Dousing the Flame: Extinguishing Challenging Behaviors and Anxiety

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Why kids behave in unwelcomed ways

- Desired and unwanted behavior is shaped through rewards.
- It’s easy to accidentally reward undesirable behavior.
- In the behavioral world, a reward is something that strengthens behavior.
- Based on B.F. Skinner’s Operant Conditioning.
- Three Rules for Parents:
  
  #1 Reward desired behavior often and quickly
  #2 Don’t accidentally reward problematic behavior
  #3 Correct unwanted behavior, but do so deliberately
Some problematic behaviors that are shaped

• Anxiety
• Isolation
• Yelling
• Refusing to cooperate
• Name-calling
• Defiance
• Self injury
• …ALL behaviors
Operant Conditioning: B.F. Skinner

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=teLoNYvOdf90
Learning

• Learning refers to changes in behavior resulting from practice or experience
  – Learning can be unlearned
  – Observation can lead to learning
  – Learning requires memory
This is great!

I'll have to wake up crying in the middle of the night more often.
Operant Conditioning

• **Operant conditioning** is learning from the **consequences** of your behavior
  – the consequences of behavior lead to *changes in the probability* of a behavior’s occurrence.

• In operant conditioning, the stimulus is a cue, it does not elicit the response

• Operant responses are voluntary

• Application = A student learns that if he participates in group discussion, teachers and peers give him positive cues (nodding head, talking with him more, etc.). Therefore, he will likely participate more tomorrow.
Operant Conditioning

- People make responses that have **consequences**
  - The consequences serve to **increase** or **decrease** the likelihood of making that response again
  - The response can be associated with cues in the environment
    - We put coins in a machine to obtain food
    - But we refrain when an **Out of Order** sign is placed on the machine
  - Application = “Planned ignoring” a child’s emotional outbursts will result in a decrease in this behavior occurring; as no reward is achieved.
Operant Conditioning

- Consequences to behavior can be:
  - Nothing happens: **extinction**
  - Something happens
    - It is pleasant
    - It is aversive
Reinforcement and Punishment in Operant Conditioning

• **Reinforcement** is any procedure that increases the probability of a response

• **Punishment** is any procedure that decreases the probability of a response.

• Example: Taking away a student’s privilege to have water in the classroom after she splashed someone with it would be called a punishment using operant conditioning terms.
Considerations in Operant Conditioning

• It is very easy to reinforce the exact behavior we are trying to extinguish…

  – Individual face to face time with a youngster after undesired behavior

  – Disruptive behavior in the classroom or at home is followed by removal from the situation (this is sometimes the desired outcome)

  – Do you have examples you’d like to discuss?
Other Clinical Considerations

- Child AND parent/teacher behaviors can be altered through operant conditioning

  - Child’s “helplessness” is reinforced by teacher’s support. The teacher is reinforced by child’s happiness/appreciation/etc.

  - Child’s school refusal is reinforced by increased time with parent. Parent is reinforced by child’s praise.
• It can be **difficult to predict** (and agree on) what acts will increase and which will decrease behavior

  – Yelling at a youngster **CAN** increase their behavior (e.g., if being yelled at feels rewarding)

  – Praise **CAN** decrease behavior
    – (e.g., a child exaggerates symptoms to garner attention)

• Knowing the **function** of the behavior is key to success!
Positive and Negative in Operant Conditioning

• Positive – means something is provided
  – Does NOT mean “good”
  – Can be added to increase or reduce behavior

• Negative – means something is removed
  – Does NOT mean “bad”
  – Can be removed to increase or decrease behavior
Positive Reinforcement

• What is positive reinforcement?

  – Delivering a reward to someone when they enact a desired behavior

  – Application - Giving a child a desired item when they have finished chores.
Positive Reinforcement

- **Shaping** behaviors
  - the use of positive reinforcement in the differential reinforcement of *successive approximations* (providing reward for behaving more like desired behavior)
  - Simple shaping example: The “You’re Getting Warmer” game
  - Application – Reinforcing a youngster for cleaning his or her room, even if it’s not a well done as you desire. Keep “upping the ante” with subsequent room cleaning.
Positive Reinforcement

- When reinforcement is provided AFTER ONLY SOME INSTANCES of a behavior, the behavior becomes MORE RESISTANT to EXTINCTION

  - This is called PARTIAL REINFORCEMENT
  - Can lead to accidental reinforcement
  - Think of a slot machine
  - Example– Mom has established their child will not get dessert until after finishing all of his food, but dad makes exceptions
Negative Reinforcement

• What is negative reinforcement?
  – Reducing/removing an unpleasant stimulus when the patient enacts a desired behavior
  – Application – Lifting a child’s grounding for behaving in exceptionally positive ways
    - Escape conditioning: behavior is reinforced because it stops an aversive stimulus (discomfort)
    - Avoidance conditioning: behavior is reinforced because aversive stimulus (discomfort) is prevented
Negative Reinforcement

• **Examples**
  – Taking your child out of a store to avoid a tantrum in public
  – Stop nagging at a child to help her quiet down
  – Student staying home from school to avoid anxiety
  – Shifting a student’s classroom from an uncomfortable location to one less anxiety provoking
Punishment – Not as effective as reinforcement

• Positive Punishment
  – A procedure wherein an *aversive stimulus* is presented to a child to reduce undesirable behavior.
  – Example: A student is suspended after inappropriate behavior.

• Negative Punishment
  – A procedure wherein a stimulus is *removed* from a child in order to reduce undesirable behavior.
  – Example: Taking away a cell phone from a child for skipping school.
Punishment - Challenges

• What the parents and teacher thinks is behavior reducing might in fact increase behavior
  - Application – sending a student out of the classroom when they are trying to avoid contact with others

• Punishment does not shape a new behavior set; it merely stops a behavior from occurring
Summary of Types of Responses

• Positive reinforcement: Something is added to increase behavior
• Negative reinforcement: Something is removed to increase behavior
• Positive Punishment: Something is added to decrease behavior
• Negative Punishment: Something is removed to decrease behavior
Extinction: The process of unlearning

- **Extinction** is the process of unlearning a learned response through new (or no) consequences

  - in Operant Conditioning, **not providing desired consequences** causes extinction.
  - Example: Monitoring safety without conversation following self-injury
Clinical Considerations for Extinction

• It can be difficult and **uncomfortable to withhold reinforcement** (such as conversation) when a youngster is engaging in problematic behavior.

• Inconsistent consequences can result in unpredictable reinforcement (and therefore more resistant to extinction) – this is why it is important for everyone to stick with the plan.
Behavior Changes, and Extinction in Further Detail...

WITHOLDING REINFORCEMENT FROM PREVIOUSLY REINFORCED BEHAVIOR?!?

EXTINCTION BURST!!!!!
BRACE YOURSELVES

EXTINCTION BURST IS COMING
Extinction Burst

- **Extinction burst** – a temporary increase in problematic behavior when reinforcement is initially no longer provided
  - Can challenge parent/teacher resolve to remain consistent in response
    - Increased behavior may lead to reinforcement (we may “give in” to such intensified behavior)
  - Application – when a child receives individual attention after leaving the dinner table is now ignored, the child will likely behave in an undesirable manner trying to regain the attention until the person realizes this behavior will no longer work to get the desired attention.
Putting it All Together

Three Rules for Parents:

#1 Reward desired behavior often and quickly
#2 Don’t accidentally reward problematic behavior
#3 Correct unwanted behavior, but do so deliberately
#1 Reward Good Behavior Often & Quickly

• “Catch them being good.”

• As soon as you see behavior you would like to see more of, give an immediate reward.

• Three types of rewards
  – Social
  – Activity
  – Material
Social Rewards

• *Social rewards* are extremely effective and include
  
  – Hugs
  – Smiles
  – Pat on the head
  – Extra attention
  – Words of Praise
  – Winks
  – Clapping
Activity Rewards

• Activity Rewards include privileges
  – Help with cooking
  – Have a friend over
  – Earned Netflix time
  – Go out for pizza with the family
  – Read a book with a parent
  – Play video games
  – Go to a friend’s house
Material Rewards

- *Material Rewards* are objects the child wants
  - Fidget Spinners
  - Minecraft
  - Shopkins
  - Legos
  - New video game
  - Happy Meal
#2 – Don’t Accidentally Reward Problematic Behavior

- When misbehavior is rewarded, it is strengthened.
- Often happens when the youngster’s behavior becomes intolerable.
  - This is often referred to as “control by pain.”
  - Children also learn to “control by torture,” such as threatening to do something drastic (e.g., self-injure)
- Parents and children teach each other behaviors.
Accidentally Rewarding Behavior - Examples

• Giving a child what they want in a store to quell a public tantrum.

• Returning a cell phone that was previously taken away after problematic behavior because the child threatened to run away.

• After a child has been whining for a long time, his father stops what he is doing, scolds him, but then engages in a conversation with his son about what is bothering him.
#3 Correct unwanted behavior, but do so deliberately

• By deliberately we mean
  – Carefully thought out
  – Not a “knee-jerk” reaction

• Although rewarding is preferable, correcting unwanted or dangerous behavior has merit as it helps guide children
Examples of Correcting Behavior

- Scolding
- Natural Consequences
- Logical Consequences
- Time-Out
- Behavioral Penalties