

"IF YOU CAN'T SAY SOMETHING NICE"

Elizabeth Shryock, Marie Eaton and Margie Bogert
Western Washington University

I felt overwhelmed when I arrived to begin my student teaching assignment in a primary learning disabilities class. There were only 12 children, yet they seemed to require even more time and attention than the 32 children I had just left.

During the first week I observed two children extensively - one, a 10-year-old girl named Allison. I was intrigued with her, particularly because of her extremely negative attitude. Not only did she say rude and hurtful things to others without provocation, but she put herself down as well. When she was given a task to do she would repeat the directions to herself, adding statements like: "Draw it this way, dummy," or "You don't even know what you're doing, stupid."

As the days passed I noticed other behaviors that resulted from her lack of social skills. Many times she directed negative comments to the whole class, such as, "You don't know where I went Saturday," or "You can't call me. You don't know the number." If she got no reaction, she singled out someone, used his/her name, and repeated whatever she had said. Again, if the person didn't react, she physically moved into range and fired again. Many times these statements caused the situation to escalate into physical confrontation and resulted in disciplinary action from the teacher to those involved.

I quickly realized Allison's negative statements acted as a catalyst for inappropriate behavior within the class. Her taunts and cynical remarks either precipitated potentially violent reactions from the other students or resulted in Allison's isolation from the classroom community. In addition, Allison also lacked appropriate responses to such comments as, "How are you today?" Most times she would say nothing; if pursued, she either responded "Fine," or "You're welcome," regardless of what was said or asked.

In order to see if my suspicions were valid, I kept track of Allison's negative statements for three days. They were very high! She said 14 negative things in just one 20-minute episode while I watched. She did not make any positive remarks during those three days. I hoped that if we could help Allison think of herself and others more positively, she might be able to work and interact more successfully in our class. I discussed Allison's problems with my supervisor and fellow student-teachers at one of our weekly seminars, and together we came up with some ideas.

I decided to help Allison change the way she talked both to herself and to others. We began a self-counting project to help her become aware of her negative statements. Allison had a point sheet on her desk divided in half, with a smiling face on one side and a frowning face on the other. Each time she said something positive, she marked one point on the smiling side. For every negative comment she marked one point on the frowning side. Allison did all of the recording, and when five points were tallied on the positive side, she received five minutes free time in the gym. If five points were accumulated on the negative side, she lost five minutes of recess.

I kept track of Allison's progress on a Standard Behavior Chart. I recorded her positive statements with dots and her negative statements with "x"s, so

that I could see if she was improving. This information is shown on Chart 1. On the first three days I counted her statements for only 20 minutes each day. Once she began to self-count we collected that information all day. We set her aim at 15 positive statements each day.

I also kept a log of the things she said. Some of the highlights are shown in Figure 1.

The day that the system was implemented there was an immediate drop in verbalizations of any type (see Chart 1). There were no positive statements, yet only two negative ones. On the following day her positive comments went up to three; the negative ones stayed at two.

The third day proved interesting. Allison called out my name (using anyone's name positively was a rarity) and stood in front of me, shifting her feet, appearing rather nervous. After a minute she repeated my name, stuttered and repeated herself a bit, then finally blurted out in one breath, "That's a nice dress you have!"

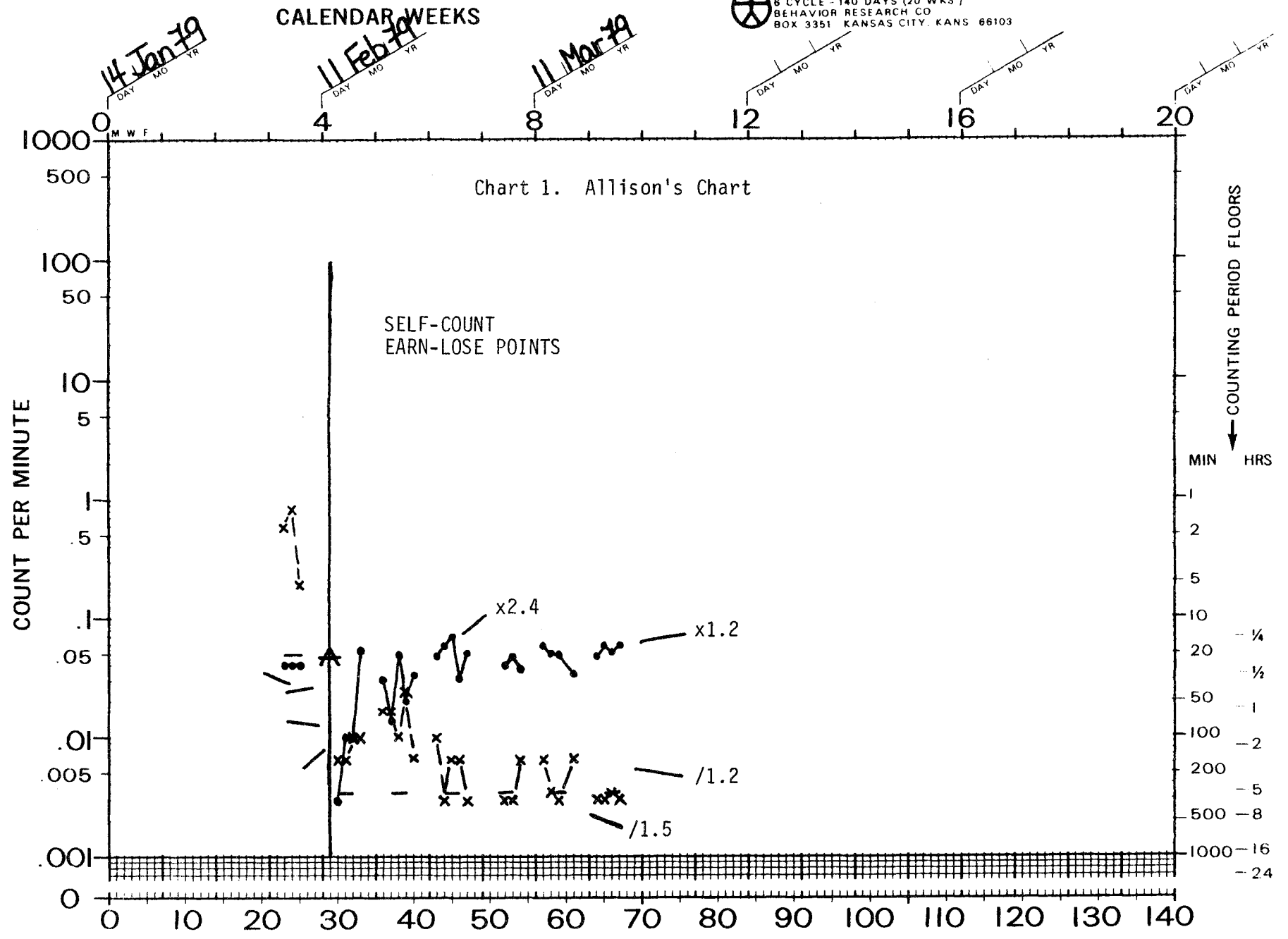
In the month that I had been in that class it was the first time I had heard her say anything that even closely resembled a compliment! Whether she meant it at this point was not important. What was important was that she thought and then heard herself verbalize something positive and experienced my response.

The next day while we were sitting around the big table eating together, one of the children asked Allison what kind of sandwich she had in her lunch. Allison's initial response was snotty and negative: "Peanut butter and jelly, what else?" Before I reminded her to mark her chart, she slapped her hand over her mouth and said, "I mean (smile), peanut butter and jelly," with all the sugared sweetness she could muster. I could not believe what I had heard. Not only did she figure out a positive way to respond, but she also caught herself and corrected her response.

Allison's progress was fairly steady, and she pulled out way ahead of my hopes. She reached her acceleration aim within 11 days, with an acceleration of $\times 2.4$, and a deceleration of $/1.2$. We agreed to continue self-counting because there were still some negative statements. She continued to improve, with an acceleration of $\times 1.2$ and a deceleration of $/1.5$ for the whole project. After 25 days into the project she had 16 positive verbalizations and no negative ones.

My heart was warmed that day when Allison came up to me and said, "Miss Shryock, I want to thank you for all the nice things you've done for me." My first reaction was to reach down and hug her, but we aren't there yet. Maybe someday we shall be there together. In the meantime we shall each continue to put one foot forward a step each day.

Elizabeth Shryock is a recent graduate of Western Washington University's special education program. Marie Eaton is an assistant professor at Western Washington University, and was Ms. Shryock's supervisor during her student teaching experience. Western Washington University is located in Bellingham, Washington. Margie Bogert is a primary learning disabilities teacher in the Edmonds School District, Edmonds, Washington. She was Ms. Shryock's cooperating teacher.



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M. EATON E. SHRYOCK		ALLISON		7		THINK-SAY	
SUPERVISOR	ADVISER	MANAGER	BEHAVIOR	AGE	LABEL	COUNTED	STATEMENTS
Western Washington University			Bellingham, Washington		M. EATON/ALLISON		
DEPOSITOR	AGENCY	TIMER	COUNTER	CHARTER			

Figure 1

TEACHER'S LOG

- Day 3 "That's a very nice dress you have." First nice comment ever! VERY STRAINED.
- Day 4 "Peanut butter and jelly (snotty voice)." "Oops, I mean, peanut butter and jelly (smile)."
- Day 5 "Miss Shryock, that's a pretty dress you have on." "I love your blouse." "That's pretty."
- Day 7 Opened door for me and said, "Ladies first." Generally a more pleasant child.
- Day 9 Another child put on management program. She didn't get as much attention.
- Day 10 Bad morning. Afternoon improved.
- Day 11 Super day! Seemed generally happier.
- Day 12 Zero negative statements! "Miss Shryock, I want to thank you for all the nice things you've done for me."
- Day 15 Super day!!
- Day 16 "Miss Shryock, will you be my friend?"
- Day 19 She came with a smile for the first time.
- Day 23 It's starting to generalize. She said, "I like you" to the aide.