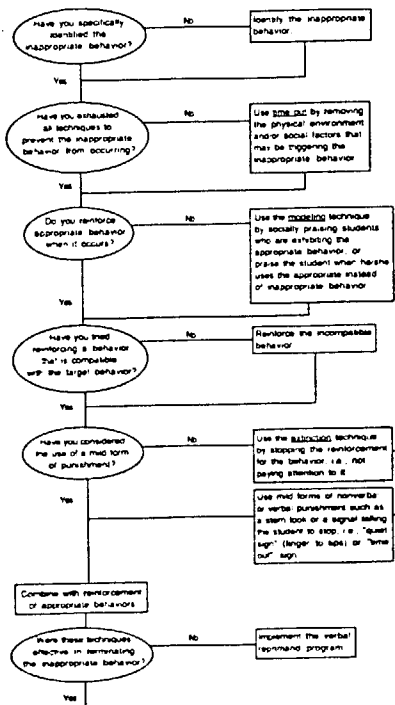


Figure 1. Flow Chart indicating considerations in behavior management approaches leading to the use of verbal reprimands.

an unacceptable behavior. The student is sent to a safe, easy to monitor area such as a corner of the gymnasium for a specified period of time (2-5 minutes).

2. **Modeling.** Modeling is a technique in which a student who is behaving appropriately is praised by the physical educator in order to get the student who is misbehaving to exhibit the same behavior as the student model.
3. **Reinforcement of Incompatible Behaviors.** In this technique, the physical educator reinforces a behavior that is incompatible with the inappropriate behavior. For example, if a student is fooling around with another

student, the physical educator will ask the student to set up equipment and reinforce that student for doing a good job of setting it up. The student cannot set up equipment and fool around at the same time.

4. **Extinction.** Extinction is the technique in which the reinforcement from a previously reinforced behavior is removed in order to decrease the frequency of that behavior. For example when a student is making duck noises in class to attract attention, ignore the noises and the behavior will often stop.

#### Guidelines for the Use of Verbal Reprimands.

Physical educators are encouraged to use milder, more positive techniques first before using a verbal reprimand. If the behavior does not stop, a verbal reprimand may be necessary. The most positive way to use verbal reprimands is to speak to the student one to one, explain why the behavior was inappropriate, and offer an appropriate alternative behavior. It is important that the teacher: (a) attack the behavior, not the student, and (b) NOT withdraw respect and/or concern for the student as a person. The focus of a verbal reprimand must be on the specific inappropriate behavior that the student exhibited. Some examples are:

1. Please do not bounce the ball when I am trying to talk. It makes it difficult for others to hear what I am saying. Hold the ball until I am finished.
2. Fighting is not an appropriate behavior in this physical education class. If you are angry with John for a reason, calmly tell him why and work out a solution.
3. Please listen when I give instructions so you know how to play the game.

In conclusion, physical educators need to question the frequently held idea that guilt is an effective technique to control inappropriate behavior. In fact, guilt is extremely ineffective means of creating lasting positive behavior change (Murphy, 1980).

In our society, there are many expectations from parents, sibling peers, teachers, coaches,

from parents, sibling peers, teachers, coaches, scout leaders, etc. It is confusing and often overwhelming to try to meet all of these expectations; especially when they are inconsistent with each other. As a result, children spend a lot of time feeling guilty about not meeting the expectations of others. If we, as physical educators, are concerned about the emotional well-being of our students, we should make a conscious effort to avoid using guilt induced verbal reprimands to control problem behavior.

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