

Implementing the Good Behavior Game: Helping Handout for School

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INTRODUCTION

The Good Behavior Game (GBG; Barrish, Saunders, & Wolf, 1969) is a research-supported intervention for managing the behavior of a class or other small group of students, such as a social skills training group or students in the cafeteria or on a bus.

It offers an excellent alternative to using interventions that are punitive. The game entails small groups of students working together to earn rewards contingent upon the good behavior of *all* the students on each team. Every student in the class is a member of a team. Although general rules and procedures should be followed when playing the GBG, the format for the game is flexible. Rules can easily be adapted to suit the individual preferences, needs, and aims of the user, and can even be changed after play begins. For example, the user decides when, where, and how long the game is played; what the rules are and what behaviors are targeted by the rules; the criteria for winning a game; and what the rewards will be when the criteria are met. In the version of the game covered in this handout, students earn points for good behavior. Some teachers, however, prefer using a response cost format, in which points are deducted from a preset number of points. Others prefer a more punitive format in which marks are given for each rule violation and linked to punitive consequences (e.g., loss of privileges).

Multiple studies—especially those conducted primarily in elementary schools—have demonstrated that, when played over a number of months or years, the GBG improves student behavior. It has been shown to be especially effective in increasing attention skills and decreasing aggression among students who are at greatest risk for behavior problems, with its

effects being both short and long term (see Tingstrom, Sterling-Turner, & Wilczynski, 2006, for a review).

The effectiveness of the GBG can be attributed to the following aspects of the game (Kellam et al., 2008; Van Lier et al., 2005):

- The game-like atmosphere is fun and motivational. Teams compete and earn rewards contingent upon their positive behavior, but all teams and team members can win.
- Students who learn and practice appropriate social skills early, such as in early elementary school, gain greater social competence and self-efficacy in controlling their own behavior.
- When students are playing the game, positive peer pressure increases group cohesiveness and decreases negative peer behavioral influences. The teams that work together are the ones most likely to win.
- Students are more attentive and actively engaged in learning while playing the game.
- Students gain confidence in their social abilities. Playing increases self-efficacy, which lasts even after rewards are no longer used in the game.
- Teachers can spend more time teaching and less time correcting misbehavior.

The game does not have to be played for months or years to be effective (as done in much of the research). Its effects are often more immediate—decreasing behavior problems of concern while the game is being played. Thus, the greatest value of the GBG is in helping the teacher manage the classroom during times of greatest need. Also valuable, however, is that the GBG helps teach students to manage their own behavior.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN PLAYING THE GOOD BEHAVIOR GAME

Before choosing to implement the GBG, teachers and others should consider the following questions (Bear, 2010).

Is the game really needed, and for what purpose?

The primary purpose of the game is to help teachers manage student behavior. Keep in mind that although reinforcement of desired behavior is one function of the game, another is to improve classroom and school-wide climate—both are positive ways to manage student behavior. If classroom management is not a problem, and a large majority of students in the class are well behaved, intrinsically motivated, and engaged in learning, then it makes little sense to implement the game. Indeed, implementing the game on an ongoing basis under those conditions may encourage students to become unnecessarily motivated for extrinsic—relying on rewards and external approval—rather than intrinsic reasons. However, this should not be a concern when the game is played occasionally, and especially in a fun, noncontrolling manner.

Is the game good for all ages of students? Although appropriate for all ages, the game may be viewed by adolescents as either childish or too controlling. However, if the game is introduced as a fun way to increase motivation, many adolescents are likely to view it favorably, especially if given the opportunity to be actively involved in how and when it is played.

Should students have input into playing the game?

The teacher should solicit input from the students, but the degree of input should depend on class characteristics such as age level or behavior of students, as well as on the teacher's own preferences. The advantages of involving the students in how the game will be played include greater student interest and investment in the game. Thus, you might ask students to help develop the rules of the game (with the understanding that the teacher has veto power), record team scores after each game, select the rewards, and help decide when the game might be played.

How long should the game be played? For weeks, months, all year? Although the GBG has two primary aims—to help the teacher manage student behavior *and* to help the students learn to manage their own behavior—too often, teachers forget the second aim. They fail to recognize that self-discipline helps keep students from becoming dependent on adults'

constant behavior monitoring and on the promise of rewards. Thus, those elements of the GBG need to be decreased or eliminated (i.e., faded) as self-discipline takes over. Obviously, this process takes much longer to work for some students than others. Nevertheless, use of the game should be reduced as student behavior improves and as more intrinsic rewards for good behavior begin to replace extrinsic ones.

STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PLAYING THE GOOD BEHAVIOR GAME

The following recommendations for playing the GBG are divided into three general sections: (a) preparing for the game, (b) teaching the game, and (c) playing the game.¹ The game allows for great flexibility, so you can adapt these recommendations to your own particular needs.

A. Preparing for the Game

Implementing the GBG successfully requires adequate preparation, which includes determining game rules and the point system, creating teams, and deciding on what rewards to use. The steps in this section describe those aspects of setting up the game.

A.1. Create teams and their membership. Teams should have between three and six students and should be composed equally with respect to behavior problems. It would be unfair to place a larger number of misbehaving students on one team than another team. Team membership should remain the same during the game season (e.g., over a grade marking period). However, there are times when it makes sense to change membership sooner, such as when the scores are lopsided (and likely to continue to be), when team members fail to get along, and when a team member is uncooperative and deliberately causes the team to lose. In the latter case, you might consider making that student a team of one.

A.2. Establish and clearly define three to five game rules. The rules might be the same as those for the classroom, such as: *Rule 1: Work quietly.* To prevent students from arguing with the official or coach (i.e., you), make sure the expected behavior, and rule violations, are clear. For example, violations of Rule 1 would be talking

¹ For more information on the Good Behavior Game, see Bear (2010).

without permission and making sounds that disrupt others. Rules need not be the same each time the game is played. Indeed, it often helps to adapt them to a particular learning activity, or to target specific behaviors of concern, such as students calling out, individuals not participating in discussions, and use of cell phones during class. In those cases, a team would earn the maximum points if all team members raise their hands before speaking, all members participate in discussion, or no one uses their cell phone.

A.3. Determine the point system and score sheet.

A critical part of the GBG is establishing a point system that is viewed by students as fair, but also is easy to use while teaching. A score sheet should be used to record points throughout the game, without having to stop teaching, and it should be posted where the class can see it. A chalkboard, whiteboard, or computer-projected screen might be used for this purpose. The point system provides feedback to players while the game is being played, reinforcing behaviors that are consistent with the established rules. The score sheet shown in Figure 1 shows the point system you should use to enter the score for each scoring period (e.g., 8 periods of the game, with 10 games being played in the season).

A.4. Determine when points will be awarded.

Throughout the game, points are awarded to each team at either fixed intervals (e.g., at the end of every 10 minutes) or random intervals (e.g., at five random times during the 50-minute period). It is your choice when and how often to award points. However, an advantage of using random intervals is that it does not require stopping in the middle of teaching to record scores.

Longer games should have more intervals. The primary determinant of the number of intervals and the length of the game should be the behavior of the students. When the behaviors targeted for improvement occur frequently (e.g., students don't raise their hands or pay attention), the intervals should be shorter; thus, points would be awarded more frequently. For example, while teaching a 30-minute lesson that requires close attention, if you expect some students to be often inattentive, you might choose random 5-minute intervals that provide more immediate feedback. Thus, scores for each team would be recorded on the board six times during that period. Those six times might

include once at the very end of the game and five random times spread out over the course of the 30-minute period (e.g., approximately every 5 minutes after the game begins). Using this scoring system, each team could earn a total of 30 points per game (i.e., 5 maximum points times six intervals).

A.5. Consider the following when developing the point system, score sheet, and awarding of points.

- During the first game or two, make games short and use short intervals (or scoring periods) within the game. This increases the chances of the teams experiencing success early and wanting to continue playing the game.
- Adjust the length of games and intervals according to the developmental level of students and the severity of behaviors of concern. Use shorter game lengths for younger students and when behavior problems are frequent, when more monitoring and immediate feedback are needed.
- Increase the length of the game and the intervals as teams demonstrate success by receiving a sufficient number of points toward earning their reward.

A.6. Determine how many points are needed to win a single game and the entire season.

Winning refers to (a) points earned in the current game and (b) the total accumulation of points across games (or during the game season). That is, at the end of each game, winning teams are declared based on their total scores. Season winners are determined when the scores are carried over from game to game. Because the teacher can decide the criteria for winning a game and the season, select realistic criteria, consisting of scores that every team is likely to achieve with reasonable effort. For example, in playing the game, one of the authors found that it almost always worked to set the winning criteria at 80% of the points possible. Using a percentage of points, rather than a fixed number, allows for greater flexibility in the number of points that can be earned from game to game, as some games may have more intervals than others.

The winning criteria should be set and announced before each game. For example: "Today each team can earn up to 40 points (eight intervals times 5 points). Your team needs at least

32 points to be declared a winner.” As behavior improves, you can adjust the criterion for winning. Likewise, if you discover that few teams are earning enough points to win and suspect that your expectations are too high, lower the criteria a bit, either during the game, or for the next game. To prevent teams from settling for the minimum points required to win (“We’ve already earned the 32 points needed, so we don’t have to follow the rules for the rest of the game”), offer bonus rewards based on performance above the set criteria.

A.7. Consider having different levels of winning. This gives each team a very good chance of winning at least at the lowest level (e.g., 80% criterion), and also encourages each team to exceed the minimal number of winning points. For example, you might offer extra bonuses, such as free time or a free homework pass, for achieving 80% percent of the points, and additional bonuses for achieving 90% and 95% criteria. You also might consider giving special awards for outstanding play (e.g., a Most Valuable Player award).

A.8. Decide the rewards to be earned (and when). A reward, based on points each team earns, can come at any point during the season—after one game, midseason, end-of-season—or at multiple points, and it can vary. For example, at the end of a season consisting of 10 games, the rewards could be 30 minutes of free time with snacks for all winning teams, and a bonus of no homework for a week for teams that obtain 90% or more of the points possible. However, for classes that are particularly challenging, smaller rewards can be given earlier and more frequently (e.g., small snack or 10 minutes free time or extra recess), such as at the end of the first games of the season and intermittently during the rest of season.

B. Introducing and Explaining the Game

The game should be introduced and explained to students shortly before play first begins, and preferably immediately preceding play so that the players do not forget what is covered. The introduction should take 10–15 minutes, but more time may be needed for practice. This section presents what should be covered.

B.1. Introduce the game and explain that its major purpose is to remind students to follow established rules. Present the game as if the

students are playing a real game such as soccer, football, field hockey, or a fictitious game like quidditch (as in the Harry Potter series), and always play it in a fun, gamelike atmosphere. Before beginning the first game, play a short practice session.

B.2. Make it clear that you are the coach (of every team), the only referee, and the game commissioner. As their coach, your job is to help the team score the most points and to help develop each player. That includes giving advice and directions, modeling skills, and supporting the players. It also includes assuming shared responsibility for their performance. Your role, however, will most often be that of the referee. As referee, your job is to enforce the rules and award points based on players’ performance. Players are responsible for their own behavior, but as the referee you will step in when players do not follow the rules. To ensure fair play and not delay the game, mention that arguing with the referee’s call may result in a penalty; the player’s team could lose a point, or the player could be removed from the game. Remember that as game commissioner you have the right to change rules, as necessary, to ensure fair play and the safety of the players.

B.3. Post, explain, and discuss the rules of the game. Be sure that each rule is clearly defined and give examples of each one. This is important to keep any player from arguing that the referee (you) is being unfair during a game. Point out that in addition to the posted rules, all other classroom and school rules also apply, including good sportsmanship. Finally, inform them that as game commissioner, you have the authority to modify the rules and add new ones, and that this is likely to happen as the field conditions change (e.g., expectations of the learning activity change or teams are markedly uneven).

B.4. Explain the point and reward systems. Introduce the game-day scoreboard (e.g., Figure 1), while explaining and demonstrating how scores will be recorded. You also will explain how points from game to game will be recorded on a separate score sheet (e.g., Figure 2) so that all teams can see their weekly progress toward earning the reward. Explain how points earn the rewards (including bonuses for outstanding play).

B.5. Announce the players on each team. Explain that in forming teams you tried to make them even

Figure 1. Sample Score Sheet for Each Game

Today's Scores									
Team	Scoring Period for Today's Game								Total Points
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
<i>Eagles</i>									
<i>Blue Hens</i>									
<i>Monarchs</i>									
<i>United</i>									
<i>Red Fury</i>									

5 = PERFECT (Followed all rules, with no exceptions!)

4 = EXCELLENT (1 or 2 minor errors, but still great!)

3 = GOOD (3–5 errors)

2 = NEEDS MUCH PRACTICE (5–10 errors)

1 = MAJOR TEAM PROBLEMS (more than 10 errors)

0 = MAJOR VIOLATION (One or more major errors that result in a player being removed from the game, or the game being terminated)

and explain the reason for any exceptions that are readily apparent. Also, make it clear that although trading should rarely occur, you have the right to trade team members at any time during the season (e.g., if one team rarely wins a game).

B.6. Arrange players in positions on the field. It is important to keep players on the same team together, making it easier for you to monitor their behavior and to keep score. This works best if seating is at tables; if not, simply arrange seating to keep players together as much as possible, such as placing members of one team in the front left quarter of the room, members of another team in the front right quarter, and so on.

B.7. Remind players that every team can win by earning enough points. The GBG does not have just one winning team, although teams will naturally compete against one another. Competition is almost always healthy, but you will need to remind players that there are multiple winning teams. Ideally, every team *should* win most of the time (although most may not win a bonus), and if an end-of-season reward is given,

try to have every team win it (assuming, of course, they deserve it).

C. Playing the Game

After introducing and explaining the game, begin play. Apply rules and procedures discussed above (see Figure 2), not only as the referee, but also as a coach for every team, by helping the team win as they develop the targeted skills.

C.1. Use praise frequently and strategically. See *Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home* for guidance on how best to use praise and rewards. This strategy will increase targeted behaviors while also developing self-discipline, improving teacher–student relationships, and improving overall classroom climate. Although all recommendations in that handout are important, the following are particularly so in playing the GBG:

- Praise students such that the whole class, or team, hears it, but also, where feasible, do so privately with some individual students who might benefit the most.

Figure 2. Example of Score Sheet Across Games

Game Scores for the 10-Game Season											
											Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
<i>Eagles</i>	33*	35*	30	28	28	33*	36**	32*	29	36**	320*
<i>Blue Hens</i>	31	34*	27	36**	33*	32*	39**	34*	40**	36**	342*
<i>Monarchs</i>	33*	35*	30	38**	28	33*	36**	32*	29	39**	333*
<i>United</i>	37**	27	35*	39**	35*	39**	40**	32	37**	40**	361**
<i>Red Fury</i>	36**	39**	40**	36**	33*	35*	39**	34*	40**	40**	372**

Note. A score of 40 points is possible per game.

*Team met goal of 80%. **Team scored above 90%, earning bonus points.

- Use praise not only to reinforce and call attention to specific behaviors and social-emotional competencies, but also to reinforce more general aspects of students' dispositions, especially those associated with self-discipline. That is, you would praise not only readily observable behaviors—paying attention, following rules, using good social or problem-solving skills—but also less observable general dispositions that those behaviors might represent. For example, don't hesitate to praise a student for being a kind and helpful person, a team leader who values working together, or someone who is respectful of others.
- Make every effort to prevent students from interpreting the game as being a means of social control. Except when necessary (e.g., self-control is greatly lacking), avoid communicating that you're playing the game for your benefit—that is, to control student behavior. Avoiding that interpretation helps students internalize the values and behaviors underlying the behavior you're trying to develop.
- Praise cooperation far more than competition by reminding players that all teams can win.

C.2. Reward targeted behaviors with team points.

Award these points at the end of each interval—whether short or long. During the first few intervals and games, it is important to state specifically why a team received the points awarded. Remember to stay positive and focus on the behaviors you want to see more of, rather than what teams did wrong.

C.3. End the game and determine total points for each team.

At the end of each game session, total the points for each team and declare who the winners are. Provide the reward you've identified to the team or teams that earned one or remind teams what long-term reward they are working for. Post the game points on the scoreboard.

C.4. Don't forget to plan for fading out the use of the game.

As discussed earlier, use of the game should be decreased, or faded, as students' behavior improves. Ways to do that are (a) decreasing how often and how long the GBG is played, (b) increasing the length of time students must go before earning points and rewards, and (c) replacing the systematic use of tangible rewards with verbal praise and more naturally occurring rewards, such as social recognition, privileges, and surprise rewards.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites and Articles

<https://www.air.org/topic/p-12-education-and-social-development/good-behavior-game>

The American Institutes for Research (AIR) website offers coaching and other resources useful for implementing the GBG. Several research case studies are also provided, where the GBG has been implemented with success in a variety of countries, including multiple diverse districts within the United States.

http://www.behaviorinschools.com/Good_Behavior_Game.pdf

This document from Behavior in Schools offers a brief overview of GBG implementation, as well as ideas for incentives and a mystery game variation. Introducing mystery rules, scoring, or incentives can add an additional element of fun, surprise, or uncertainty into the game.

Related Helping Handouts

Engagement and Motivation: Helping Handout for School

Improving Teacher–Student Relationships: Helping Handout for School

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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