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# Effects of Classwide Positive Peer “*Tootling*” to Reduce the Disruptive Classroom Behaviors of Elementary Students with and without Disabilities

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**Abstract** The purpose of this study was to examine the use of a classwide positive peer reporting intervention known as “tootling” in conjunction with a group contingency procedure to reduce the number of disruptive behaviors in a third-grade inclusive classroom. Nineteen elementary students including four students with disabilities (i.e., specific learning disabilities and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) were taught how to report their classmates’ positive behaviors using the “tootling” intervention. Results indicated that the use of the “tootling” intervention in combination with a group contingency procedure decreased students’ disruptive classroom behaviors, establishing a functional relation. Limitations of the study, implications for using tootling as a classwide positive behavior support, and future research questions are discussed.

**Keywords** Positive peer reports · Classwide positive behavior supports · Inclusion · Classroom management · Group contingency

## Introduction

Managing student misbehavior or inappropriate classroom behavior is a major challenge and concern for many classroom teachers (Anderson and Kincaid 2005; Richardson and Shupe 2003). In fact, both general and special education teachers reported that they did not feel they were adequately trained to deal with disruptive,

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defiant, and aggressive behaviors observed increasingly in younger children (Fox et al. 2002; Stormont et al. 2005). Behaviors that are distractive or disruptive occur more commonly than severe behaviors and comprise the majority of school-based disciplinary referrals (Sterling-Turner et al. 2001).

School-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS) is an approach for addressing problem behaviors in the school environment in a positive and preventative manner (Sugai and Horner 2006). SWPBS applies the characteristics of positive behavior supports (PBS), which integrates “valued outcomes, behavioral and biomedical science, empirically validated procedures, and systems change to enhance quality of life and minimize or prevent problem behaviors” (Sugai and Horner 2006, p. 246), to the whole school with expectations of preventing and changing problem behaviors. SWPBS includes three main tenets: (a) prevention, (b) theoretically sound and evidence-based practice, and (c) systems implementation. These tenets are used to promote desirable behaviors within the general school population (i.e., primary prevention), with students who are at risk for developing behavior problems (i.e., secondary prevention), and with students who have serious behavior problems (i.e., tertiary prevention; Melman et al. 2007; Sugai and Horner 2006).

Incorporated within the structure of SWPBS is the use of classroom-based PBS (Fairbanks et al. 2007). Classroom-based PBS systems facilitate the development of educational environments by promoting academic engagement and productivity, while minimizing disruptive behaviors (Hieneman et al. 2005). Classroom-based PBS also promotes positive peer behaviors, or *prosocial behaviors*, which improve the classroom milieu and assists appropriate modeling for students with problem behaviors. Encouraging prosocial behaviors can have extended effects in the classroom and for individual students. Kidron and Fleischman (2006) described prosocial behaviors as “positive actions that benefit others, prompted by empathy, moral values, and a sense of personal responsibility rather than a desire for personal gain” (p. 90). Increasing teachers’ awareness of day-to-day prosocial behaviors results in teachers praising (i.e., reinforcing) these behaviors and ideally this praise increases the probability that students will engage in these prosocial behaviors (Seymour and Stokes 1976; Stokes and Baer 1977). Although teachers may want to encourage prosocial behaviors, doing so can be difficult. For instance, if a student engages in a prosocial activity (e.g., sharing, waiting his/her turn, asking for and/or giving help), the teacher may not observe this desired behavior in action and fail to reinforce the behavior. An alternative option is to teach students to recognize and acknowledge such student behaviors. Using peers to monitor and report prosocial behaviors in the classroom can result in increasing a teacher’s awareness of these desired behaviors and increasing classmates’ awareness and reinforcement of prosocial behaviors (Cashwell et al. 2001; Skinner et al. 2000).

One method of promoting peer reporting of their classmates’ prosocial behavior is known as “tootling”. Skinner et al. (2002) developed *tootling* to enhance day-to-day social interactions among diverse students. Tootling is a term that was constructed from the word “tattling” and the expression “tooting your own horn” (Skinner et al. 2000). Tootling is like tattling, but students report their classmates’ prosocial behaviors instead of inappropriate behaviors when tootling. Students are taught to “catch” each other performing prosocial behaviors (e.g., opening doors,

giving positive verbal comments, helping peers with a difficult task, sharing materials) and write the behavior on a card, which they then submit to their teacher. In addition, employing an interdependent group contingency (i.e., the class working to earn the group reinforcer) may build cohesion among classmates as they work together to try to achieve a common goal (Slavin 1991). Cashwell et al. (2001) suggested positive effects when classmates worked together to report peers' prosocial behaviors, to reach a group-contingency, and to obtain a group reinforcer. Finally, daily publicly posted progress feedback may stimulate peers and educators to provide additional reinforcement (e.g., social praise) for prosocial behaviors (Gresham and Gresham 1982; Seymour and Stokes 1976; Van Houten 1984).

To date, only two peer reviewed studies exist evaluating tootling, with the results being somewhat mixed and neither study examining the effects of disruptive classroom behaviors. In the first study, Skinner et al. (2000) investigated whether 28 fourth-grade students would increase their reporting of peer prosocial behaviors. During the tootling condition, students wrote tootles on index cards describing peers helping classmates and at the end of the school day placed the cards in a box. An interdependent group contingency and public posting of the class' progress also were implemented. When the class reached the goal of 100 tootles, the class received a group reinforcer (i.e., extra recess time). Upon achieving the goal of 100 tootles, the goal was raised to 150 tootles. The "tootling" intervention increased the students' reporting of their peers' prosocial classroom behaviors. Although results were promising, minimal progress was demonstrated when the tootling intervention was initially implemented. Skinner et al. also noted experimental limitations due to an unplanned procedure being implemented during the study. Given these limitations, Cashwell et al. (2001) replicated the study in a classroom of second grade students. Results indicated that students increased the reporting of their peers' prosocial classroom behaviors, but that reinforcement of tootling was necessary in order to maintain high levels of tootling behavior. Unfortunately, neither Skinner et al. nor Cashwell et al. evaluated the effects of tootling on students' disruptive behaviors.

Although previous tootling research shows promise as a classwide PBS, additional research is needed (Cashwell et al. 2001; Skinner et al. 2000, 2002). The purpose of the current study was to extend the research on classwide positive peer reporting (i.e., tootling). Specifically, the effects of tootling on the reduction of inappropriate classroom behaviors were examined. In addition, the classroom teacher's opinions regarding tootling procedures as a classroom-based PBS were explored.

## Method

### Participants and Setting

Participants included 19 third-grade students (eight females) enrolled in a Title I rural elementary school within the southeast United States. Of the 19 students, 4 were identified as having a disability. Three students had specific learning

disabilities (i.e., reading) and one student had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Fourteen students were Caucasian, three were African-American and two were Hispanic. The classroom teacher was a certified elementary teacher with 3 years of teaching experience. All phases of this study occurred in the students' third-grade inclusive classroom setting.

### *Materials*

The students used 4 in by 6 in index cards to record observations of their peers' prosocial behaviors. After recording the tootle, students placed the cards in a clear container that was kept on the teacher's desk. A poster displayed in the front of the classroom provided feedback to the students regarding the daily number of "tootles" peers reported and the total number of "tootles" required to reach their collective goal.

### *Variables and Data Collection*

The dependent variable was the total number of disruptive behaviors performed by the entire class. Disruptive behaviors were defined as any student demonstrating at least one of the following behaviors: (a) talking out (i.e., audible vocally or manually produced sounds made during a time in which students should be working or listening), (b) out of seat without teacher's permission (i.e., standing, running, and walking around), and (c) engaging in any motor behavior that interfered with another student's studying (i.e., any physical contact with another student, his/her desk, or any objects on it). If a student performed two disruptive behaviors simultaneously (e.g., talking out while out of seat), the disruptive behaviors were recorded as one occurrence. However, if the student performed two disruptive behaviors in discrete succession (e.g., first talking out and then getting out of seat), the disruptive behaviors were recorded as two separate occurrences. Event recording procedures were used to record the total number of disruptive behaviors performed by the whole class during the school day from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The classroom teacher wore a bracelet made from construction paper that listed the initials of all students. The teacher made a mark next to the corresponding student's initials when a disruptive behavior was observed. The independent variable was the reporting of peers' prosocial behaviors (i.e., tootling) and group contingency.

### *Design*

An A-B-A-B research design (Barlow and Hersen 1984) was used to determine the efficacy of using the tootling intervention to decrease classroom disruptive behaviors. The A-B-A-B design allowed for sequential application, comparison effectiveness, and intra-subject replication of effects. The study included four phases: (a) baseline, (b) tootling procedures, (c) baseline, and (d) tootling procedures reinstated.

## Procedures

*Baseline* During baseline, the teacher conducted class and recorded the number of student disruptive behaviors simultaneously. If a disruptive behavior was observed, it was recorded using a check mark by the classroom teacher on her bracelet made from construction paper, which listed the initials for all of the students in the classroom. Data were collected until a stable baseline was achieved for a minimum of five school days.

*Pretraining* Prior to implementing intervention procedures, the classroom teacher conducted two 20 min group instruction sessions designed to teach students how to report their peers' prosocial behaviors (Skinner et al. 2002). During the first session, students were encouraged to define and give examples of prosocial behaviors. The teacher then explained specific types of prosocial behaviors. The teacher noted that prosocial behaviors are behaviors performed by a classmate to help another classmate during the school day. The teacher provided examples (e.g., sharing materials, complimenting others, honesty, asking for help, working quietly) and nonexamples (e.g., talking-out, out of seat, interfering with others when working). During the second session, the teacher instructed students regarding how to write examples of peer prosocial behavior on index cards. Students were taught to write the name of the classmate, how she/he helped others, and who she/he helped. Finally, the teacher prompted the students to write their own examples. Using these examples, the teachers provided corrective feedback when errors occurred and praised the students for their accurate responses. Students continued practicing writing positive prosocial peer behaviors on the index cards until all students successfully wrote three prosocial reports. Tootles were scored correct if they included (a) the student's name, (b) the peer's name, (d) what the peer did, and (d) the name of the classmate who the peer helped.

*Tootling* At the start of the school day, the teacher reviewed the training procedures and how to write tootles. The teacher also placed index cards on the students' desk and encouraged the students to write a tootle if they observed a classmate performing a prosocial behavior. Tootles were collected throughout the day prior to routine transitions, such as lunch, recess, bathroom, or exploratory class (e.g., art class) and placed in a clear container that was kept on the teacher's desk. Twenty minutes prior to school dismissal, the teacher read the tootles aloud and announced how many tootles were reported. When the class met their cumulative goal (i.e., 75 tootles that met criteria), the entire class received a predetermined group reinforcer (i.e., extra recess time). Seventy-five tootles as a class criterion was selected based on the research team and the teacher's professional judgment. If the class did not meet the goal, the total number of tootles earned was applied to the next day's total; consequently, increasing the probability of the class receiving the group reinforcer. Tootling sessions were continued until disruptive behaviors decreased by 50% of the baseline mean for three consecutive school days.

### *Interobserver Reliability and Treatment Integrity*

As a means of assessing the reliability of the teacher's observations, a graduate assistant trained in observational recording procedures collected data independently on the frequency of disruptive behavior. Reliability data were collected during a minimum of 30% of the school days within each condition. Reliability estimates for disruptive behaviors were calculated by dividing the smaller number of observed occurrences by the larger number of observed occurrences and multiplying by 100%. Mean agreement for disruptive behaviors was 92% (range 89–100%) for all student, 93% (range 92–100%) for students with disabilities, and 92% (range 86–100%) for students without disabilities.

Reliability estimates for reporting tootles also were calculated. The graduate research assistant independently scored 30% of the index cards from randomly selected school days across both tootling phases. For each tootle, interobserver agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements on reports that met the criteria by the number of agreements plus disagreements on reports that met the criteria and multiplying by 100%. Mean interobserver agreements for reporting prosocial behaviors for the third-grade class was 100%.

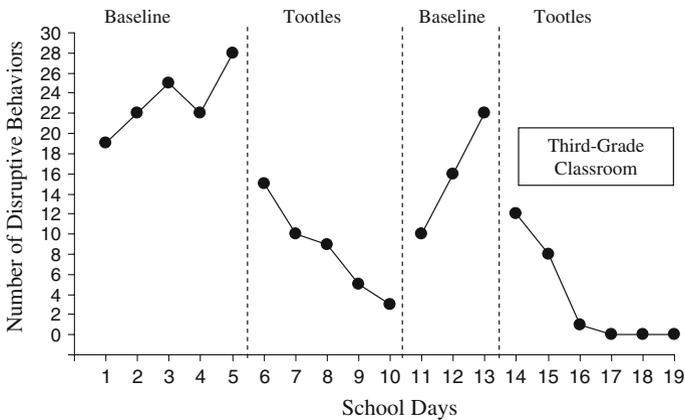
Procedural integrity measures verified the teacher's performance and were assessed throughout all phases. The second observer recorded the teacher's behavior for a minimum of 40% of the school days during each phase. Intervention steps that had to be carried out by the teacher consisted of (a) placing index cards on the students' desk for tootling; (b) encouraging students to tootle; (c) reading and announcing the tootles; and (d) delivering group reinforcers if meeting criteria. Procedural integrity was derived from dividing the number of observed behaviors by the number of planned behaviors and multiplying by 100%. The mean procedural integrity was calculated for each phase of the study. Mean procedural integrity was 99% (range 98–100%).

### *Social Validity*

The classroom teacher was asked to complete the *Intervention Rating Profile* (IRP-15; Martens et al. 1985) to assess the social acceptability and validity of tootling procedures and outcomes. The IRP-15 is a 15 item Likert-type scale that assesses general acceptability of interventions. The Likert scale ranges from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Total scores generated by the IRP-15 range from 15 to 90. Higher scores indicate stronger acceptance of interventions, and ratings above 52.5 are considered to reflect acceptability by the rater (VonBrock and Elliott 1987).

## **Results**

Figure 1 illustrates the number of disruptive behaviors engaged in by all students within each phase in time series fashion. During the baseline phase, the students engaged in a mean of 23.2 (range 19–28) disruptive behaviors daily. Upon implementation of the tootling intervention, the disruptive behaviors decreased to a



**Fig. 1** Number of disruptive behaviors in a third-grade classroom with and without the use of tootling

mean of 8.4 (range 3–15) and a descending trend was observed, with 100% non-overlapping data points. The students’ reached the class criterion of 75 tootles and received the class reinforcer three times (days 7, 9, 10). When the tootling intervention was withdrawn, an ascending trend was observed and the mean level of disruptive behavior increased to 16 (range 19–28). The reimplementation of tootling resulting in another decreasing trend and a decreased level of disruptive behavior ( $M = 3.5$ ), with zero disruptive being observed on the last 3 days of tootling. The students’ reached the class criterion and received the class reinforcer 5 out of the 6 school days (1 days 15, 16, 17, 18, 19).

The mean number of daily disruptive behaviors per student during each phase is presented in Table 1. Fourteen students were observed demonstrating disruptive behaviors during baseline and nine students averaged at least one disruptive behavior daily. Six students (students 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 14) accounted for approximately 75% of the disruptive classroom behaviors including 2 students with disabilities (students 1 and 6). Students with disabilities ( $n = 4$ ) performed 32% of the total disruptive behaviors during baseline, which was higher than the class average. During the first phase of tootling, most all students’ disruptive behaviors decreased. Only two students (students 6 and 14) averaged more than one daily disruptive behavior. Students with disabilities accounted for 26% of the total occurrences of disruptive behaviors. When the tootles’ intervention was withdrawn, most students’ disruptive behaviors increased. Thirteen students were observed demonstrating disruptive behaviors. As in baseline, the same six students (students 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 14) were responsible for 85% of the disruptive behaviors. Regardless of classification, the class daily mean of disruptive behaviors increased when the tootles intervention was withdrawn. When the tootles intervention was reintroduced, only one student (student 3) demonstrated a mean of one disruptive behavior daily. Although seven students were observed demonstrating disruptive behaviors, no disruptive behaviors were observed during the last 3 days.

**Table 1** Mean number of daily disruptive behaviors per student across phases

Students	Baseline	Tootles	Baseline	Tootles	IOR (%)
1 <sup>a</sup>	3.20	.40	2.67	0.5	92 (67–100%)
2	2.60	.60	2.00	0.5	91 (67–100%)
3	2.80	.80	3.00	1.00	86 (67–100%)
4	0	0	0	0	100
5	1.00	.60	.33	0	91 (75–100%)
6 <sup>b</sup>	3.20	1.2	2.00	.33	100
7	2.20	.80	1.67	.33	100
8	1.00	.40	.33	0	100
9	1.00	.60	.33	0	75 (0–100%)
10	.80	.40	.33	0	100
11 <sup>c</sup>	.80	.40	.33	0	100
12	.60	.20	0	0	100
13	.20	.20	0	0	100
14	3.60	1.4	2.33	.67	92 (75–100%)
15	0	0	0	.17	100
16	0	.20	.33	0	100
17	0	0	0	0	100
18 <sup>a</sup>	.20	.20	.33	0	100
19	0	0	0	0	100
All student	1.22	.44	.84	.18	92 (89–100%)
Student with disabilities	1.85	.55	1.33	.30	93 (92–100%)
Student without disabilities	1.05	.41	.71	.20	92 (86–100%)

*IOR* interobserver reliability

<sup>a</sup> Student with a learning disability (LD)

<sup>b</sup> Student with a LD and ADHD

<sup>c</sup> Student with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders (ADHD)

The classroom teacher reported that the tootling and group-oriented contingency intervention was socially valid and acceptable. The teacher marked all items as either agree or strongly agree. The teacher's IRP-15 rating was an 86, indicating that the intervention was socially valid.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of students reporting their classmates' prosocial behaviors (e.g., tootling) on the disruptive behaviors of third-grade students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom. During tootling phases, the number of disruptive classroom behaviors decreased

significantly. A functional relation was established between changes in behavioral patterns and introduction of the intervention within three different points in time (Horner et al. 2005).

This study supported previous research that students can successfully report their classmates' prosocial behaviors (Cashwell et al. 2001; Skinner et al. 2000, 2002). This study extended the research on tootling by specifically examining the immediate effects of tootling on classroom disruptive behaviors. Results suggest that when students were rewarded for reporting their classmates' prosocial behaviors, which were incompatible to disruptive behaviors, concurrent benefits were observed in the students' classroom behavior. Consequently, tootling increased the amount of positive reinforcement available for appropriate behavior and possibly decreased the amount of reinforcement available for inappropriate behavior. According to the principles of matching theory (Herrnstein 1961, 1970), an individual's rate of responding on concurrently available alternative behaviors is equal to the rate of reinforcement obtained from performing these alternatives. By reinforcing tootling, there was a change in the proportion of reinforcement available for appropriate and inappropriate behavior, which may have altered the occurrences of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Martens (1992) also suggested that according to the matching equation, choices in behavior match the relative amount of reinforcement provided for each behavior. Since the rate of reinforcement increased during the tootling phase, the matching law may explain why students performed more prosocial behaviors and decreased disruptive behaviors.

This intervention also was designed to impact student-to-student peer interactions and positive social relationships. Students acquired prosocial peer reporting relatively quickly. The third grade class displayed a zero-percent overlap of disruptive behaviors when 75 tootles were required to earn the group reinforcer. Moreover, the disruptive behavior of students both with and without disabilities decreased. Although some students' (student 6 and 14) disruptive behaviors decreased more gradually, there were no occurrences of disruptive behavior observed during the last 3 days of this study.

Although not all students reported prosocial peer behaviors initially, all students did report prosocial behaviors before the completion of the study. Tootling may have changed the student behaviors maintained through peers reinforcement by reinforcing peer tootling. As a result, positive peer pressure was observed by the teacher. Students were observed encouraging one another to perform prosocial behaviors so they could report it and earn the group contingency (e.g., extra recess time). As encouragement to perform prosocial behaviors occurred, disruptive classroom behaviors decreased. This public praise appeared to facilitate additional positive social interactions among students.

Previous studies (Cashwell et al. 2001; Skinner et al. 2000) used a higher criterion of 100 and 150 tootles before students earned the class reinforcer. Moreover, Cashwell et al. noted that students were observed reporting over 60 tootles on three different school days. Skinner (1969) defined rule-governed behavior as the occurrence of behavior under the control of the antecedent event for which immediate consequences appears to be lacking. According to Skinner, contingency-governed behavior is performed by direct contact with the

consequences. With this in mind, the selection of the class criterion of tootles (i.e., 75) was based on the research team and the teacher's professional judgment to ensure the likelihood of the class earning the reinforcer contingently. Data pertaining to how often the class received the class reinforcer was undeterminable in previous tootling studies; however, in this study the class received the class reinforcer 8 of possible 12 (75%) school days when the intervention was implemented. While the class earned the reinforcer on most intervention days, they did not earn the reinforcer all the time limiting both satiation and ratio strain effects. Additional research is required to examine the identification and administration of group contingencies and reinforcement of tootles that will maximize appropriate classroom behaviors.

This study also extended the tootling literature by investigating the social validity of the intervention. The general education teacher rated the intervention as socially acceptable. The teacher noted *strong agreement* that (a) the intervention would be an acceptable intervention for the students' problem behaviors, (b) most teachers would find this intervention appropriate, (c) the teacher would suggest the use of this intervention to other teachers, (d) this intervention was a good way to handle student behavior problems, (e) the teacher liked the procedures used in this intervention, (f) the intervention was relatively easy to implement, and (g) overall, this intervention was beneficial for the students.

Tootling meets the key criteria of classroom-based PBS. Tootling engaged all students in a common effort to reach a goal; it recognized and identified positive behaviors; students were taught to identify positive behaviors and encouraged to perform such behaviors; and it decreased inappropriate classroom behaviors. Previous researchers suggested the positive effects of PBS noting improved learning environments, reduction in problem behaviors, and improving academic achievement (e.g., Fairbanks et al. 2007; Melman et al. 2007; Sugai and Horner 2006). A number of recent studies have capitalized on the effectiveness of teacher prompts and praise in reducing mean levels of problem behaviors in high risk settings (Colvin et al. 1997; Lewis et al. 2000), and it is possible that these effects will be enhanced if differential peer praise is added. Encouraging peers to report their classmates' prosocial behaviors resulted in decreases in disruptive classroom behaviors.

Several limitations of the present study warrant caution in interpreting these findings and emphasize the need for replication. First, effects of the interdependent group-contingency could not be parceled from the use of the tootling intervention. While classroom disruptive behaviors decreased, it could be the result of the group contingency or a combination of both the contingency and tootling, as implemented in this study. The absences or fading of group contingency procedures should be explored while maintaining low levels of disruptive behaviors. This study is also limited by its small sample size. Only one third-grade inclusive classroom of 19 students' participated and only one teacher reported social validity. A range of students with disabilities was not included and the small sample size did not allow for a separate analysis, as only four students with disabilities participated. Third, this study was limited by its experimental design, as more comparative-treatment designs are warranted to enable the individual effects of the "tootling" procedures

to be evaluated. The external validity of this study should be interpreted with caution until further research is conducted.

The results of this study need to be replicated with additional teachers and with a broader range of students across a variety of ages, grade levels, and abilities. Students who are older may find public prosocial comments embarrassing; therefore, the effects of public peer reports may not be as effective, as compared to students in the lower grades. Moreover, additional teachers' and students' opinions of using tootles require investigation. Future research also should examine the establishment of group criterion levels. Additional analyzes are needed to investigate the number of tootles reported daily, the distribution of tootles among students with and without disabilities, students with and without behavioral problems, and the quality of tootles throughout the study. Reporting the specific number of daily tootles may aid in the implementation of future group contingencies. Finally, future studies should investigate the generalizability and maintenance of peer reporting in other content-area settings, as well as the effects of tootling on the amount of instructional time for teachers and the amount of task engagement for students. Nevertheless, students' behaviors improved using this classroom-based PBS of tootles and the teacher reported favorable opinions concerning the intervention procedures to improve behavioral functioning outcomes.

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