



## Rethinking the Stoplight System

Behavior management tools, such as the stoplight or other chart systems, are frequently used in preschool and elementary classrooms. In the Stoplight Behavior Management System, each child starts the day on green, but depending on behavior can be moved to yellow and then to red, with negative consequences. They're seen as effective ways to motivate children to follow classroom procedures and to reduce problem behaviors. What's not to like?

To answer that, imagine that your boss posts a chart in the lunch room where he or she moves you up or down the chart depending on how well you performed various tasks, whether you were late for a meeting, or made a small error in an important email. And then imagine that if you did something wrong, your lunch break was shortened or your pay docked. Would you feel respected or shamed, cared for or publicly embarrassed?



### Potential problems with the stoplight or other behavior management charts:

- They depend on external rather than internal motivation.
- They punish bad behavior rather than reinforce good behavior.

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- They are public and tell everyone—other children and adults alike—that the child has misbehaved.
- They increase a child's sense of shame which over time can have anti-social effects.
- They can become self-fulfilling prophecies; once the child has landed on red for the day, for example, there is little motivation to try to make good behavior choices for the rest of the day.

### Alternatives approaches:

- Help children learn to manage their own behavior by clearly describing the steps to accomplishing the desired behavior, visually depicting the behavior with photographs or drawings, creating a checklist the child can use to show his or own progress, and providing positive attention for accomplishing the behavior.
- Provide logical consequences; for example, when the child refuses to wash hands before snack, offer the choice to wash hands or do something else while the other children have a snack.
- Generously praise what the child is doing right rather than focus on what the child is doing wrong.

## R E S O U R C E S

*Teaching Your Child to: Cooperate With Requests.*

The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.

<http://bit.ly/2llMKdN>

*Beyond the Stoplight: sharing resources to create caring classroom communities for all children.* [www.beyondthestoplight.com](http://www.beyondthestoplight.com)

Programs and families can contact the program leadership directly at [PAIECMH@pakeys.org](mailto:PAIECMH@pakeys.org) with questions or concerns.

