Tennessee Behavior Supports Project
at Vanderbilt University

What is noncontingent attention?

Noncontingent **attention** is a strategy when a teacher or paraprofessional provides attention at regular intervals, regardless of how a student is behaving.[1] The attention can take many forms, including a verbal statement or question, a physical gesture or touch (e.g., pat on the back or thumbs up), or a facial expression (e.g., smile).[2]

When is noncontingent attention most effective?

Noncontingent attention is most helpful for students with attention-motivated behaviors.[3] While the strategy requires careful planning at first, when used correctly, it can effectively reduce problem behavior.[4] Providing noncontingent attention to the student may decrease his or her need to seek teacher attention by acting out.[5] As a result, problem behavior decreases.[6]

How do I use noncontingent attention in my classroom?

Let's imagine there is a student in your class who is engaging in disruptive behavior. You think that the behavior is motivated by gaining your attention. You've heard of noncontingent attention and decide to give it a try. Using noncontingent attention requires some planning prior to implementation. The following table outlines the steps necessary to implement this strategy as well as an applied example to illustrate each step.

1. **Identify the student's problem behavior**
Identify a target behavior that the student frequently demonstrates. Examples include blurting out answers or getting out of seat without permission.
Example: Harry seems motivated by my attention. For example, he often gets out of seat at inappropriate times to show me his work. His target behavior will be "leaving seat without permission."
2. **Collect data on problem behavior**
Use a simple method for collecting data on the number of times problem behavior occurs: • Tally behaviors on a post-it. • Put paper clips in your pocket. When problem behavior occurs, switch one clip to the other pocket. Record the number of paper clips you moved.
Example: I will use the post-it method because it seems like it won't interfere with my teaching. Every time Harry leaves his seat without permission to ask me questions, I will mark a tally on the post-it.

3. Determine a schedule of noncontingent attention

- Divide the total time of the observation by the total count of problem behavior. This is an estimate of how often the problem behavior happens (e.g., every 10 minutes).
- Then, choose a schedule that is slightly more frequent than the time you calculated. For example, if problem behavior occurs every 10 minutes, deliver attention every 8 minutes.

Example: During a 60-minute class period, Harry left his seat 10 times. I calculate: 60 ÷ 10 = 6. This means that about every 6 minutes, Harry leaves his seat.

I will provide Harry attention every 5 minutes.

4. Set a timing device

Set an interval timer or a MotivAider (a portable vibrating timer) to indicate when the interval is complete.

Example: I will set a repeating timer to vibrate once every 5 minutes on my phone.

5. Deliver attention

Direct attention to the student each time the timer goes off. The attention should be neutral or positive, but not a reprimand (see "Examples and Non-Examples" below).

Example: Every time the timer goes off, I will provide noncontingent attention to Harry. For example, I may pat him on the back or I may make eye contact and smile at him from the front of the room.

6. Collect data on problem behavior to determine next steps

Collect data on the presence of problem behavior after starting the strategy. Analyze the following information to determine next steps:

- If there is a slight decrease in problem behavior, continue the strategy.
- If there is no decrease in problem behavior, examine if all procedures are correctly in place or if an increase in schedule is required.
- If data demonstrate a steady and significant reduction in problem behavior over time, consider reducing the schedule of noncontingent attention that you are providing.

Example: After four weeks, data indicate that Harry's problem behavior has consistently reduced to an average of 5 occurrences per 60-minute class period. I decide to reduce the schedule of noncontingent attention. I calculate: 60 ÷ 5 = 12. This means that about every 12 minutes, Harry leaves his seat.

I will provide Harry attention every 10 minutes and continue to collect data on problem behavior to determine next steps.

Examples and Non-Examples

Examples and **non-examples** of ways to deliver noncontingent attention are provided below. Remember, noncontingent attention includes providing positive or neutral statements, physical touch, gestures, or facial expressions. Reprimands should be avoided.

Examples of noncontingent attention

- Smiling at the student and patting his or her back.
- Saying, "Cool new shoes!"
- Directing "thumbs up" at the student.
- Saying, "Hope you had a nice weekend, Bianca!"
- Saying, "You already completed the first five problems. Are you feeling confident with this material?"

Non-examples of noncontingent attention

- Giving a "teacher-look."
- Saying, "Please stop distracting others, John."
- Saying, "Keep your eyes on your own paper."
- Ignoring the student.
- Shaking your head "no" at the student.

Helpful Tips for Classroom Use:

- Choose students whose behavior is maintained by **any** teacher attention. For example, the student does not discriminate between attention for getting in trouble and praise.
- When possible, provide minimal attention to low-risk problem behaviors. Low-risk problem behaviors include behaviors that impede learning (e.g., calling out, making distracting noises, etc.), but differ from high-risk problem behaviors because they do not cause an immediate threat to the safety of self or others.[7] Rather than providing attention for the inappropriate behavior (e.g., redirect or a "teacher look") use the noncontingent attention schedule instead. For more information, see the "Minimal Attention" tip sheet.
- Identify a frequent enough schedule of noncontingent attention so that the student does not engage in the undesired behavior to gain your attention.

For Further Reading

http://theautismhelper.com/attention-behaviors-noncontingent-attention/

www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/challenging-students/breaking-attention-seeking-habit-power-random-positive

Endnotes

[1]Banda, D. R. & Sokolosky, S. (2012). Effectiveness of noncontingent attention to decrease attention-maintained disruptive behaviors in the general education classroom. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy, 34*, 130-140.

[2]*Ibid.*

[3]Banda & Sokolosky (2012)

[4]Doughty, S. S. & Anderson, C. M. (2006). Effects of noncontingent reinforcement and functional communication training on problem behavior and mands. *Education and Treatment of Children, 29*, 23-50.

[5]Banda & Sokolosky (2012)

[6]Doughty, S. S. & Anderson, C. M. (2006)

[7]Banda & Sokolosky (2012)