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Positive Behavior Support
Concept Paper 2

Reinforcement in Everyday Life

Despite the popularly stereotyped vision of positive reinforcement as commending a person when they have done a good job or performed an expected behavior, positive reinforcement does not necessarily mean “happy.” The “positive” merely means that a consequential stimulus was introduced, or added, to reinforce (maintain or increase frequency of) a desired behavior. According to theory, the stimulus must be introduced immediately upon completion of the behavior in order for it to reinforce. For example, neither my fiancé nor I are particularly fond of emptying all the trash bins in the house and taking the garbage out to the curb. When I do it, especially without being asked, my behavior is reinforced by a hug and kiss when I come back inside. Since I enjoy that (I find it reinforcing), I tend to take out the trash on a more regular basis, and look forward to the outward display of affection that is due to me.

Negative reinforcement, on the other hand, occurs when an aversive stimulus is removed contingent upon the maintenance or increase in frequency of a desired behavior. Like most teachers, I do not enjoy having ungraded papers hanging over my head, especially when papers from several different classes start to pile up. Those papers (and the unpleasant feeling I get when I see them on my dining room table) provide me with an aversive stimulus. The sooner I stop procrastinating and grade and return the papers, the sooner the aversive stimulus is removed from my life (at least until the next batch). Therefore, large stacks of essays (and the subsequent unpleasant feeling they cause) negatively reinforce my grading habits.

It is also worth noting that a stimulus cannot accurately be defined as either a positive or negative reinforcer (or, indeed, a reinforcer, period) until the relationship between the stimulus

and the response is established. What may act as a positive reinforcer for one person may not have the same effect on another person. Reinforcement, by definition, must be meaningful for the recipient. Both kisses from my future wife and a dining room table free of adolescent interpretations of *To Kill a Mockingbird* are extremely reinforcing to me, although for very different reasons.

Differential Reinforcement Strategy

Differential reinforcement strategies, much like other aspects of special education, are meant to improve a student's quality of life in the least possible intrusive manner. In choosing a behavior reduction approach, one should never leap directly to Level IV (aversive stimuli) when a Level I or II approach will accomplish the same goals. Likewise, when choosing among the different Level I strategies, the least intrusive approach should be selected. In the case of the seven-year-old boy who constantly leaves his seat to sharpen his pencil, a differential reinforcement of lower rates of behavior (DRL) seems the most appropriate strategy to implement.

When a student exhibits a high rate of behavior that is tolerable or desirable in small doses, the DRL is used to decrease the behavior, while not extinguishing it completely. A seven-year-old boy who gets up to sharpen his pencil once or twice during a period does not pose a problem to the educational process; a boy who rises twelve times in 45 minutes does. Before a teacher can implement this plan, however, a few steps must be taken. First, the teacher should collect data to determine the frequency of the behavior. Any behavior intervention strategy must be data based. Doing so will determine the efficacy of existing intervention techniques; if they are found to be relatively ineffective, then the use of a more intrusive procedure can be justified (Alberto & Troutmann, 2003).

Once baseline data has been collected, the next step is to contact the child's parents to obtain permission for whatever intervention the teacher might deem appropriate. Additionally, the teacher should also consult his immediate supervisor and, if one exists, a behavior management committee. If the student in question receives special education services, it is also important to confer with his case manager or IEP team to ensure that any proposed interventions are permissible under the IEP. Only after these steps have been taken can a DRL be implemented.

Baseline data indicates that our student (Mortimer) leaves his seat 12 times in a 45-minute block. This translates to an average of three "out-of-seats" about every eleven minutes. A gradual approach to fading the behavior seems most appropriate in this case. The implementation of an interval DRL (as opposed to a full-session DRL) is more effective for behaviors that need to be faded gradually (Alberto & Troutmann, 2003). While an older student with high rates of out-of-seat behaviors may benefit from a full-session DRL, it is probably unrealistic to expect Mortimer to go directly from twelve out-of-seats in a period to only one or two, especially given his age and any other, unknown contributing factors (e.g., ADHD).

In order to reduce this behavior without extinguishing it, Mortimer's teacher should first speak to him to communicate the plan: Mortimer is allowed to leave his seat only twice every fifteen minutes. Once Mortimer accomplishes this successfully, he will earn a reinforcer of his choosing (from a pre-set list of appropriate, attractive reinforcers, so as to avoid requests for a new car and a baby sister). "Once the behavior has stabilized, the length of the interval is increased" (Alberto & Troutmann, 2003, p. 345), so that in order to earn his reinforcer (which may have to be changed every so often in order to maintain its attractiveness), Mortimer can only leave his seat twice in a twenty- or twenty-five minute block. The target behavior can then be

faded, incrementally, to only one or two out-of-seats per class period before reinforcement is given.

Harris & Herman have deemed the DRL approach appropriate for out-of-seat behaviors (1973, as cited in Alberto & Troutmann, 2003), but as with any behavior intervention strategy, there must be consistency within and across settings in order to achieve maximum efficacy and integrity. Ideally, Mortimer's teachers will all implement this approach and agree to stick to the schedule of fading (which can be determined as the intervention progresses). They must not scold or penalize Mortimer for leaving his seat for the fifth or sixth time in a class period if it lies within his allotted two instances per interval; to do so would invalidate the DRL.

Portfolio Work Sample ~

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