

Pit Crews: Utilizing Peers to Positively Shape and Cue Positive Behaviors

Diana Browning Wright

Utilizing Peer Disapproval Often Backfires

Often teachers are exasperated by the behavior of a student in their class and seek to utilize peer disapproval as a method of motivating behavior change. This approach often backfires, as the student will accept negative attention as a way of feeling empowered, even at the cost of ridicule. This approach relies on challenging the student's sense of belonging, one of the five major life needs. (Belonging, Fun, Physical Needs, Empowerment and Freedom are the five needs identified in many different theoretical models.) When a student's sense of belonging is sufficiently challenged, challenging behaviors often increase, and the teacher's ability to "reach and teach" that student is reduced. This punishment approach, whether or not the behavior is eliminated, will often cause yet another unwanted outcome: "flight or fight," the side effects of punishment. In this situation the student physically or mentally withdraws from teacher influence and control as a result of the ostracizing technique; the "flight" side effect. Teachers sometime refer to this withdrawal as "passive aggressive" behavior. Alternatively, the student may demonstrate an escalation of challenging behavior, resulting in physical or verbal outbursts as a result of the negative interaction, the "fight" side effect.

Utilizing Peers to Shape, Model, Cue Behavior Can Avoid Side Effects

One way to achieve success in using peers to change behavior that can be more positive in approach and therefore result in less of a likelihood of side effects is called "Pit Crews." This technique relies on peers to shape, model and cue behavior in such a way that the student feels more empowered, while maintaining a sense of belonging. The overall goal of this program is to enhance a wide range of rule-following behaviors through the use of cueing and reinforcing prosocial behaviors that are minimally intrusive and minimally time consuming.

Pit Crew Description

The selected student receives "?" cards or "+" cards from the selected 2-3 peer "pit crew" members during an activity period the teacher has selected. "?" cards are given when the student is either about to enter a time period or activity he/she may have had difficulty with in the past, or when he/she has already begun engaging in a behavior that is not rule-following. This "?" card serves as a prompt or cue to begin, or switch to, the positive behavior the "pit crew" is to address. The "+" card is given during a time in which he/she is demonstrating the desired behavior or immediately after the student switches to the positive behavior after receiving a "?" card. At the end of the monitored time period, the teacher asks key questions. The monitored time period varies from 30 minutes to a full day, depending on the age and other characteristics of the students as well as how long the "pit crew" has been working with the student.

Key questions:

- For the "pit crew": "Did you find times to give your friend a "?" card that you thought might be helpful?"; "Did you find times to give a "+" card because your friend was on track? (i.e., class/activity rules were being followed well)" "Did you feel you were doing your best to help your friend?"
- For the "friend": "Did you find it helpful to be reminded before you had trouble, or after you got off track, by receiving a "?" card?"; "Did you feel your friends were doing their best to give you "+" cards when you were on track?"

If the teacher decides to utilize reinforcement other than the positive attention of the “pit crew,” reinforcement for both the student and the pit crew gains the best results. For example, a surprise reinforcer, such as extra time free time, or cokes after school, for both the student and the pit crew can be given, “because I am so pleased at how well we are all working together in this class to help each other do our best.” Alternatively, all can be contingently reinforced. For example, an opportunity to play a favorite game together at free time, 2 bonus points on the quiz of their choice, and so forth could be available if preestablished criteria are met, e.g., more than 10 “+” cards received in a 2 hour period.

Step By Step Methods For Instituting Initial Use of “Pit Crews” in the Classroom

Introduce the Concept

Sample dialogue to be altered for age level as follows:

“Students, I have noticed that some of us may need the help of all of us if we are to do our best in this class. What are some of the problem behaviors we have sometime in our class that we might want to change? (Brainstorm). I would like to establish “pit crews” for different students in our class whenever we believe that person could use our help to do his/her best. A “pit crew” is like the mechanics and other support people who cheer on the race car drivers. The driver does his best for a few laps and then comes in to hear how he/she did, what could be better next time, and then speeds on his way. The pit crew then watches to see how things go in the next lap. In our class, a pit crew will be any 2 or 3 volunteers who will help a friend do better. If you are the friend, you can expect your crew to give you “?” cards if you are about to go into a situation you might have difficulty with. That is to remind you to do your best. If your crew notices you are going out of bounds or off track, they may give you a “?” to remind you that you are off track. This may help you get back ON track. Your pit crew may give you a “+” card if they see you doing a really good job as well. If you are a pit crew member, your job is to give a card quietly, without talking at all, then return quickly and quietly to your work. I will tell you how many cards you will have, and how long a time period you have to give them to your friend. (Each member should have 2-3 “?” cards and 4-5 “+” cards minimally.) At the end of the time period, the pit crew and their friend will meet with me to hear how it went.” (If there are any contingencies you want to use, introduce them now, e.g., “If we all do a good job, there may be a surprise ahead,” or, “If we do a good job giving the cards, and receiving the cards, the team will earn extra free time.”) I will have a box on my desk. If you have a behavior of yours you want supported, or if you notice a friend’s behavior you want to help, suggest this in the box. (This is anonymous, so don’t have the students write who is recommending this.)

Establish the first and second “pit crews,” THEN a more problematic case

Identify two relatively high status students with minor behaviors. (You can even pretend their names were in the box!) If you want to publicly ask for volunteers, make sure there will be hands raised. You can pre-invite students to volunteer, then publicly request participation. (The goal is to enhance the student’s sense of belonging. Avoid at all costs situations in which no one will volunteer as that becomes a public humiliation.) Select students who themselves could use help with the behavior in question as pit crew members. If the teacher has been successful, by the time the targeted student gets a “pit crew,” he/she will have observed positive interactions and will likely have come to see this as a “circle of friends,” trying to help everyone do their best. Just knowing someone would volunteer to help is extremely validating for some of our more at-risk students who have received many negative peer messages in the past.