

# BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION

Here are some steps to follow in changing behaviour. Remember, it's always easier to talk about something than to bring it off successfully, so don't become discouraged when the first results are less than perfect.

1. Identify the one behaviour that is to be improved or strengthened.
2. If a behaviour is to be changed, identify the behaviour that is to take its place.
3. Determine a positive reinforcer.
4. Determine whether to try extinction or whether a negative reinforcer will be needed, if so, identify one to be used.
5. Design a plan for getting the desirable behaviour, so you have something to reinforce.
6. Put the plan into effect and set a time for evaluation to determine what modifications of the plan are needed.
7. Evaluate and make needed modifications.

## NOTES ON BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION CHANGING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

Behaviour may be influenced either by a stimulus that precedes the behaviour (antecedents) or by a stimulus that follows the behaviour (consequences). Behavioural modification concentrates on the consequences of behaviour. Stimuli which increase the frequency of the behaviours they follow are called positive reinforcers.

The teacher must establish what the positive reinforcers are that are likely to encourage the desired behaviour or that may be stimulating the unwanted behaviour. For example, if the teacher unwittingly attends to some undesirable behaviour by saying: "Johnny, why did you do that?", it is very likely that the teacher's comment serves to reinforce the undesirable behaviour.

Techniques for Strengthening Behaviour:

### 1. Reinforcement:

Reinforcement is a consequence of behaviour that increases the probability of the behaviour recurring. e.g. teacher praise and approval. The value of a particular consequence as a reinforcer will vary with individuals. Some maybe more appropriate at primary level while others may be needed at the post primary level.

## **2. Shaping:**

Shaping is the procedure of reinforcing successive approximations to some desired terminal behaviour. For example, if a child answers in class but only at a whisper, a teacher can praise the child when he answers with just a little more volume than usual. Later the teacher can reinforce answers that more closely approximate the desired terminal behaviour, i.e., answering in a manner audible to both the teacher and to other students.

## **3. Modelling:**

This can be used to avoid paying attention to the child who behaves badly in order to gain attention. With many children, criticism or praise can maintain disruptive behaviour as both operate as forms of attention. When the child behaves badly, the teacher reinforces a child who is behaving well, and in a way that is obvious to the attention seeker.

## **4. Contracting:**

This is an agreement specifying the tasks to be completed, and the reinforcing consequences for the child. Contracting is particularly useful for the child who is generally "disruptive".

## **5. Token Reinforcement Programmes:**

A token reinforcement programme generally involves three factors:

- (i) A set of instructions to the class about the behaviours that will be reinforced.
- (ii) A means of making potentially reinforcing stimulus - usually called a token-contingent upon behaviour.
- (iii) A set of rules governing the exchange of tokens for back-up reinforcers such as prizes or opportunities to engage in special activities.

An example of this type is described in the accompanying article "Fly me to the Moon".

Techniques for Weakening Behaviour:

### **1. Ignoring for Extinction:**

When a teacher or parent stops making approval or some other form of attention contingent upon behaviour, the behaviour will frequently extinguish or decrease in frequency. Many behaviours have been decreased when the teacher stops attending to them. Among those behaviours which have been successfully extinguished are tantrums, regressed crawling, vomiting and aggression in a classroom. However, ignoring inappropriate behaviour without praise for appropriate behaviour is not only difficult for teachers to do, but it may be ineffective in a number of instances.

## **2. Reinforcing Behaviour Incompatible With Undesired Behaviour:**

As just mentioned, when one extinguishes a behaviour by not attending to that behaviour, one should also reinforce or attend in a positive manner to the desired behaviour. It is most helpful if one can reinforce a behaviour which, if increased in frequency, would make the undesirable behaviour less probable. For example, if a child is frequently talking and wandering around the classroom, it is helpful to reinforce academic behaviour as the child cannot work on his academic material and at the same time talk and wander around the room. That is, the teacher will be reinforcing behaviours which are incompatible with the undesired behaviour.

## **3. Soft Reprimands:**

When simply ignoring a certain behaviour does not serve to reduce such behaviour, a reprimand which is audible only to the child being reprimanded may prove very effective in reducing the behaviour of disruptive children.

In contrast, when the reprimand is audible to a number of children in the class, the loud reprimand will generally serve either to maintain the disruptive behaviour or to increase it.

## **4. Time Out:**

Teachers have long used the procedure of placing a child at the side of the room, at the back of a room, in a corner, or in a dunce's chair. Unfortunately, being placed in such a situation has a number of deleterious effects on the child, e.g. being the centre of attention.

However, it may be possible to remove the child temporarily from the reinforcing situation, e.g., to sit alone in a quiet room for a specified time.

## **5. Response Cost:**

Instead of earning points as in a token reinforcement programme, a child may lose points for certain behaviour and if sufficient points are lost she/he loses a privilege.

## **6. Satiation:**

The child is allowed unlimited access to the reinforcer, so that the reinforcer loses its interest.

Either when trying to strengthen some behaviours or to weaken others it is essential to remember that no single reinforcer will be effective under all conditions or with all children. Teachers need to ask children what they like and observe carefully what children do. Any high frequency activity is likely to make an effective reinforcer.

**THE CRITICISM TRAP:**

Wesley Becker, University of Oregon psychologist, has done a great deal of classroom research. He has consistently shown that teacher attention (even though negative) can inadvertently reinforce undesired behaviours. For example, in one classroom an extensive study showed that students were out of their seats more often when the teacher increased the number of times she said "sit down". Dr. Becker refers to this problem as "The Criticism Trap". He has found that some simple rules can help a teacher avoid this trap. He calls his system "Rules, Praise and Ignore".

1. Specify few (five or less) rules that can be the basis for reinforcement.
2. Praise (or reinforce in some way) positive behaviours.

Becker says we should "Catch the children being good".

3. Do not attend to minor disruptive behaviours. If a major disruptive behaviour occurs, "time out" will likely be helpful.

The Basic Steps in a Behaviour Modification Programme:

These are to be found in the article entitled "Fly me to the Moon" and in the article entitled "Behaviour Modification Increasing Productive Behaviour".