

Classroom behavior charts are harmful to autistic people, not helpful.

When I was in kindergarten, and then again in second grade, I had teachers who used public behavior charts for their students.

In kindergarten it was a laminated stoplight with green, yellow, and red. In second grade it was a string on the wall with green, yellow, and red construction paper above it.

For an idea of how the system worked, here's a picture of one version of a chart:



In this system, green = good behavior, yellow = warning for bad behavior, and red = bad behavior/getting sent to the principal's office.

When I was in second grade, my teacher would put a stamp with the color of our behavior that day in our planners, to be sent home to our parents for them to see & sign next to.

I was, overall, a green student. **But there were autistic students in both of my classes w/ this system who were frequently in the red zone, and I wasn't immune to it either.**

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I remember a day in kindergarten when I got sent down to the principal's office after ending up in the red zone on the stoplight. I remember feeling angry, and misunderstood. I didn't talk to the principal when she asked me what was going on. My teachers were confused about my "behavior," because I was usually such a "model student."

From the little I do remember before I got sent down, I know I was accidentally speaking out of turn, and being too loud because of voice modulation issues. **What I realize looking back is that I was unmasking in public, and it wasn't well received.** So when I got sent down to the office, I reverted back to what I was supposed to do: stay silent.

Usually, I barely talked at all. I only spoke when spoken to, in short answers, and I didn't verbally engage with many of my classmates. On this particular day, I had started speaking more. **Because I had issues with reading social cues and knowing how loud I was speaking, I had accidentally been talking when the teacher was trying to address the class.** That behavior- speaking out of turn- was unacceptable, and got me sent to the office.

In order to meet the behavioral standards of my teachers in kindergarten and elementary school, I had to stay quiet. I knew that. **And when I broke the rules by talking (too loudly, on accident), I was publicly shamed- clothespin moved down the line, to a morally corrupted color.**

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As I said earlier, *I wasn't the only autistic student in my kindergarten or second grade classes who had to deal with this system.* In kindergarten, there was an autistic girl named Sarah. And in second grade, there was an autistic girl named Maddie. I was friends with both of them.

Sarah often vocal stimmed by screaming. Loud, shrill, screaming. Though looking back, I'm not even sure it was vocal stimming. I think she may have been screaming because she was overstimulated and she knew that if she screamed, she'd be taken away from the main classroom for "being disruptive."

Anyway, Sarah had her own personal behavior chart. **Because when you're autistic, the general ABA methods don't suffice.** Your behavior gets modified on an individualized level, constantly surveilled by your aide, who adds fake coins to your reward chart when you speak on command and follow instructions, and strips them from the chart every time you scream.

Sarah never even got the dignity of being included on that laminated stoplight with the rest of us. Because the teachers must have known that if she was included, she'd

always be in the red. And I guess they never wondered what that said about their view of what constitutes “good” behavior. Looking back, it’s clear what their framework meant: neurotypical behavior is “good,” and autistic behavior is “bad.”

The whole behavior chart thing got way more intense in second grade, with Maddie. Why? Because my teacher was incredibly authoritarian, and Maddie was willing to defend herself. My teacher would move people’s clothespins to the yellow for whispering under their breath to ask someone if they could borrow a crayon, or asking if they could go to the bathroom during a lesson. **Maddie saw the injustice of this, and fought back.**

There’s one day I’ll never forget. Maddie went up to my teacher to ask her a question, during a time the teacher had mandated there to be absolute silence. During these time periods (which were any time outside of lessons), she had a select group of seven-year-olds patrol the classroom to search for whispering students. That classroom was a surveillance state.

And Maddie, brave girl that she was, didn’t care. She had a question about the assignment, so she walked right up to the desk and asked. It didn’t go well. My teacher started yelling her, then stood up, moved Maddie’s clothespin to the red (from green!) and demanded that she go to the principal’s office. Maddie shouted “No!” then ran behind the desk and moved her clothespin back into the green. *After all, the only thing she had done was ask a question.*

They went back and forth, moving the clothespin, for a solid minute before my teacher tried to grab Maddie and drag her away from the string. **At this point, my teacher had provoked a full-on meltdown.** Maddie started screaming and sobbing, running through the classroom to avoid being captured by my teacher. She started crawling under tables, scampering between them to evade my teacher’s grasp.

My teacher called the office. They sent in around three employees from the special education department, who then cornered and captured Maddie like she was an animal. She left the room unwillingly, crying and flailing.

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There were, on occasion, times when neurotypical students would be moved to the yellow or red. **But most of the time, the only kids whose clothespins I saw in the red and yellow were autistic, or otherwise neurodivergent.**

When you’re neurodivergent, your behavior is seen as a marker of immorality. It’s a lack of obedience, a lack of conformity. This makes you dangerous in the eyes of authority figures. Because you defy them again and again, often accidentally, and in doing so you strip them of their power.

So let me leave you all with this: social contracts are good. Rules that everyone agrees on are good. But when the force and will of one person is imposed on another, to the detriment of their wellbeing, that is bad.

~Eden 🐸