

# Teacher's Attention—The Most Powerful Reinforcer

(Excerpt from *The Solution Book*, Topic Booklet B)

## Teacher's Attention—The Most Powerful Reinforcer

In the elementary grades, the most powerful reinforcer is the teacher's attention. All children want and need personal interactions with the classroom teacher. Every nod, grin, and small word of approval—every interaction, whether negative or positive—is affecting a child's behavior. The teacher is one of the most significant people in the child's life. This is a responsibility the teacher must handle very carefully, for each time students interact with their teacher they are learning about social skills as well as academic and study skills.

Students want and need the teacher's attention, and they will get it—one way or another. Each student figures out the most efficient way to get one-to-one attention from the teacher. Unfortunately, many students learn that the easiest way to get attention is to do something the teacher does not want them to do. Let's look at an example. Ellie is one of twenty-eight first-grade students. She is average in ability, appearance, and social skills. Ellie's teacher is well intentioned and works hard to be a good teacher. However, like many teachers, she is overworked and usually has more to do than time allows. At the beginning of the year, Ellie tried hard. She liked the teacher and wanted the teacher to be pleased with her. Ellie worked hard on assignments. She would try hard on tests. She would do everything the teacher asked the class to do. However, Ellie soon found out that her efforts were hardly noticed by the teacher. Even though Ellie worked hard on an assignment, she wouldn't get the answers right. The teacher would tell her to try harder. When Ellie tried hard on a test, she would miss many of the answers. The teacher only praised the students who did really well, so Ellie was ignored. At the same time, Ellie noticed that the teacher would pay attention to students who misbehaved.

This taught Ellie something: she learned that she could get the teacher's attention, but she had to do something the teacher did not want her to do. In fact, through trial and error, Ellie found that there were several things that would guarantee the teacher's attention. Ellie learned that the teacher didn't like noise, so she pounded on her desk. Ellie learned that the teacher didn't like things to be messy, so she

wrote on her desk and scattered crumpled papers on the floor. Anytime Ellie would do these things, the teacher would look her in the eye and say something like, "Ellie, how many times have I told you not to write on your desk? Now, get the sponge and wipe those pencil marks off right now!" Unwittingly, the teacher was teaching Ellie to misbehave.

The criticism Ellie learned to seek from her teacher may seem like an unpleasant interaction. However, if this is the only attention she can get from an important person in her life, she will consider this attention better than nothing.

The majority of student's misbehavior in the elementary classroom is designed to get the teacher's attention. The teacher provides attention in the form of reminders, criticism, or punishment. So a student misbehaves to get the teacher's attention. This attention fosters more misbehavior in the future. The cycle continues and a pattern is established. (Many children learn this pattern of misbehavior both at home and at school.) However, with a good background in reinforcement, teachers can easily avoid teaching misbehavior.

A teacher can improve classroom management by first identifying whether or not students are misbehaving to get attention. To decide, answer the following questions:

- Do you spend a lot of time punishing students?
- Do you have to constantly remind students what to do?
- Do you feel that your interactions with students are negative?
- Do you have a number of students who consistently misbehave?
- Do you ever catch yourself feeling, thinking, or saying, "How many times have I told you...?"

If the answer to any of the above questions is yes, then you need to modify the way you interact with your students. This booklet and booklet E, "Increasing Positive Interactions and Improving the Student's Self-Concept," will help you develop a healthy learning environment in your classroom.