

Self-Monitoring of Behavior: Putting the Child in Charge

Clayton R. Cook, PhD
University of Washington

Teachers and parents are constantly in the market for strategies to address behavior problems. **Self-monitoring** has been successfully established as an effective strategy that teachers and parents love because it requires very little time to implement and has a big impact on behavior.

Self-monitoring is an intervention that teaches children how to monitor their own behavior with the intent of increasing desirable behaviors and decreasing undesirable behaviors. Research has shown self-monitoring to be successful for children with a wide range of behavior problems and abilities. With self-monitoring, children are prompted at various time points to reflect on their behavior and write down on a chart whether they were engaging in a desirable or undesirable behavior at the exact moment the prompt occurred or during a previous amount of time (e.g., the last 5-minutes). A major ingredient to the success of a self-monitoring intervention is the development of a specific goal and rewards that can be earned for meeting the goal. Through the combination of increased self-awareness and goal-directed behavior, children's behavior improves.

Although self-monitoring can be used to address most types of behavior problems that occur with some degree of regularity, it is perhaps most effective to increase positive behaviors, including being on-task, following directions, keeping hands and feet to self, and other positive behaviors. Children who are easily distracted, engage in disruptive behaviors, have trouble paying attention or fail to complete assignments independently are prime candidates for a self-monitoring intervention.

A self-monitoring intervention should include the following materials and implementation steps:

Materials:

- Self-monitoring chart
- Vibrating timer or watch that prompts the child to self-monitor and record his behavior on the chart
- Rewards or access to desired privilege

Step1: Identify the Problem

- What specifically is the child doing that is undesirable?
- More importantly, what do you want the child to be doing instead? The desirable behavior should be something observable, measurable and described in a way that the child can understand.
 - Examples:
 - An undesired behavior is talking out of turn. Alternatively, the desirable behavior would be to raise one's hand appropriately and waiting to be called on.
 - An undesired behavior is looking around the room at persons/objects not pertaining to the lesson. Alternatively, the desirable behavior would be

active participation defined as looking directly at his/her work or the teacher when appropriate.

Step 2: Collect Baseline Data

- A baseline is an estimate of the child's current or typical level of behavior. The baseline estimate of behavior will be used to determine whether behavior is improving in response to the self-monitoring intervention. In collecting baseline data, you are to directly observe how often the student is engaging in undesirable behavior.
- There are several methods to collect baseline data. One easy method is to simply tally the number of times the behavior occurs during a particular time period. This will give you an idea of the number of times the behavior occurs during a specified amount of time. For instance, one may find that the child is disruptive 10 times for every 30-minutes of class time. A goal of the self-monitoring intervention, therefore, would be to decrease the number of disruptive behaviors to less than 10 times for a 30-minute time period. Another way to directly observe behavior is to mark a check when the undesirable behavior occurs and an "O" when the behavior does not occur. This would be done at the end of every 30-seconds for a 10 or 15-minute time period.
- When observing, the teacher or parent should allow things to occur as they naturally unfold. For example, if the child is having trouble staying on-task while completing homework, the parent should observe the child during the natural homework routine. Then the teacher would simply set a watch to vibrate every 30s or look at a clock on the wall. The teacher would only need to glance at the student every 30s and note if the pre-specified behavior (see Step 1) was or was not occurring.
- It is important to get a stable and accurate estimate of behavior at baseline, since subsequent decisions will be based on whether behavior during the self-monitoring intervention has changed relative to baseline.
- Figure 1 is a useful chart to record observational data for a child.

Step 3: Determine how often the child will monitor his/her own behavior

- The child will be asked to record their own behavior at certain time intervals that you, the teacher, will determine.
- Generally, the more times the problem behavior occurs, the more frequently the student should be prompted to self-monitor. For example, if the student is off-task every two minutes as determined during baseline observations, then having the child monitor his/her behavior every 2-3 minutes would be an appropriate length of time to prompt the student to self-monitor.
- Caution should be taken so that the student is not monitoring so often that it interrupts their on-task behavior. This would happen if, for example, the student is off-task every two minutes, and the prompt to self-monitor occurred every 30 seconds.

Step 4: Decide on the prompt device and create a self-monitoring chart

- Now that the length of time between prompting the child to self monitor has been determined, decide on the type of prompting device that you would like to use. The prompt can be visual, audio or physical. The important thing is that the prompt given to

the child is noticeable and does not interrupt other activities that may be going on in the class or at home.

- Suggestions:
 - The MotivAider ® is a fairly new product that is essentially a small, vibrator that can be worn by the student. The MotivAider ® can be programmed to cue students on any interval.
 - A more common object is a kitchen timer with a vibrating option.
 - Natural breaks in the day can also be used as a cue as to when to self-monitor.
- Another consideration should be when will self-monitoring occur? Self-monitoring should be implemented during time when undesirable behavior is most likely to occur. Does problem behavior generally occur during independent assignments? If so, self-monitoring should only be used during these times.
- A simple chart should be created that allows the student to note if they are ('yes') or are not ('no') doing the desired behavior.
- See Attachments 2 ,3 and 4 for examples of self-monitoring charts.

Step 5: Schedule a meeting with the child.

This meeting should have three purposes: 1) explain to the student the reason for self-monitoring and have them agree to use the procedures, 2) have the student set his own goal and 3) have the student identify rewards or privileges to earn for meeting the goal.

- Explaining self-monitoring: Tell the child what type of behavior that you like to see them engage in (e.g. looking at the teacher when the teacher is giving instructions). Explain that you want to help the student to do more of the good behaviors during class periods. Also explain that with self-monitoring they will make notes of their own behavior.
- Setting the goal. Identify a reasonable goal such as 8 out of 10 self-monitoring intervals will show that the student is on-task.
- Identifying rewards or privileges to earn: Ask the student what type of activities or items would they like to have in exchange for meeting their goal. Provide the students with some reasonable examples such as an extra 5 minutes of computer time, new pencil, extended lunch break, or piece of candy. Allow the student to add his/her own reasonable items or activities to the list.

Step 6: Teach the child how to self-monitor

- Explain to the child step-by-step what will happen and show them how to use the chart correctly. Have the prompting procedure/device ready.
- Role-play an example of both the desirable and undesirable behavior. For example, if the behavior was on-task the teacher would say, "Look Tom, I am completing my assignment. I am looking directly at my paper and am writing down my answers. This means that I am doing a good job and on-task so I would put a check under the 'YES' now that the timer has signaled me to record my behavior." Then model an off-task behavior. Say, "Tom, I have an assignment to do but instead I am not paying attention by looking outside the window. I am not doing a good job paying attention, so I would put a check under the 'NO' section when the timer signals me to record my behavior."

- Have the student role play both desirable and undesirable behavior. Provide feedback as necessary.

Step 7: Begin self-monitoring

- Once you are confident that the child understands the procedure, begin implementing the self-monitoring intervention.
- In the beginning provide a lot of encouragement and reminders to self-monitor. Over time, as the child gets used to the intervention, one should decrease the amount of assistance they provide the child.
- Occasionally, check to the child's self-monitoring chart to make sure s/he is being honest. If you agree, circle their response. If you disagree, put a slash through their response and mark the correct response.
- Collect self-monitoring sheets and provide reinforcement as you have already decided. Make sure that you are consistently and immediately providing reinforcement exactly as you specified during the meeting with the student.
 - The only exception is if the student decides on their own that they would like to 'collect' reinforcement. That is, the student may decide that they want to have a full 15 minutes of computer time rather than five separate 3-minute time periods of computer time.

Step 8: Determine if self-monitoring is working

- It is important to also observe the child's behavior now that the intervention is in place to find out whether behavior is improving since the intervention has begun. To monitor student behavior, simply conduct observational periods in the same manner as baseline observations.
- If self-monitoring is working, you should see a noticeable reduction in the number of times the student is engaging in an undesirable behavior compared to the number of times s/he engaged in the behavior during baseline.
- For most interventions, the long-term goal is to have long-lasting effects without the intervention in place. In other words, the student should eventually be able to stay-on task at a high level without having to use self-monitoring forms. Although this may not be possible for some students, gradually removing the intervention should be a goal once the child has demonstrated significant improvement for an extended amount of time.
 - One step to decrease the amount of intervention is to increase the time between cues. For example, if the student was given a cue every 2 minutes the next step would be to increase the interval to 4 minutes, etc... However, caution should be taken so that increases occur slowly. Periodic observations should be conducted to make sure the intervention is still effective compared to baseline while changes are being made. Ideally, self-monitoring may be faded out so that the verbal praise for on-task behavior is sufficient to maintain on-task behavior.