

# "GOTCHA!"

## Twenty-Five Behavior Traps Guaranteed to Extend Your Students' Academic and Social Skills

*Describes effective natural reinforcers that teachers can use in the classroom to help students develop positive and constructive knowledge and skills*

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**L**ike many fifth graders struggling with reading and math, Carlos experiences school as tedious and unrewarding. With few friends of his own, Carlos finds that even recess offers little reprieve. But he does find solace in his baseball cards, often studying, sorting, and playing with them in class. His teacher, Ms. Greene, long ago lost count of the number of times she had to stop an instructional activity to separate Carlos and his beloved baseball cards. Then one day, when she approached Carlos' desk to confiscate his cards in the middle of a lesson on alphabetization, Ms. Greene discovered that Carlos had already alphabetized all the left-handed pitchers in the National League! Being the insightful and ever-creative teacher that she is, Ms. Greene realized she'd found the secret to sparking Carlos' academic development.

Carlos was both astonished and thrilled to learn that Ms. Greene not only let him keep his baseball cards at his desk, but also encouraged him to "play with them" during class. Before long, Ms. Greene had incorporated baseball cards into learning activities across the curriculum. In math, Carlos calculated averages; in geography, he located the hometown of every major leaguer born in his

state; and in language arts, he wrote letters to his favorite players requesting an autographed photo. Carlos began to make significant gains academically, and an improvement in his attitude about school was also apparent.

But school became really fun for Carlos when some of his classmates began to take an interest in his knowledge of baseball cards and all the wonderful things you could do with them. Ms. Greene helped Carlos form a classroom Baseball Card Club, giving him and his new friends opportunities to develop and practice new social skills as they responded to their teacher's challenge to think of new ways to integrate cards into the curriculum.

How did all these dramatic and wonderful changes in Carlos occur? Skills that Carlos had not acquired before were now being practiced, mastered, and used in a wide variety of meaningful ways. Much to both his and his teacher's delight, Carlos had been ensnared by a "behavior trap."

### What Is a Behavior Trap?

Baer and Wolf (1970) were the first to use the term *behavioral trap* in describing how natural contingencies of reinforcement operate to promote

and maintain generalized behavior changes. They compared the operation of a behavior trap to that of the common household mousetrap:

Consider, for example, that very familiar model, the mouse trap. A mouse trap is an environment designed to accomplish massive behavior modification in a mouse. Note that this modification has thorough generality: the change in behavior accomplished by the trap will be uniform in all environments, it will extend to all of the mouse's behaviors, and it will last indefinitely into the future. Furthermore, a mouse trap allows a great amount of behavioral change to be accomplished by a relatively slight amount of behavioral control. A householder without a trap can, of course, still kill a mouse. He can wait patiently outside the mouse's hole, grab the mouse faster than the mouse can avoid him, and then apply various forms of force to the unfortunate animal to accomplish the behavioral change desired. But this performance requires a great deal of competence: vast patience, supercoordination, extreme manual dexterity, and a well-suppressed squeamishness. By contrast, a



householder with a trap need very few accomplishments: If he can merely apply the cheese and then leave the trap where the mouse is likely to smell that cheese, in effect he has guaranteed general(ized) change in the mouse's future behavior.

The essence of a trap, in behavioral terms, is that *only a relatively simple response is necessary to enter the trap, yet once entered, the trap cannot be resisted in creating general behavior change*. For the mouse, the entry response is merely to smell the cheese. Everything proceeds from there almost automatically: The householder need not have more control over the mouse's behavior than to get him to smell the cheese, yet he accomplishes thorough change in behavior. (Baer & Wolf, 1970, p. 321, emphasis added)

Effective behavior traps have four essential features: (1) They are "baited" with powerful, virtually irresistible reinforcers that "lure" the student to the trap. (2) Only a small, easy-to-perform response that is already in the student's repertoire is necessary to enter the trap. (3) Once the student is inside the trap, inter-related contingencies of reinforcement motivate the student to acquire, extend, and maintain targeted academic and/or social skills (Kohler & Greenwood, 1986). (4) They can remain effective over a long period of time because the student shows relatively few, if any, satiation effects.

Behavior traps are all around us. And it's not just school children who get trapped. Behavior traps are particularly evident in each of our lives in the activities we "just can't get (or do) enough of." Consider the case of the "reluctant bowler":

A young man is persuaded to fill in as a substitute for a friend's bowling team. He has always regarded bowling as uncool, an activity for persons not like himself. And bowling looks so easy on television that he does not see how it can be considered a real sport. Nevertheless, he is persuaded to go, just to help out this one time. During the evening he finds out that bowling is not nearly so easy

as he has always thought (he has a history of being reinforced by athletic challenges) and also that some very nice people whom he would like to get to know are avid bowlers (i.e., it is a mixed doubles league). Within a week he has purchased a custom-fitted bowling ball, a bag, and shoes; has twice practiced on his own; and has signed up for the next league season. (Heward, 1987, p. 571)

This example illustrates the fundamental nature of behavior traps: easy to enter and difficult to exit. Behavior traps can also be maladaptive, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, and juvenile delinquency. The everyday term *vicious circle* refers to the natural contingencies of reinforcement that operate in destructive behavior traps. Teachers, however, can learn to build and set behavior traps that function as "success circles" to help students develop positive, constructive knowledge and skills.

### Setting Up a Behavior Trap

Creating and using behavior traps involves five steps:

1. Identify Your Prey.
2. Find Some Powerful Bait.
3. Set the Trap.
4. Maintain Your Trap Line.
5. Appraise Your Catch.

#### Step 1: Identify Your Prey

The most effective and efficient trappers know exactly the kind of "catch" they are after and set prey-specific trap lines. The first step in creating a classroom behavior trap is to decide what kind of academic or social skills you are after. Many students, especially those with special learning needs, have numerous skill deficits, and any single behavior trap—no matter how powerful—is not likely to change them all.

Considerations that should go into determining which knowledge and skill areas to target for trapping should include the following:

1. In which area does the student most need help? Use the power of a behavior trap for those academic or social skills in which the student needs the most assistance.

2. Are you trapping for relevant prey? Remember the "relevance of behavior rule" (Allyon & Azrin, 1968), and target only knowledge and skills that will contact naturally existing contingencies of reinforcement after you are no longer minding the trap—in other words, functional skills that are or will be frequently demanded and clearly useful in students' present and future environments after you are no longer minding the trap.

3. Are you targeting behaviors that lend themselves to frequent practice opportunities? Students learn faster and better when they receive frequent opportunities to actively practice and use new skills and knowledge (Heward, 1994). There is little benefit in designing an elaborate trap that can only be used once every 2 or 3 weeks.

4. Are you beginning with "small game" and gradually and systematically working your way up to larger prey? When Ms. Greene discovered that Carlos had already alphabetized some of his baseball cards, she properly resisted the temptation of immediately requiring him to produce a large, multicomponent language arts assignment with the cards. Following Ms. Greene's example, use your trap for smaller prey at first, and then gradually lure the bigger catch later.

#### Step 2: Find Some Powerful Bait

Once the target skills have been identified, the teacher is ready to find some good bait. Any trap is only as effective as the bait with which it is set. Make an inventory of your students' interests with the intention of using their most zealous preoccupation as irresistible trap bait, like the most delicious cheese for the mousetrap. How do you determine those interests? Perhaps ironically, discovering the most effective bait requires the least amount of searching.

The best bait is usually the most obvious. Shakela, for example, just loves horse. She constantly talks about horses, always chooses books about horses, and draws pictures of horses. Shakela has horse cut-outs pasted on her notebooks, horse patches sewn to her jacket, and a horse pendant hanging around her neck. Her teacher will have no difficulty determining what to use as bait for Shakela's trap. It is when students do not make their interests so apparent that the teacher will need to search.



A topic or activity is likely to be effective as bait to the degree that a student (a) engages in or expresses interest in it, (b) spends time on it, and (c) relates to it in a variety of ways. How often does Brian talk about motorcycles? How much time in one sitting does he spend looking at books about motorcycles? Does he draw pictures of motorcycles? Are all of his written compositions about motorcycles, regardless of the content of the day's story starter? Does he collect or make model motorcycles? Does he mimic the sounds of a motorcycle while moving about the classroom? If the answers to these questions are "Several times each day," "hours at a time if we let him," "yes, yes, yes, and yes," then Brian will almost certainly fall "victim" to a well-designed behavior trap baited with all manner of motorcycle stuff.

Another important indicator of effective bait is the student's history of involvement with the activity or topic. If Brian has been interested in motorcycles for as long as anyone can remember, they will almost certainly prove to be excellent bait. If his love affair with motorcycles is relatively recent, however, motorcycle bait may be ineffective once the novelty wears off.

Some specific tactics for discovering a student's interests:

- Ask the student who his or her heroes are. They might be athletes, TV stars, cartoon characters, musicians, or comic book heroes. Children's idols make particularly tasty trap bait.
- Ask the student what she or he is "really into." These interests might include computer games, cooking, building model cars, playing basketball, collecting insects, or drawing pictures.
- Ask the student's parents and peers if there are any activities that the student spends most his or her free time doing.
- Observe the student's disruptive behaviors for the possibility of turning them into positive traps (like Carlos's baseball cards). Some undesirable behaviors, such as passing notes or throwing paper airplanes in class, can be used as bait for a trap and turned into positive learning experiences.
- Provide a variety of activities for students to sample in order to see if

they develop a strong interest. Like the young man who had never gone bowling before but was quickly "hooked" once he had the experience, a student given the opportunity to read stories to the kindergarten class or to take Polaroid pictures and write captions for a classroom scrapbook might develop a strong enough interest so that those activities can function as effective bait.

It is possible (in fact, quite often likely) that the most powerful bait available—the student's most preferred mania—is far from the teacher's first choice. Within the limits of legal, ethical, and moral considerations, however, the teacher should resist placing value judgments on the student's interests. Curtis, for example, believes that Dennis Rodman is the coolest guy in the world, and if given the chance, he would read about his hero all morning long. Although his teacher may think Curtis could use a better role model than the roughhouse basketball player, he should realize and appreciate that Mr. Rodman is helping Curtis practice the target skill of reading. Understandably, most teachers would prefer that their students read *The Prince and the Pauper* rather than a *Spiderman* comic book. But without the reading skills they acquire with the help of their favorite comic book superheroes, some students may never be capable of reading "good literature."

### Step 3: Set the Trap

Once some powerful bait has been selected, use it to set the trap. No trap will be effective unless it is placed within "the path" of its intended prey. Like the householder with his or her mousetrap, the teacher must bait and set a behavior trap so the student can't help but "smell the cheese." Remember too: Behavior traps must be easy to enter. Be sure to place enough good, fresh bait at the mouth of the trap to lure the student in. Using stale bait or not enough bait will be ineffective (e.g., a two-paragraph newspaper story about Dennis Rodman that Curtis has already read three times). Don't "give away the store," either. Curtis may just have to sit down during reading to see the first part of a story, but to

learn all the new "dope" on his hero, he may need to write and/or answer questions about the first part.

Don't make it hard for the student to find or discover the trap. Place it "right under his nose."

Some possible strategies for setting behavior traps are as follows:

- Form a classroom club. Clubs provide many possibilities for learning and practicing academic and social skills. For example, a student who is lured into a cooking club soon finds himself practicing a wide range of academic skills: reading recipes, following directions, measuring volume, adding and multiplying fractions, and discovering science concepts. His social skills also get a good workout as he and the members of his cooking "team" must learn to cooperate, negotiate, and be polite to one another while developing menu plans.
- Get help from student confederates. Ask popular students to include the target student in their group. They are usually more than willing to help just to get their teacher's approval. If the social reinforcement is not enough to initiate the invitation, tangible reinforcement should be considered, then gradually faded out. If this seems a little dubious ethically, focus on the outcome. Once the target student is accepted into a reinforcing peer group trap that will extend his social skills and make the time he spends in school much more pleasant, the potential ethical concern becomes irrelevant.
- Give the student a job that matches her interests with academic target skills. For example, the classroom tattler might be given the role of classroom recorder, writing and reporting a record of the good things other students are doing. This would be an effective way to develop and extend the student's writing and speaking skills.
- Get help from other teachers and other members of the community. Target students can be teachers' helpers, provide assistance in an early childhood or special education class, or join a community service group to help others who are less fortunate. Outside school supports are important sources of behavior traps.



#### **Step 4: Maintain Your Trap Line**

Don't overwork your trap. To ensure success, expect and be pleased with small prey at first, gradually expecting more as you progressively discover the capability of your trap. It is very important to start small. Introduce skills with which the student has experienced some success previously, and then gradually build on those skills. Do not bombard the student, or the natural reinforcer will lose its effect. Even though Nina is crazy about insects, making her write a 10-page research report on the topic—especially if her research and writing skills are not well developed—could destroy the power of insects as good bait. Instead, her teacher might start by simply having her classify insects by their appearance, then perhaps go on to labeling them, writing brief descriptions about her favorite "bugs," and so on. Eventually, Nina might very well be producing 10-page reports with all the detail of an experienced entomologist, but only if her teacher uses the insect trap wisely and judiciously. If Nina begins to express distaste for the skills expected, her teacher is overworking the trap and should probably back off.

Remember that fresh bait is requisite to an effective trap line. Stale bait is a weak and ineffective lure. Stay on the look-out for new activities, new materials, and new skills that will prevent satiation.

Finally, give the trap a rest periodically; traps left out in the elements eventually corrode and must be discarded. Do not wait until the student loses her enthusiasm before bringing the trap inside, away from the elements. By keeping a student away from his or her obsession every now and then, the teacher creates a little deprivation that will help keep the trap in good working order.

#### **Step 5: Appraise Your Catch**

Look for evidence that you've captured the right prey: noticeable changes in the student's performance and use of the targeted skills. Regular and direct assessments of the target skill will help you decide if your catch is "big enough to keep." When a trap proves ineffective, try to ascertain why it is not working and make the necessary adjustments. You may also wish to create and set out another trap. Whenever a trap yields a sub-

stantial catch, both teacher and student should celebrate! Continue to maintain and extend a successful trap's operation. You may eventually find that the student becomes so adept with his or her new skills, the trap may no longer be necessary.

### **Twenty-Five Practical Behavior Traps**

Theoretically, a student can be caught in as many different behavior traps as opportunity permits. Although behavior traps are truly individualized, what serves as effective bait for one student often catches some additional prey as well because many of our students share the same macroculture. The following specific behavior traps are organized into five categories: hero traps, fetish traps, classroom club traps, school and community resource traps, and turning-around-behaviors-that-annoy-you traps.

#### **Hero Traps**

Many children have heroes. These real or fictitious people are often promoted by our culture through the media, which provides many resources for teachers to use. Hero traps share in common many of the same potential activities that serve to maintain and extend academic and social skills. Begin by finding as many books, magazines, posters, stickers, CDs, videos, audiotapes, and/or computer games as you can find to lure the student. Six hero traps are the musician trap, the famous athlete trap, the cartoon character trap, the TV trap, the movie star trap, and the comic book trap. The following are suggestions for student activities using hero traps.

1. *Language arts.* Students can write letters to the hero or fan club asking for signed photographs; write scripts or stories using the heroes as characters; pretend to interview the heroes; write titles of the heroes' songs, movies, or TV shows in alphabetical order; classify the heroes' movies, songs, and so forth; and read about their heroes.

2. *Math.* Students can use promotional cups from fast-food restaurants to practice regrouping or classifying; do math drill games featuring the their heroes; use averaging, counting, fractions, or statistics for recording

things like home runs, batting averages, foul shots, rebounds, or touchdowns by favorite athletes; listen to songs by musician heroes and record the durations, then use these numbers for adding, subtracting, multiplying, dividing, and/or averaging; find out how much money their heroes make per year and divide it into dollars per month, week, day, or hour; and create a budget using the hero's salary.

3. *Curriculum content areas.* Students can find the geographic location of the hero's birthplace, concert tours, or sport schedule; make a time line of the hero's career; and find information about the hero's place of birth.

#### **Fetish Traps**

The word *fetish* usually evokes unsavory images. After all, the dictionary tells us that a fetish is "an abnormally obsessive preoccupation or attachment; a fixation" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1992). But not all fetishes are bad! A fetish trap can be set around just about any topic or activity with which a student is preoccupied. Three examples are the motorcycle trap, the race car trap, and the horse trap. Students can engage in fetish trap activities in the following areas:

1. *Language arts.* Students can draw pictures and write stories, research the topic, give oral reports, write descriptions, alphabetize the different types, and read about the fetish of their choice.

2. *Math.* Students can classify types, compare prices, compare speeds, and use prices and speeds as numbers for any basic math operation.

3. *Curriculum content areas.* Students can research the history of the fetish (e.g., the winners of the Kentucky Derby for the past 10 years); build on physical science concepts such as momentum, stopping distance, friction, and wheels and axles; and find geographic locations (e.g., motorcycles from Japan, England, and Germany).

#### **Classroom Club Traps**

Classroom club traps are particularly effective for building social skills such as negotiating, beginning and ending conversations, and asking for



and offering help. Possible academic activities will vary for each club. Nine classroom club traps are described below.

1. *Gameboy® club trap.* Students can explain how to play, write directions, classify games, alphabetize games, share strategies, and graph scores.

2. *Cooking club trap.* Students can read and follow directions, measure, apply science concepts, classify and alphabetize recipes for a club cookbook, conduct an opinion survey on foods cooked, and compare temperatures and cooking times.

3. *Model building club trap.* Students can read and follow directions, measure, compare lengths and widths, estimate distances and time needed to build, and use numerical data for graphing.

4. *Sports team trap.* Students can keep score; graph outcomes of a series of games; measure time duration of games; and practice speed, endurance, strength, and dexterity.

5. *Science club trap.* Students can collect rocks, shells, leaves, or insects; classify items; measure and weigh items; research a topic of interest and write reports; and give oral presentations.

6. *Computer club trap.* Students can do math drills, choose their own adventure reading, write stories, problem solve with simulations, and create graphics (the academic skills for computer club activities are limited only by the software).

7. *Classroom newsletter club trap.* Students can conduct interviews, write book and movie reviews, report on athletic events, report on classroom events, make illustrations, write captions, write riddles, design advertisements, and design layout.

8. *Classroom store club trap.* Students can inventory supplies, count money, calculate change, write purchase orders, calculate profits and/or losses, and be cordial when serving customers.

9. *Baseball card club trap.* Students can find geographic locations of teams and players, alphabetize players' names, classify by positions or teams, calculate averages, and compare and interpret statistics.

## School and Community Resource Traps

Four examples of school and community traps and their corresponding activities are as follows:

1. *Teacher's helper trap.* Students can read aloud to younger children, peer tutor younger children, correct papers, measure and cut bulletin board items, count field trip money, sort students' papers, and proofread students' papers.

2. *Band or chorus trap.* Students can practice social skills, read music and/or lyrics, and practice organization skills (like coming on time with appropriate materials).

3. *Safety patrol trap.* Students can practice social skills, write a daily log or journal of experiences, and count and graph times when intervening is necessary.

4. *Community service trap.* Students can practice social skills, find opportunities for volunteer work, and develop the skills necessary for performing the type of service they will be providing.

## Turning-Around-Behaviors-That-Annoy-You Traps

Three behavior traps in this category are the paper airplane trap, the note-passing trap, and the tattle-tail trap. The secret to the effectiveness of these traps is having a controlled time and procedure in which the usually annoying and inappropriate behaviors can be used positively.

1. *Paper airplane trap.* Students can measure flight distances, experiment to find out which design is best for each kind of flight, write step-by-step directions for making paper airplanes, explain to other students how to make paper airplanes, and read and follow directions from books about making various airplane designs.

2. *Note-passing trap.* Students can write notes to peers, read notes from peers, and write responses to peers.

3. *Tattle-tail trap.* Students can write about the positive behaviors of other students, keep an ongoing record of classroom events, and read recorded observations to the class at the end of each day or week.

## Conclusion

What do baseball cards, horses, motorcycles, Dennis Rodman, and bugs have in common? Although not likely to appear on many teachers' lists of necessary instructional materials, for Carlos, Shakela, Brian, Curtis, and Nina, these seemingly unrelated entities provided the motivation to learn and practice important skills. Once caught, these students showed little interest in escaping the traps their teachers had set for them. They did, however, display a great deal more interest in and enjoyment of school. ■

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