Progressive Consequences — Do They Work?
By Randy Sprick

"Many teachers in our school use a classroom management plan in which each student has a set of colored cards contained in a pocket chart located in a prominent place in the classroom. When a student misbehaves, a card is pulled from his or her pocket. Each card is a different color and represents a progression of consequences such as, when the green card is pulled it serves as a warning, when the yellow card is pulled the student loses recess, when the orange card is pulled it is a parental contact, and if the red card is pulled the student is sent to the office. What do you think about this kind of system?"

This is a question educators often ask in my workshops, so I thought it might be helpful to publish an answer.

When evaluating any disciplinary intervention for use in your classroom, I always begin by asking myself two questions.

First, “Does the intervention treat children with dignity and respect?” If the answer to that question is no, reject the intervention immediately.

In this case, I believe it is entirely possible for a teacher to assign progressively more serious consequences and do it in a manner that is respectful.

Which brings us to the next question—is the intervention working? Is it helping in your efforts to motivate students to be responsible and actively engaged in instruction?

If the answer is yes, then you have a disciplinary plan. If it isn’t broken, don’t try to fix it! However, if the answer is no...

In this case, I believe the answer could easily be no. It would be very difficult for a teacher to be consistent in handing out progressive penalties, especially if that teacher is with the same children for the entire day. For a middle or high school teacher, the system probably works better. For an
elementary teacher, it would be almost impossible. Let me show you what I mean...

Johnny absentmindedly begins to tap his pencil on his desk. He is not doing this purposefully to cause trouble. It’s a habit that he is virtually unaware of. However, his action is disruptive to the lesson. The teacher issues a warning and pulls his green card. Johnny stops immediately.

Twenty minutes later, Johnny starts up again. The teacher, who genuinely likes Johnny, pulls his yellow card. Now, he’s lost his recess. But, he does stop the misbehavior.

Ten minutes go by—Johnny starts up again. What does the teacher do now? Pull the orange card and call his parents. What if he taps his pencil another time? Would the teacher send him to the office?

At this point, the misbehavior is too trivial for the severity of the consequence. Yet, that is the progression. To be consistent, the teacher should pull the orange card. But, she (or he) doesn’t really want to send Johnny to the office for tapping his pencil four times. So instead, she looks him straight in the eye and says firmly, “Don’t make me pull this card!”—a phrase that can only lead Johnny into thinking that he has the power to “make” his teacher do something she doesn’t want to do. Or even worse, she says, “I really don’t want to pull this card,” leading Johnny to wonder what she does want to do and to continue the misbehavior just to find out.

The problem inherent in a progressive consequences system is that all misbehavior is addressed with the same increasingly severe penalties. However, misbehaviors are not equivalent. Tapping a pencil is not the same as pushing someone. If the government used such a system, we could easily end up in jail for parking tickets! Fortunately for most of us, the government puts parking tickets on a different plane than speeding tickets or DUIs, and treats us accordingly.

**Making Progressive Consequences Work**

To make a progressive consequences system work better, consider following the government’s example—recognize that misbehavior can be minor or serious and respond appropriately.

In this case, set up a parallel system for misbehaviors. On one side are the “speeding ticket” misbehaviors. Those are the ones that will receive progressive consequences. On the other side are the “parking ticket”
misbehaviors. Those will be treated with consequences that you hold on the same level.

For instance, tapping a pencil is a minor misbehavior. A teacher might simply choose to take time from the student. For instance, every time Johnny taps his pencil, he loses 15 seconds on the computer. If Johnny misbehaves 12 times, he is corrected 12 times but still has only lost three minutes of computer time. If you get 12 parking tickets, it does not bankrupt you, but is annoying enough that you become more likely to put money in the meter when you park downtown. The point is, you are not escalating the punishment over some trivial offense, which allows you to be calm and consistent in correcting the misbehavior every time it occurs.

It is important before you implement to clearly and explicitly teach your students what to expect—which misbehaviors will merit progressive consequences, which will merit non-progressive consequences, and what those consequences will be.

Using Non-Progressive Consequences

On the other hand, you might consider implementing a non-progressive system for all misbehavior. In this system, you will identify four categories of misbehavior.

First, misbehavior that receives no consequences at all, just reminders—this might be the case in kindergarten, for instance. Your young pupils will simply forget that they are not supposed to shout out an answer. No need to issue a consequence when a simple reminder will do.

Second, misbehavior that receives minor consequences—like Johnny with his pencil. This category is like the parking tickets and consequences remain on the same level. Every time Johnny taps, he owes 15 seconds.

For most teachers, these two categories will take care of 90-95 percent of the misbehaviors that occur. The final two categories deal with the other 5-10 percent.

Third, more serious misbehavior that earns more serious consequences—these include displays of disrespect, use of bad language, and so forth. For these actions, you can devise a menu of consequences that all of your students know about and understand. When any of these misbehaviors occur, you select one of the consequences from the menu—for example, time owed, time out, detention, parental contact, or parent conference.
Fourth, those misbehaviors that violate your school’s code of conduct or involve physical or emotional violence—for these you issue the ultimate consequence (office referral, parental notification, etc.).

Once again, you must make sure that your students understand your system. Teach them exactly what consequences apply to which behaviors.

This system allows for some flexibility between classrooms. Not every teacher needs to use the same classification—with one exception. Consequences for category four misbehaviors should be consistently implemented throughout the entire school.