

# Mystery Motivator

**Description:** This reward system intrigues students because it carries a certain degree of unpredictability. The strategy can be used with an entire class or with individual students.

## Materials:

- *Mystery Motivator Chart*
- Special watercolor markers (including 'invisible' marker)\*

## Preparation:

- Develop a reward menu for the individual or class targeted for this intervention. (NOTE: For suggestions on how to create a reward menu, see *Creating Reward Menus that Motivate: Tips for Teachers.*)
- Select 1-3 behaviors that you wish to reduce or increase in the targeted student(s) and write out concrete definitions for each.
- Decide on a time period during the instructional day that the Mystery Motivator program will be in effect (e.g., during math class, all morning, throughout the school day).
- Decide on the minimum behavioral criteria that the student must meet in order to earn a chance to fill in a blank on the *Mystery Motivator Chart* (e.g., all homework turned in; fewer than 2 teacher reminders to pay attention during reading group).
- Prepare the *Mystery Motivator Chart*.

First, decide how frequently you want students to be able to earn a reward (a good rule of thumb is to start with a frequency of 3-4 times per week and then to reduce the frequency as student behaviors improve).

Next, randomly select as many days of the week on the chart as you plan to reward students. For each day that you select on the chart, write the letter "M" into the chart blank with the invisible-ink pen.

Finally, come up with guidelines for the student or class to earn bonus points (e.g., if the student or class earn the chance to fill out at least 3 of the five chart spaces in a week, they will be given the bonus points that appear in the *Bonus Points* box on the *Mystery Motivator Chart*). Each week, you will write a different number of bonus points (e.g., between 1 and 5) into the bonus points box. If the student or class earns these points, they will be able to redeem them for a prize from the reward menu.

**Intervention Script:**

1. Introduce the Mystery Motivator program to students:
  - Explain that students will have the chance to earn rewards for good behavior.
  - Review the behaviors that you have selected with students. Use demonstration and modeling to ensure that students clearly know either (a) the negative behavior(s) that should be avoided or (b) the positive behavior(s) that should be increased. Post the behavioral definitions that you have written.
  - Introduce the *Mystery Motivator Chart*. Tell students that they can earn a chance to fill in the blank on the chart for the current day to uncover a possible reward—but only if they first are able to show the appropriate behaviors. Specifically, inform students of the behavioral criteria that they must meet and the time period each day that the program will be in effect (e.g., “If you turn in all of your classwork assignments by 2 p.m., you will be allowed to color the daily blank on the chart.”)
  - Let students know that the magical letter “M” (for *Mystery Motivator*) has been secretly placed in some (but not all) of the chart squares. If the student reveals the “M” as he or she fills in the chart, the student can select a reward from the reward menu.
2. Start the Mystery Motivator intervention. At the end of the daily monitoring period, inform the student or class whether they have earned the chance to fill in the *Mystery Motivator Chart*. Permit the student or class to color in the chart blank for the current day, using the special markers.
  - If the magic letter “M” appears, the student or class can select a prize from the prize menu.
  - If the magic letter “M” does *not* appear, congratulate and praise the student or class for their good behaviors. Let them know that they will have another chance to fill in the *Mystery Motivator Chart* tomorrow.
3. At the end of each week, determine whether the student or class has met criteria to fill in the *Bonus Points* box. Award any points that appear in the box and let the student or class redeem them for corresponding prizes from the reward menu.

**Tips:**

**Substitute Paper Slips for Special Markers.** Students find it very motivating to color in chart blanks to uncover a hidden prize symbol. However, the teacher who does not have special “invisible ink” markers readily available can substitute envelopes and folded slips of paper. At the start of the week, the teacher takes five envelopes and writes one of the days of the week on the back of each. The teacher then takes five slips of paper. For each day (e.g., 3) that child can earn a reward, the teacher writes the letter “M” on the slip. The remaining slips are left blank. The teacher then folds all slips in half, randomly mixes them up, seals them into the envelopes, and stores them securely. Whenever the student or class meets the behavioral criteria, the teacher retrieves the envelope with the current day written on it and hands it to a student to open. If the letter “M” appears on the slip inside, the student or class can choose a reward from the reward menu.

**Troubleshooting:**

**The student attempts to cheat.** If you have a student who attempts to cheat on the Mystery Motivator Chart (e.g., by coloring beyond the borders of a given day’s chart blank in hopes of revealing whether the next day’s blank contains a magic letter), consider suspending them from the game for a day as a consequence.

**A student attempts to undermine a team’s performance.** Occasionally, a student may misbehave deliberately in order to prevent the class from earning a chance to fill in the *Mystery Motivator Chart*. If this happens, you can designate that student to be a “team of one”. While the student would still have the chance to play the Mystery Motivator game, he or she would no longer be in a position to sabotage the chances of others to earn reinforcement.

**References:**

Moore, L.A., Waguespack, A.M., Wickstrom, K.F., Witt, J.C., & Gaydon, G.R. (1994). Mystery Motivator: An effective and time efficient intervention. *School Psychology Review, 23*, 106-117.

Rhode, G., Jenson, W.R., & Reavis, H.K. (1992). *The tough kid book*. Longmont, CO: Sopriswest, Inc.

\* You can purchase invisible ink pens (with “revealer” ink) on-line from the S.S.Adams Company, a manufacturer of novelty gifts. Visit the company’s website at:  
<http://www.ssadams.com/catalog2.html>

# MYSTERY MOTIVATOR CHART



**Class/Student:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Week of:** \_\_\_\_\_

**BEHAVIOR GOALS:** 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Monday

Tuesday

Wednesday

Thursday

Friday

Bonus

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