What Works (and What Doesn't) in Behavior Management - Part 1

Welcome to what works and well, what doesn't work about behavior management. And you'll see us say management a lot of times with air quotes because the underlying theme of all this work is that we're not here to manage other people's behavior. But I would say, Julie, we are here to help manage each other's states.

So it's a little bit of a quandary we're in, but let's talk about what works and what doesn't. Okay, I'm so excited about this particular topic, Kristie, because so many people will say we've got a great behavior plan in place. And why isn't it working? And so we're going to talk about behavior charts.

And if you're looking at the screen right now, you can see we have really strong feelings about behavior charts. And we think we should ditch the behavior charts. And we wanted to open this particular session talking about this little girl who, uh, we were in her classroom and we were sitting at a kidney shaped table there to observe.

And this little girl, a kindergartner comes walking past us and says, "Hi". And Kristie and I look, and she's headed to the behavior chart. And we said, hi.

And she moved her chart. She was on green and she just moved it to red. And we both looked with confused faces and we're like, wonder why she moved it to red.

And so I said, did your teacher tell you to move your clip? And she said, no, but honey, we all know that I'm going to be on red pretty soon. And we're both like blink, blink, because this little tiny human is taking control of a system that punishes her daily. And my first thought is this kid is funny and this kid is awesome and way to go sister, you know, whatever.

At the same time, I started, it started to sink in on me that she has taken over a system because it's pretty painful for her. Yeah. Well, and just, she's internalized a perception about herself and just sort of like resolved to the point that's like, well, that's where I'm going anyway.

Why bother pretending or waiting for it or, you know, and it might seem funny and it might feel like, oh, she's being sassy and taking charge, but really what are we telling her? What messages? And so Julie, I think the theme of this session in particular, so many people are going to have stories like the one you just shared. Other people are going to have other stories where they're going to be like, this has really helped some kids and this has really worked for us. So we're going to talk about that as well, because, um, it's, it's maybe not always visible in the moment, what the problems are.

Others is very visible. So let's, let's go ahead and dive in and we'll, we'll unpack that. Okay.

So keep this little girl in mind as we kind of unpack, like Kristie said, but what we're going to do is we're going to have a quick overview of eight problematic practices. So I'll just kind of go through them, behavior charts and clips, token economy systems, public praising as passive manipulation. Now, Kristie, I don't know about you, but in my college experience as an educator, learning to be an educator, they constantly taught us to praise people.

Yeah. They just forgot to tell you it was passive manipulation. I know.

So if you, if you're sitting here going, wait, I do that all the time. It's okay. A lot of this stuff is going to be something where you're like, I have to unlearn some things.

And so maybe people may not understand, but it means something like, Oh, Hey, Julie, I like the way that you're sitting and you're ready to listen or Hey, Samantha, I like how you got your book out and turned to the page, you know, things like that. So it's like, I'm publicly acknowledging or praising someone, but I'm trying to tell the person next to Julie, they don't have their act together. Sometimes it's a little bit, I would say even like, finally, Julie, I'm glad you're finally paying attention.

You know what I mean? There's a bit of that as well. That's probably right. But yes.

So it's, it's manipulation in the way that you're trying to manage other people's behavior by putting someone as an exemplary shining star. So that's something that we're going to talk about. And then you want to talk about white dominant cultural norms.

Yeah. And it don't get too caught up in all the verbiage, even like number three and number four, they have like lots of verbs, words there. But the idea is that behavior is not good or bad.

Sometimes the, the, the way we see the world, that's why we talk about the white dominant culture, because it's just the culture in which we all are living. And the way we see things is, was that behavior, a good behavior, or is that a bad behavior? Even like when I said, I like the way that you did something. I'm just saying sort of like, there's not a lot of gray.

What if I got my book out, but I'm on the wrong page? Am I bad or am I good? And the little girl in your story was like, I'm just going to be bad at some point today. So let's just go to red. So even if you've got a multicolored chart system, it's sort of naming a behavior as good or bad.

And we want to move away from that. Okay. We're going to talk about negative calls, home timeouts, or other well-intentioned variations like forced quiet time.

When the teacher says it's time for you to take a break, that kind of timeout, detention and suspension and seclusion and exclusion. And many of you are looking at these eight going, we do that. We do that.

We do that. We do that. And we know because we've been in schools, we see these things.

They're very pervasive, but we're going to talk about them as problematic and talk about what to do instead. And the biggest one we're going to dive into is why are behavior charts and clips problematic? You will see tenants of, um, even exclusion in our use of behavior clips. So that's not like they're all singular.

So we can take this one. That's the most pervasive and probably Julie, I would say, if you looked at that list of eight, the one that feels the least harmful on the face of it, like people might go, oh, I know the problem with negative calls homes. It's like disrupting the parent relationship with their child.

And, oh yeah, I totally understand the problem with putting a kid in a room all by themselves. Okay. But how can you put behavior charts on that same list? Okay.

And so they're very normalized. And like Kristie said, we're talking about any kind of public display and whether it's a dojo system or a digital system or any way that you are talking about what's good and bad behavior and people are getting points for or taken away. Um, and they're been very normalized, but that doesn't mean they're effective.

And I'll just use really quickly, Julie, about like a point system. People might've been surprised to see token economy systems on, um, and they might be saying, Hey, Julie and Kristie are, you know, school-wide intervention is based on building up the enough points to get to the thing on Friday or enough Fridays to get to the school-wide thing. And so go back to the slide where you said, normalization doesn't equal effectiveness.

So you can have a PBIS system or some sort of intervention system that everyone does, maybe everyone in your state, everyone in your region, everyone in your district. Um, and you might have some effectiveness with the overall approach, but if you break it down, something like a token economy system, especially for the youngest children in your school district, they have no concept of that. And so maybe around eighth grade, we teach token economy systems in social studies, but it's like developmentally people don't understand it.

So it's sort of random or, um, less predictable to use something like that with younger kids. So if it's a school-wide intervention and you have preschool, kindergarten, first grade, and everybody's trying to accumulate points, it will have less effect on younger kids. So it's not obvious district-wide.

That's right. And if you want to talk from younger to older, when you're talking about all kids, these tools are designed to increase compliance and offer real-time feedback. And the feedback is good or bad.

Yes or no. Is this right or wrong? Right. However, they often cause harm.

They reinforce shame and they fail to teach meaningful regulation skills. And this is the stuff that's hard to hear because no one is in this work to reinforce shame or cause harm or fail to teach a meaningful skill. And so we really have to rethink these larger systems.

And so despite good intentions, these practices can backfire and actually increase challenging behaviors. So back to the little girl on the girl that put her clip on red, it told me

a ton about her trust for the teacher. What we know to be true is it actually disrupts the trust cycle between student and teacher.

And it can actually backfire where we're going to see worse and worse and worse behavior as people feel more and more disconnected. So let's go back to this, the list of eight, because I think when you said that it fails to teach meaningful skills, that's probably one that crosses all eight. And people might say, no, we have a social emotional learning curriculum, or we teach emotional literacy.

But what you said, Julie, was it fails to teach regulation. So that's really different. So I want to like point back to one of the first videos we did where we're talking about the brain and we're explaining how regulation works.

And the bad news is if you're, if the humans in front of you have a brain, they're going to be dysregulated. And our only job is to help them regulate through helping them feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure. And none of these do that.

In fact, they often do the opposite of safe, seen, soothed, and secure. Really good point because regulation is just managing energy and tension in the body. And we need skills to do that.

And things like emotional literacy is like a little tiny part of something, but not about being feeling safe, feeling seen, someone soothing my nervous system and having secure relationships. All right. So let's talk a little bit more about the harms of the public nature of behavior charts.

Because as you said, we were just there observing, and we saw the little girl go up and, you know, interface with it. So it's very public. Yeah.

So shame makes a whole lot of sense. These public tracking causes embarrassment and leads to students to internalize negative labels that harm or form their identity and belonging. I don't know if any of you are parents, but I bet you that you've had discussions at the dinner table about that kid, that one kid who, and usually they're using not only the kid's behavior, but the teacher's interpretation of the behavior through a system to talk about the student.

And so there's a real shame and stigma that can come from publicly displaying anything about behavior. And Julie, I would say we've touched on the others. It's just, again, the lack of instructional value, the dismantling of trust.

And again, as you mentioned, it might show something short term, but in the longterm, I, you know, even when we watched her, we thought, oh, she's taking control of the system. She's has a sense of agency and autonomy, but not really. It was just about, let's just get the show over and move on.

Yeah, that's right. That's right. So this story is just something that we really want you to hear because we want you to understand the depth of some of these systems and the depth of harm that can be caused by some of these systems.

And I think on your dashboard, you've got this full story. So we'll just give you the brief story. But this is Milo.

And Milo's mother contacted us and was so distraught because he was coming home and he said, I'm the boy on red. I'll always be the boy on red. And he, quote, came home every night and cried in his closet, finally escalating to the point where he screamed, I just deserve to die.

I will always be red. And this one's a hard one to swallow. And it makes sense if you spend any time in school systems and you notice the kids that are repeatedly in public ways in trouble and or on red or 10 miles behind or a sinking ship or a balloon that burst, like you can have all sorts of cute things, but essentially what it's teaching is I'm bad.

And this kid really couldn't get out of the cycle of being bad. And there was no way around it. So if you're interested in that whole story, it's going to be on your dashboard for you to check out and you can read the whole thing.

It's a really important read for educators who are pretty wedded to those kinds of systems. And I think, Julie, I'll say two things about the system here as we get a lot of verbiage again. So when we talked about the white dominant culture and the either or or the bad good, that same system or that same culture, those same norms tend to marginalize students further.

So students who are systematically marginalized in our educational system get more harm or are disproportionately claimed to have behaviors that are challenging. And so that, you know, now this leads to a student who's already has the likelihood of being harmed by the system. On top of it, our behavior system, our behavior charts brand him as a problem every day, not only to himself in terms of what you said, like his identity and internalizing, but it perpetuates what those who stand around him think about kids that look like Milo.

So we start to associate the kids who look like this are a problem, problem to the peace and happiness and safety of the classroom. And that becomes internalized by other students as well. And so there's a racial component to this that we really have to talk about, we really have to think about.

And then, of course, when we think about students with disabilities, Kristie, Milo happens to have ADHD as an attribute, but and what we know is disproportionately we look at racial identities and disability identities, and we start to see repeat repeated problems over and over and over again, like you said.