



How to: Manage Group Behaviors With the Element of Surprise: The Mystery Motivator

Description. Teachers often seek techniques to manage classroom behaviors that are both effective and feasible. The Mystery Motivator (MM) is an intervention that rewards students for appropriate behaviors (Moore et al., 1994; Rhode, Jenson, & Reavis, 1992). It includes two elements of uncertainty that give this intervention added power: (1) whether or not MM is in effect on a given day; and (2) what reward will be given when earned. The classwide version of the intervention described here (Kowalewicz & Coffee, 2014) is an interdependent group contingency: that is, all students contribute toward a successful session and rewards are delivered to the entire group.

Preparation: To prepare the Mystery Motivator group intervention, the teacher:

1. **decides when to schedule the intervention.** The Mystery Motivator can be played daily. However, the teacher will want to select MM during a group instructional activity (e.g., large-group instruction; independent seatwork) when behaviors are most challenging. It is also recommended that daily MM sessions not exceed 40 minutes or so to maintain student motivation.
2. **defines target and replacement behaviors.** The instructor defines 2-4 behaviors that are problematic and targeted to be reduced ('target/problem behaviors'). Target/problem-behavior examples are 'talking during instruction' and 'out of seat'. The teacher then matches each target/problem behavior with an appropriate replacement behavior: e.g., 'raises hand to be recognized before talking'; 'sitting up straight and facing the teacher'.
3. **calculates a behavior cut-off.** Students earn the chance for a Mystery Motivator reward in a session only when the total number of target/problem behaviors falls below an instructor-defined cut-off. The teacher can select any cut-off. However, a good way to determine a reasonable cut-off value is for the instructor to collect baseline data--keeping a tally across 2-3 days of the number of target/problem behaviors observed during the activity when MM is to be scheduled. Then the instructor can cut that baseline figure in half to come up with a realistic initial cut-off.

For example, a teacher who intends to use MM during a 40-minute large-group social studies period collects baseline data and finds that, on average, the class displays 12 target/problem behaviors. When MM begins, the teacher sets the cut-off for earning a chance for a MM reward at 6 or fewer problem behaviors. NOTE: As students show success with MM, the teacher will want gradually to lower this cut-off to reflect the improved behaviors.

4. **makes a poster of replacement behaviors.** The teacher writes the replacement behaviors on a poster visible to all students. Replacement behaviors are phrased in positive terms.
5. **creates the reward envelope.** The instructor identifies a range of motivating rewards that the class can earn for winning the Mystery Motivator, such as tangible (e.g., pencils, popcorn) and/or intangible (e.g., 5 minutes of additional free time) reinforcers. The teacher writes down each reward idea on a separate index card, places all cards into a manila reward envelope, and draws a large question-mark (?) on the outside of the envelope.
6. **formats the Mystery Motivator calendar.** The teacher prepares the Mystery Motivator calendar. Using a weekly or monthly calendar format, the instructor randomly selects 60 percent of the instructional days as dates



when the Mystery Motivator can be earned. The teacher writes a large 'M' on those Mystery Motivator days. The instructor then covers ALL instructional days on the calendar with blank post-it notes large enough to completely cover the dates and hide any letters underneath. NOTE: When students show success with this intervention, future calendars can have the percentage of Mystery Motivator dates reduced to 50 percent or even lower.

Procedure: Whenever the Mystery Motivator intervention is being used, the teacher:

1. **announces the Mystery Motivator game.** The teacher informs the class that the MM intervention is in effect, points to the posted replacement behaviors, and urges students to show appropriate behaviors.
2. **records target/problem behaviors.** During the MM session, the teacher keeps a running tally of target/problem behaviors. Each time a target/problem behavior is observed, the teacher adds to the tally, either by using a hand-held counter (e.g., 'golf clicker') or updating the tally using pen and paper.
3. **uncovers the date on the Mystery Motivator calendar.** At the end of the session, the teacher announces the final total of observed target/problem behaviors and notes whether the tally exceeds the cut-off. The instructor then uncovers the current date on the MM calendar, allowing the class to see whether an 'M' appears underneath the post-it as a signal that day that a reward is potentially available.
4. **provides MM feedback, reward, and/or encouragement.** The teacher provides the appropriate response: (1) If an 'M' appears on the calendar and the cumulative tally of target/problem behaviors falls at or below the cut-off, the teacher praises the class and chooses a student to reach into the reward envelope to select a reward card. Once selected, the reward card goes back into the envelope. The teacher then follows up to ensure that students receive the reward as quickly as possible; (2) If no 'M' appears on the calendar but target/problem behaviors fall at or below the cut-off, the teacher praises the class and reminds students that they will soon have another chance to earn a reward; (3) If an 'M' appears on the calendar but behaviors exceed the cut-off, the teacher reviews expected replacement behaviors and encourages the class to improve its performance in the next MM session.

Tips for Use. When the Mystery Motivator has been in place for several weeks and shown to be effective in reducing classwide target/problem behaviors, the teacher can start to fade the intervention. First, the instructor can reduce the frequency of 'M's appearing on the Mystery Motivator calendar from a starting point of 60% of days to 50%, then to 40%, etc. Second, the instructor can gradually lower the behavior cut-off from 50% of pre-intervention levels to 40%, then to 30%, etc. Eventually, the instructor can randomly schedule days when the MM intervention is or is not in effect. It is important, of course, while fading the Mystery Motivator, that the instructor continue consistently to acknowledge and praise improved class behaviors as a means of locking in these behavioral gains.

References

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