**Promoting Homework Completion and Accuracy with Mystery Motivators**

**Intervention Summary:**

Although proficient homework completion is associated with academic success for students of ever ability level, many students lack the motivation to complete their homework assignments. This strategy targets performance deficits in homework with a game-like intervention permitting access to an unknown reinforcer for students achieving a specific homework criterion. This “mystery motivator” is an unpredictable reward represented by a manila envelope with a question mark written on it, which is prominently displayed on the teacher’s desk. Inside the envelope is a card indicating what the student will win if the student attains the homework goal. The mystery motivator intervention has been demonstrated to have powerful effects on homework completion and accuracy for elementary school students and is highly rated by both students and teachers.

**Materials Needed:**

* Mystery Motivator Chart consisting of a posterboard chart divided into boxes labeled with the five days of the school week.
* Squares of construction paper and scotch tape or a set of “invisible ink” and developer ink pens.
* Manila envelope with a large question mark drawn on it with a black marker.
* 3”x5” index cards listing activity rewards, such as extra recess, indoor games, and music time, or describing access to small tangible rewards, such as candy.
* Small tangible rewards, such as wrapped candy, stickers, colorful erasers, etc.
* Reinforcement Menu

**Procedures:**

Obtaining Baseline Data:

Baseline data should be collected prior to implementation of intervention to evaluate how well the student is currently completing homework assignments. Baseline can be collected using one or more of the following strategies.

* Calculate the homework completion rates in one or more subjects for 5 to 10 days, or the previous marking period. Homework completion rates are defined as the number of completed assignments divided by the number of assignments given.
* Calculate homework accuracy rates in one or more subjects for 5 to 10 days, or previous marking period. Homework accuracy rates are defined as the number of correct items divided by the total number of items.
* Calculate grades in one or more subjects, such as those in which the achievement is the poorest, for the target student for the marking period to date.

Intervention Steps:

* Preparation

1. Write the letter “M” (for mystery motivator) in the boxes on the Mystery Motivator Chart corresponding to the number of days that the reward is available (see implementation step one below). Then tape a square over each box so that the squares conceal which days are labeled with an “M” and which are blank.
2. Alternatively, use the invisible ink marker to write an “M” in the squares corresponding to the days on which the reward is available.

* Introduction and Training

1. Explain to the student that he/she will have an opportunity to earn rewards for good homework performance in selected subjects.
2. Display the manila envelope with the question mark on it. Explain that every day that the student turns in all assigned homework in the selected subject(s) with at least 80% accuracy (or some other criterion), you will allow the student to remove the tape and lift the tab on the Mystery Motivator Chart for that day, or to color over the square with a developer pen. If an “M” appears beneath the tab or is revealed when the developer pen is applied, the student will earn the reward in the envelope.

* Implementation

1. Begin by making the reward available (signaled by the “M”) for at least 3 of 5 days each week. Be sure to make the “M’s” random, so that students cannot predict on which day days the reward will be available (e.g., not every other day).
2. Each day, check the student’s homework in the target subject(s) to see if it is complete and to record a percent-accuracy score. As soon as you are able to determine if the student has met the goal (which will probably be the following day after you have checked papers), announce the results. If the student has met the criterion, allow him/her to lift up the tab, or apply the developer pen to color the square marking the day on which the goal was met. If an “M” appears on the square, open the envelope and announce the reward. Provide the reward immediately or as soon as possible.
3. If no “M” appears, verbally praise the student’s excellent homework performance and remind him/her that he/she will have another chance to earn a mystery motivator tomorrow.
4. If the student did not meet the criterion, encourage the student to try harder the next day.
5. After the student has met the original criterion for at least 3 to 5 days for several weeks, reduce the number of days per week on which the mystery motivator is available and/or raise the criterion (e.g., 85% accuracy).

**Progress Monitoring:**

Progress monitoring will occur in one or more of the following ways and should be the same way data was collected during baseline.

1. Compare homework completion rates in the selected subject(s) for the target student before and after implementation.
2. Compare the homework accuracy rates in the selected subject(s) for the target student before and after implantation.
3. Compare grades in the selected subject(s) for the target student before and after implementation.

Intervention Implementation Checklist:

1. Teacher posts Mystery Motivator Chart in classroom YES NO
2. Teacher places card with reinforcer name in manila envelope YES NO

posted visibly on the teacher’s desk

1. Teacher checks for students completion of homework and YES NO

accuracy of answers

1. If student meets criterion student is allowed to lift tab on YES NO

Mystery Motivator Chart to see if “M” is present

1. If “M” is present, student is allowed to open the manila envelope YES NO

and student is given reinforer on card as soon as possible

1. If “M” is not present, teacher verbally praises and tells him/her YES NO

there will be another chance to earn the mystery motivator tomorrow

1. If student does not meet the criterion, he/she is encouraged to try YES NO

harder the next day

**Alternate Ideas/Variations:**

1. Distribute Reinforcement Menus and have students mark their preferences. Also invite students to add any favorite classroom activities not on the list. Based on student responses and classroom resources, develop a classwide reward menu and post it in the classroom when the mystery motivator intervention is in effect. When the “M” appears on the chart, permit the students to vote on a reward from the menu and deliver it as soon as possible.
2. Alternatively, number the rewards on the posted menu. Each day, place a slip of paper with a number on it corresponding to a reward in the envelope. If the “M” appears on the chart, deliver the reward matching the number.

**Based On:**

Rathvon, N. (2008). Promoting homework completion and accuracy with mystery motivators. *Effective*

*School Interventions: Evidenced-Based Strategies for Improving Student Outcomes Second Edition*, 173-175. New York, N.Y.: The Guilford Press.

**Sources:**

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promote homework completion and accuracy. *School Psychology International, 24*, 369-377.

Moore, L. A., Waguespack, A. M., Wickstrom, K. F., Witt, J. C., & Gaydos, G. R. (1994). Mystery

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