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Basic Parenting 101:

THE MANUAL YOUR CHILD
SHOULD HAVE BEEN BORN WITH

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COURSE OBJECTIVES

1. You will study a solid overview of learning theory.
2. You will read real life examples of how children learn.
3. You will study ways to teach a complicated subject to parents who are coming to you for help with their children.
4. You will experience the power of story as a cognitive-behavioral therapeutic tool.
5. You will see ways to demystify psychotherapy for your patients.

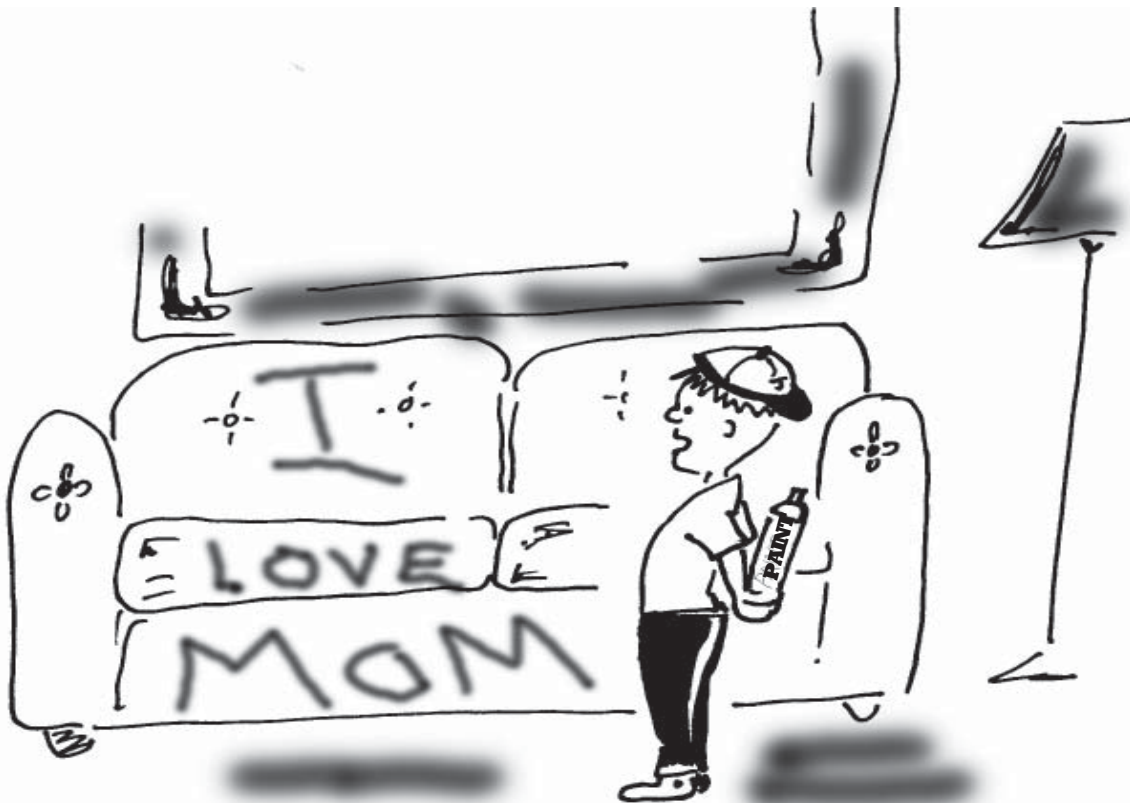
Tell me, I forget.

Show me, I remember.

Involve me, I understand.

Teaching Parents About How Their Children Learn

PeopleToons by PC



© 1999 Philip Coptich, Ph.D.

"You've got to believe me mom!
It really did sound good in my head."

INTRODUCTION

I am a Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapist. I tend not to tell my patients this because it would not make any sense to them. I introduce myself with, “Hi, I’m Dr. Phil. I solve problems. How’s your world?”

Usually, within the first few minutes, a new patient will say something like, “I’ve tried everything!” or “I’ve read all the books.” or “My last therapist told me...”

Many therapists tell me that this type of early confrontation worries them because they now have to deal with the teachings of others (good or bad). For me, I love this starting point.

I start by advocating, “I would think that you have lots of skills. My goal is to help you use your skills better and to add a few new ones— if we find that you need some support in one or two areas.”

At this point the new patient tends to relax a little and tells me one or two worries.

When I work with parents I often find that the most well meaning of them are missing basic parenting and coping skills. In this course we are going to look at how to teach basic learning theory in a way so that a loving parent can pick it up and use it. And I do mean use it. I find that the parents I work with are eager to try new ways of dealing with old problems; as long as I don’t try to stuff the new stuff down their throats. A major part of my therapy is teaching, but not in the high school or college way. I teach through stories. I tell vivid stories about solving problems. I let my patients walk out of each session with new eyes, with new skills embedded in a safe story. I want them to be able to get their minds around the new concept without feeling like they are wading through science or psycho-babble. I teach in the way we humans have probably passed down important information since the beginning of the extended family.

As you continue, you will find stories and information intertwined. Often I have a set agenda to cover in a session. I estimate that about fifty percent of the time that preconceived session occurs. I start with something like, “I would like to talk with you about how your son Bobby learns. You know the nuts and bolts about how his mind picks up information and stores it away so he can argue with you about it later. Is that OK with you?”

The other half the time, my plan goes right out the window when the patient walks in and says something like, “My first husband showed up drunk to pick up Bobby...” In this situation I deal with the parent’s most pressing concerns.

Other times I can segue into a psychotherapeutic teaching mode (Cognitive Psychotherapy). “It sounds like you dealt with that pretty well, as we discussed last session, we were going to talk

about how Bobby learns, is this a good time for us to do that?"

You may have noticed, I tend to ask for permission before I move on. I find that most people feel safer and are much more receptive to my stories if I ask permission to control the conversation for a few minutes.

So, if it is OK with you, let's talk about how children learn.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

How do children learn? This is a relatively new question. Until about 100 years ago, people assumed that children were just smaller versions of adults. But, since the industrial age, our view of children, as well as our expectations of ourselves has multiplied immensely.

My five year old, Joshua, was explaining to his grandmother that the remote control was a beam of light and that the beam of light went from the remote control to the VCR. His grandmother understood all that but just wanted CNN. Joshua gave up explaining the concept and just removed the pile of papers from in front of the VCR's sensor. Of course, Josh's grandmother thought he was a genius. I hope so— well, I am his father, and I also think he is a genius. One thing for sure, Josh is able to learn. You see, a few weeks prior, Ethan, age eight, had a similar but not as polite a conversation with his little brother about the infrared wonders of the remote control.

Ethan: Give me it. Give me it now.

Josh: No! I want to turn it up!

Ethan: Josh, Josh, Hurry up then ... you're so slow!

Josh: I'm not slow, it's broken. The thing don't work!

Ethan: Give it to me, I'll do it!

At this point the channel changer was dropped purposefully at Ethan's feet just as he tried to snatch it.

Ethan: What's wrong with this dumb thing. Josh, Josh ... move the papers from in front of the VCR ... Get out of the way ... Mom, Josh won't let me watch TV!

Josh learned that the channel changer will not work if the VCR sensor is covered with papers. He stored this knowledge and was able to retrieve it from the depths of his memory when his grand-

WHAT'S THAT NOISE?

The uterus isn't exactly the quietest place to hang out. Not only can a baby hear the sounds of his mom's body—her stomach growling, her heart beating, the occasional hiccup or burp—but he can also hear noises from beyond. If mom sits in a movie theater with state-of-the-art sound or walks by a noisy construction site, odds are the fetus will react to all the ruckus by kicking or shifting around.

Of course, not all sounds are the same. Perhaps the most significant one a baby hears in utero is his mother's voice. Around the seventh and eighth month, a fetus's heart rate slows down slightly whenever his mother is speaking, indicating that mom's voice has a calming effect.

By the time they're born, babies can actually recognize their mother's voice. In

mother had a similar problem.

This is a remarkable ability. Without trying we humans gather and store information in our minds, then retrieve it later when we need it. This is the most basic definition of learning. Our children are predisposed to learn. They are wired to be curious and to store information.

In this chapter we will look at the basic ways in which a child learns. By understanding this process we as parents can become better teachers of life's lessons.

I'M PETRIFIED OF ...

Mrs. Rizzo was very embarrassed. She entered my office and sat in a chair taking up as little space as she could possibly shrink into. She made no eye contact. She spoke softly, fighting off tears. The weight of the world was resting on her shoulders.

"I'm depriving my daughter of what she deserves." She testified, "I'm acting so selfish. But, I just can't help myself. I feel stupid coming to you with my problem. I'm sure you have real problems to deal with." Mrs. Rizzo was embarrassed to tell me that she was petrified of balloons. She had been fearful of them for many years. In fact, she can vividly recall the first time a balloon frightened her. She was six or seven years old.

I was at my aunt's home helping to set up for my cousin's birthday party. I was blowing up a balloon and I pushed my air into it as hard as I could. I wanted to see how big it could get. Just then, Boom! It exploded. I was so shocked, I froze. I couldn't take the next breath. My aunt grabbed me and shook me. She thought I had swallowed part of the balloon. I finally took a deep breath and started to cry. My mother came running into the kitchen and yelled at my aunt for letting me blow up the balloon. My mother was positive that I could damage my eye with a piece of exploding balloon.

The Rizzo family was planning a huge birthday party for Mary who was turning eleven. Mary had asked for a clown theme party. Mrs. Rizzo had okayed the plan and found a clown to entertain. The clown was a happy go lucky senior citizen who had a local reputation for fussing over each child during a party. When Mrs. Rizzo went to meet the jolly Jumpin' Judy she was treated to a small show of clown antics. One part of Jumpin' Judy's show included joke telling and balloon animal antics. Jumpin' Judy would tell rapid fire

one study, doctors gave day-old infants pacifiers that were connected to tape recorders. Depending on the babies' sucking patterns, the pacifiers either turned on a tape of their mother's voice or that of an unfamiliar woman's voice. The amazing result: "Within ten to twenty minutes, the babies learned to adjust their sucking rate on the pacifier to turn on their own mother's voice," says the study's coauthor William Fifer, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. "This not only points out a newborn's innate love for his mother's voice but also a baby's unique ability to learn quickly."

Laura Flynn McCarthy
Parenting



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jokes and blow up and tie balloon animals to illustrate the pun. In over forty years the jokes had barely changed. The kids loved them. Mrs. Rizzo explained:

She took a little green balloon off the table. She snapped it onto a hand held pump. In seconds it grew to a long thin curving tube. Pop! I couldn't catch my breath. I felt lightheaded. The room started to spin. I felt a heavy weight on my chest and I started to perspire. Judy, said something like, "Oops, I made a balloon angel." Then she noticed me. She asked if I was okay. I told her I had to go and practically ran to my car. That afternoon I went to work, I'm a waitress. There was a small kiddie party. The balloons scared me so much I told the manager that I had the flu and needed to go home. I must have looked like I had the flu. He wouldn't let me drive home until I was feeling better. I've ruined Mary's party! I told Jumpin' Judy no balloons!

What Mrs. Rizzo was suffering from was an anxiety attack brought on by her unrealistic fear of balloons. In a few sessions Mrs. Rizzo's fear was alleviated. Mary's party was a complete success, balloons and all.

So, what happened? How did Mrs. Rizzo become fearful of balloons? It happened through a process called **classical conditioning**.

Classical conditioning was first defined by Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936). You have probably heard of the Pavlovian Response which is usually thought of as a dog salivating to the sound of a tuning fork or bell. Pavlov found, during an experiment to understand the way salivary glands work, that the dogs salivated well before the food was placed in front of them. He noticed that the dogs salivated when they heard footsteps coming down the hallway. At first this made no sense, until it was observed that the food dishes were also carried down the same hallway. The dogs had learned that sometimes the sound of footsteps coming down the hall resulted in food being placed in front of them. Pavlov's observation and subsequent research was so revolutionary to the understanding of learning that he was honored with the Nobel Prize for his work.

People can be conditioned to positive or negative things. Mrs. Rizzo became conditioned to fear balloons. Let's look at how this occurred.

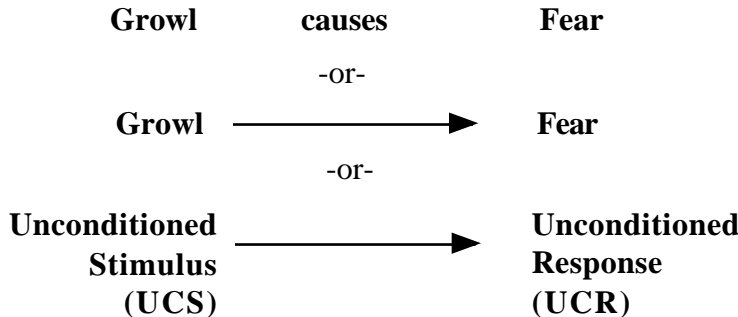
Mrs. Rizzo was born with the ability to feel fear. She has a naturally occurring response to fearful situations. This feeling of anxiety is a normal part of a person's neurological makeup. This fear is an

unconditioned response. In short hand this is written “**UCR.**” By definition a UCR is a naturally occurring response (behavior or feeling) to an **unconditioned stimulus (UCS)**. A stimulus is something in the world that causes a behavior. If Mrs. Rizzo was walking in the woods and heard a loud growl she would naturally feel fear. The loud growl would be the unconditioned stimulus and the fear would be the unconditioned response. Mrs. Rizzo did not have to learn to be fearful, that has been part of her since birth. The growl elicited, caused, her fearful behavior.

I have a big blackboard in my office and I'm not afraid to use it. Frequently I say, “This is complicated, let’s look at it on the *no spell-board*. Then I get up and diagram or draw or whatever. Usually in short order, patients are diagraming all sorts of stuff on the board. Some of my compulsive prone patients start off each session writing an outline on the board of what they wish to cover during the session.

The board is called “the no spell board” because spelling doesn’t count. I make it very clear that spelling or artistic skill or penmanship (within reason) doesn’t count so that people don’t get self-conscious and clam up.

As a diagram this looks like:



Prior to age seven, let’s say, Mrs. Rizzo was not fearful of balloons. But, when the balloon and the fear provoking loud pop (unconditioned stimulus) were connected in her mind, Mrs. Rizzo became fearful of balloons. The balloon is now said to be a **conditioned stimuli (CS)**. By definition a conditioned stimuli is a stimulus that acquired its power to cause a behavior. It initially lacked such power. The learned response is called a **conditioned response (CS)**. By definition a conditioned response is a learned response of the autonomic nervous system caused by a conditioned stimulus. This connection is the process of classical conditioning, one of the ways we all learn. With repeated exposure, Mrs. Rizzo became so fearful of balloons she didn’t want to be in the same room with them.

By unintentionally connecting the balloon popping with her fear, Mrs. Rizzo’s brain connected the two as being about the same

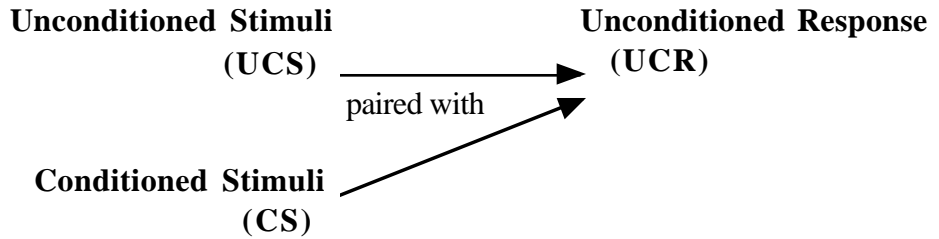
stimuli. She learned to be fearful of balloons.

As a diagram this looks like:

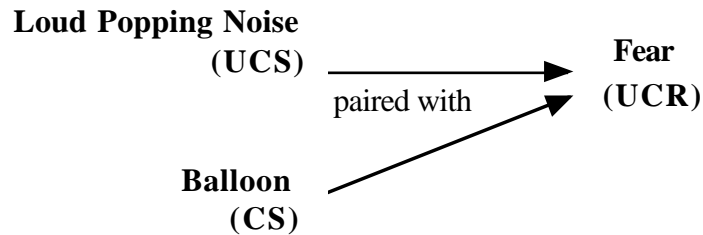
At first-

Loud popping noise → Fear

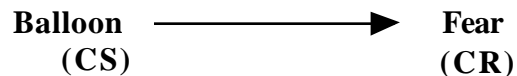
With pairing over time-



-or-



Over time this changes to look like:



These labels and the initials are very complicated for everyone. I make sure that my patients know that they are brain twisters and that there won't be a test. (You also will not be tested on these brain twisters.) I make sure they have a copy of the next few side bars in hand as we go over this. The goal is for mom and dad to realize that parenting is complicated and that as parents we can accidentally teach inappropriate things to our children. With that said, we can also help by un-teaching stuff (extinction).

Repeated pairings of the balloon (CS) with the loud noise (UCS) taught Mrs. Rizzo to experience fear when she was in close proximity to a balloon. Please note, this was not a choice that Mrs. Rizzo had. She would have loved not to feel the fear. In fact, she believed the fear to be unrealistic. But her fears were

very real, even overpowering. She was unable to override her conditioned response by thought. Mrs. Rizzo needed to be unconditioned. In eight hours, over a two week period, she unlearned her fear of balloons. (We will discuss how we “unlearn” later in this chapter.)

AMY AND THE CHOW CHOW

Amy was a tall thin girl of nine when I first met her. She was social, outgoing, and quick witted. Her mother was very concerned that, as she put it, “Amy has screaming fits whenever she sees a dog.” As it turned out, Amy was well known for her uncontrollable screaming whenever she saw a dog, even a puppy. Dogs were so fear provoking for Amy, that when she was in the school library a poster of a chow chow and a kitten set her off into a siren of tortured fear. Amy’s mother explained, “The principal suggested I bring her to a therapist before it got out of hand. Out of hand! She would have to explode to get more out of hand.”

Amy’s mother had no idea why her daughter was so fearful of dogs. Amy was well adjusted, she had never been attacked by a dog, and she seemed to love all other animals.

HOW DID AMY LEARN TO BE FEARFUL OF DOGS?

Below you will find a diagram for classical conditioning. Fill in the blanks and see if you can explain how Amy learned to be petrified of pooches.

Make up your own scenario as a starting off point. Try to imagine the process it would take to become fearful of a dog. I advise you to only take a few minutes on each question. This is just for fun. I will go over my theory on the next page. Enjoy figuring out the puzzle.

A few questions to ponder:

You may find it helpful to play along with this and write down your answers on a separate sheet of paper.

What caused Amy’s initial fear?



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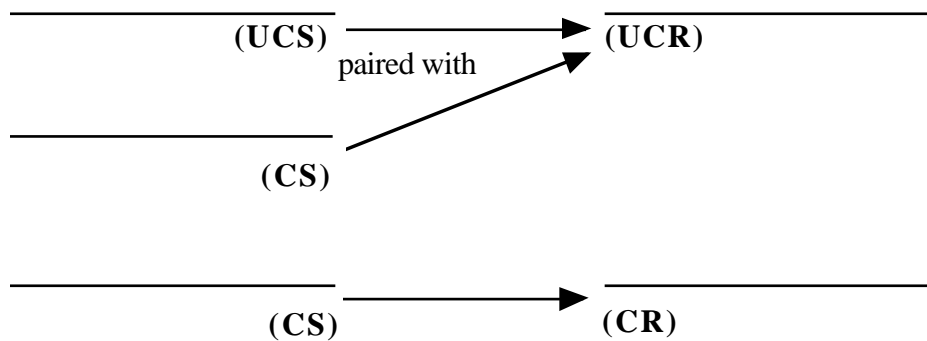
Generalization (stimulus): The tendency of a stimulus, similar to the conditioned stimulus (CS), to cause the conditioned response (CR).

Desensitization: A process of unlearning unwanted responses learned through classical conditioning. (Sometimes called classical extinction)

How did Amy learn to be afraid of dogs? (Your best guess)

What got paired in Amy's mind?

How would you diagram the classical conditioning?



WHAT CAUSED AMY'S INITIAL FEAR?

Amy's initial fear was an unconditioned response. Amy was born with a full package of feelings. One of these feelings is her ability to be fearful. For the most part this ability is very helpful. It helps her to react to danger, to protect herself. This fear is a response of the autonomic nervous system, a reaction. If we had to think about pulling our fingers away from a hot stove, versus having that response controlled by the autonomic nervous system, we would all possess burn scarred fingers. The autonomic nervous system (not under our direct thought control) is substantially faster than cognition (controlled by thought). We will never know exactly what happened. However, we can come up with a likely scenario.

One weekend at the lake, I observed a young couple and their

toddler playing in the sand. At one point, the curious toddler wandered twenty feet astray and went to visit a lonely puppy staked out next to a blanket and a large ice chest. The toddler showed no fear of the puppy. The puppy showed no fear of the toddler. In a few minutes the two of them became close friends. So close that the puppy wound his leash around the toddler's feet, pulling him to the ground. At this moment, mom observed the new friendship. She ran over and picked up her small child. He began to cry. Mom became upset and yelled at the bouncing puppy for scratching her leg. As she carried her child back to her blanket she told him in a stern voice, "You stay with mommy, that doggy could bite you."

The toddler, who was not interested in sunbathing, escaped from his mother and ran towards the puppy. At this point mom screamed, frightening her child and all others in ear shot. The baby plopped down on his bottom and cried heavily.

I would think that this kind of pairing would cause the average child to learn to fear dogs.

WHAT GOT PAIRED IN AMY'S MIND?

Somehow Amy experienced the pairing of a fear provoking stimulus, such as mom's screaming (UCS), with the presence of a dog (CS), causing fear to be a conditioned response (CR).

HOW WOULD YOU DIAGRAM THE CLASSICAL CONDITIONING?



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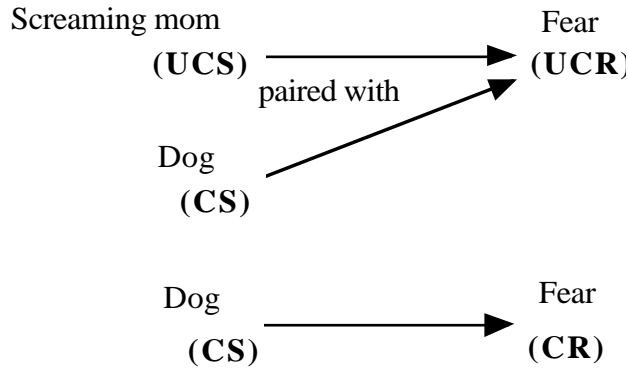
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GENERALIZATION

Amy became fearful of all sorts of dogs. She was uncomfortable around collies and perplexed with poodles. In fact, even a poster of a chow chow scared her. This is due to a phenomenon called stimulus **generalization**. Amy, as with all of us, generalized her fear to similar stimuli. The shape of the dog, the size of the dog, or the disposition of the dog did not matter. Anything in her “fear category” was defined as a *dog*, and to Amy all *dogs* provoked fear. By definition, generalization is the tendency of a stimulus, similar to the conditioned stimulus (CS), to cause the conditioned response (CR).

We often see stimulus generalization when young children begin to learn language. Most parents have at least one embarrassing incident associated with when baby finally calls her father “Dada.” Over the next few days or weeks she calls every man she sees, “Dada.” This generalization is the natural progression of learning. It tends to decrease as a person gets older. However, it is still a powerful reality even for adults. I have seen many adults in the corporate world experience stimulus generalization to their own detriment.

Mr. Carlson was having angry thoughts about his new supervisor. He openly stated that he barely knew the new boss. He had no history of trouble with other supervisors. When I asked him who his new supervisor reminded him of, he shed light on his internal conflict. “Now that you mention it,” he pondered, “He looks a lot like my brother. He is such a dishonest bastard I can’t stand him!” Even in his explanation I wasn’t sure if he was talking about his brother or the new supervisor. Mr. Carlson was experiencing stimulus generalization.

DESENSITIZATION

Earlier we met Mrs. Rizzo, a woman who was overwhelmed in

the presence of balloons. Her fear brought much discomfort to her work and home life. Mrs. Rizzo and I used a learning process called **desensitization** to decrease Mrs. Rizzo's fear of balloons.

Desensitization simply involved reteaching Mrs. Rizzo that balloons are not fear provoking. This reteaching took shape by having Mrs. Rizzo spend time with balloons when she did not feel anxious. This sounds so simple, but it tends to be very tricky. In Mrs. Rizzo's case, the fact that she was coming to my office to deal with her fear of balloons caused her to feel nervous.

While sitting privately in the waiting room, I explained to her that we were going to solve her problem with balloons. And, that we would solve this problem at her speed. This was very important to her. She was trying to trust me but, in the back of her mind she was concerned about having to confront her fear. If you think about it, she had spent most of her life avoiding her fear. By avoiding balloons she did not have to deal with her discomfort.

Mrs. Rizzo and I continued our session sitting at a round table. I asked her to teach me what it was about balloons that scared her. I softly asked questions about her discomfort.

Dr. Phil: How close to a balloon can you come before feeling discomfort?

Mrs. Rizzo: I can't touch them.

Dr. Phil: I understand, touching them would make you feel uncomfortable. Could you watch a balloon on TV?

Mrs. Rizzo: Sure. It can't hurt me.

Dr. Phil: Could you hold a photograph of a balloon?

Mrs. Rizzo: I could, it isn't real.

Dr. Phil: Would you be okay with a balloon on a chair across a large room?

Mrs. Rizzo: Yes, but I couldn't go over to it. You're not going to make me do that are you?

Dr. Phil: As I told you in the waiting room. I work for you. I will not make you do anything. Is that okay with you?

Mrs. Rizzo: It sure is. I don't want to touch a balloon! (She said with a sour face.)

Dr. Phil: Would you feel relaxed if a balloon was sitting

The process of desensitization is critical in dealing with children who have failed repeatedly in school and are "turned off" to learning in school. In much the same way as the individual runs from the snake, these children "run" from learning through belligerence, apathy, or any other technique that gets them away from the stimuli they have learned to fear.

Donald MacMillion

Anything learned can be unlearned.

I would rather make my name than inherit it.
W.M. Thackeray

over there on the couch? (I pointed to the couch 15 feet away.)

Mrs. Rizzo: Would I have to touch it?

Dr. Phil: No.

Mrs. Rizzo: I could do that.

Dr. Phil: How about if the balloon was half way between us and the couch?

Mrs. Rizzo: No, No way ... That is just too close.

Just the thought of the balloon 7 feet away on the floor was causing her agitation.

Dr. Phil: Could you hold a balloon?

Mrs. Rizzo: I don't think so.

Dr. Phil: Could you blow up a balloon?

Mrs. Rizzo: Are you nuts! (She looked astonished.)

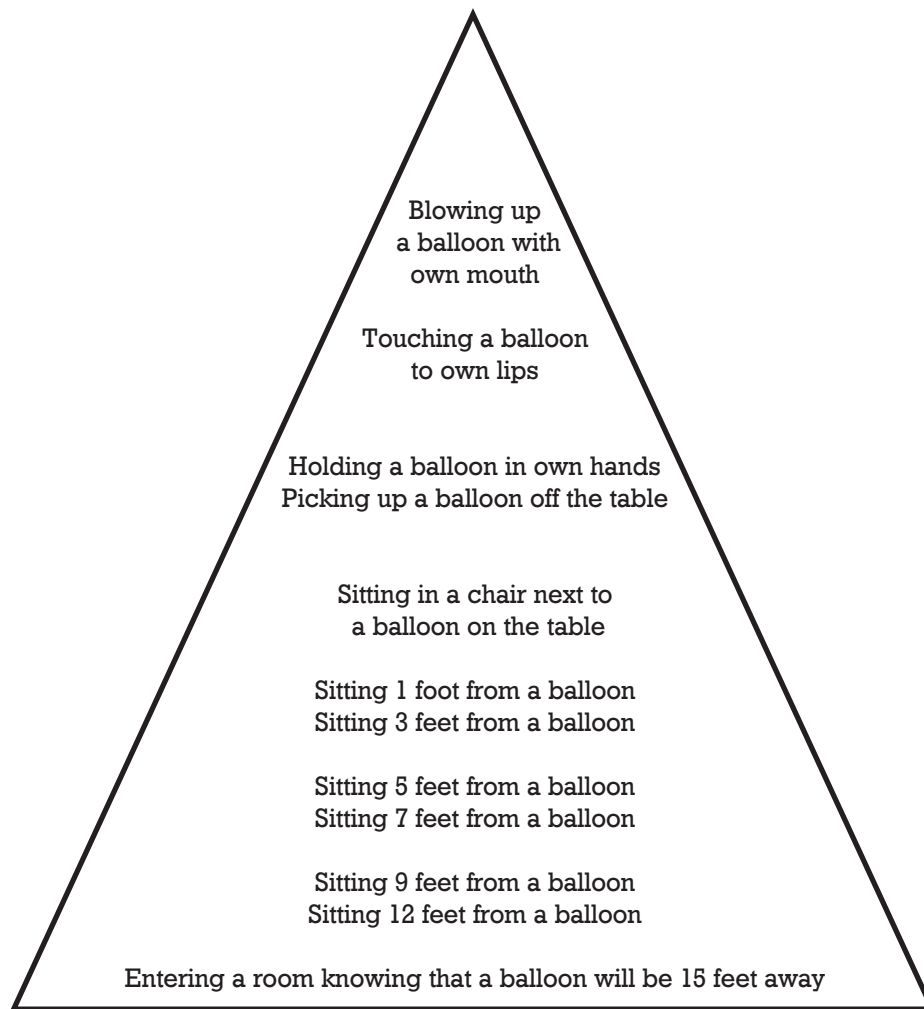
What this gentle line of questioning accomplished was a hierarchy of fear. A way of measuring and categorizing Mrs. Rizzo's level of fear. At the top of the hierarchy, the most fear provoking activity was blowing up a balloon, at the other end was watching a balloon on TV. The bottom of the hierarchy was the starting point of Mrs. Rizzo's relearning and the top of the hierarchy was Mrs. Rizzo's goal. (At this point we didn't even talk about the specifics of "our goal." That could send Mrs. Rizzo running into the street yelling, "Dr. Phil is crazy, Dr. Phil is crazy ... He wants me to blow up a balloon!" That would really get the eye doctor's staff next door talking. I simply told Mrs. Rizzo that our goal was for her to become comfortable around balloons.)

Mrs. Rizzo's balloon fear hierarchy looked like Fig 1:

The hierarchy is pyramid shaped. At the top we have the most fear provoking activity while at the bottom the lowest fear provoking activity. If we extend the pyramid, we would have all things that cause no fear whatsoever. Sometimes we need to start dealing with a problem very far from the top of the pyramid. We start where we can start, without passing judgment.

I met with Mrs. Rizzo, every few days over a two week period. Each time we started at the highest place on the hierarchical pyramid that she was comfortable. Then we slowly moved up the pyramid. This movement was simply a question of choice, "May I bring

HIGHEST LEVEL OF FEAR



LOWEST LEVEL OF FEAR

FIG. 1

the balloon one foot, a half foot or an inch closer?" If she said no, we talked about controlling our discomfort by breathing. If she said yes, I slowly moved the balloon closer. At no point was pressure used. The goal was for Mrs. Rizzo to get used to the presence of the balloon, for her to relearn the pairing of the balloon as a neutral stimulus. Mrs. Rizzo was being reconditioned to the true nature of the balloon.

The conditioned stimulus (presence of balloons) was weakened when it appeared alone so often that Mrs. Rizzo no longer exhibited the conditioned response (fear of balloon). At this point Mrs. Rizzo's fear of balloons is said to be *desensitized*.

By our fourth session, Mrs. Rizzo was comfortable sitting holding an inflated balloon. During the fifth session she was comfortable blowing air into a deflated balloon. At the end of only two weeks, Mrs. Rizzo was happily talking about the upcoming birthday party.

How to teach your children not to listen ...

Most parents tend to talk to their children from the negative. "Didn't you finish your homework yet?" "Stop yelling at your brother!" or "Didn't I tell you yesterday ...". This parental negativity tends to teach our children to stop listening.

Responses may be altered by their effects on the environment

E.L. Thorndike

Law of Effect: Behaviors (responses) that lead to positive outcomes (as defined by the child) are increased and behaviors that lead to negative outcomes are decreased.

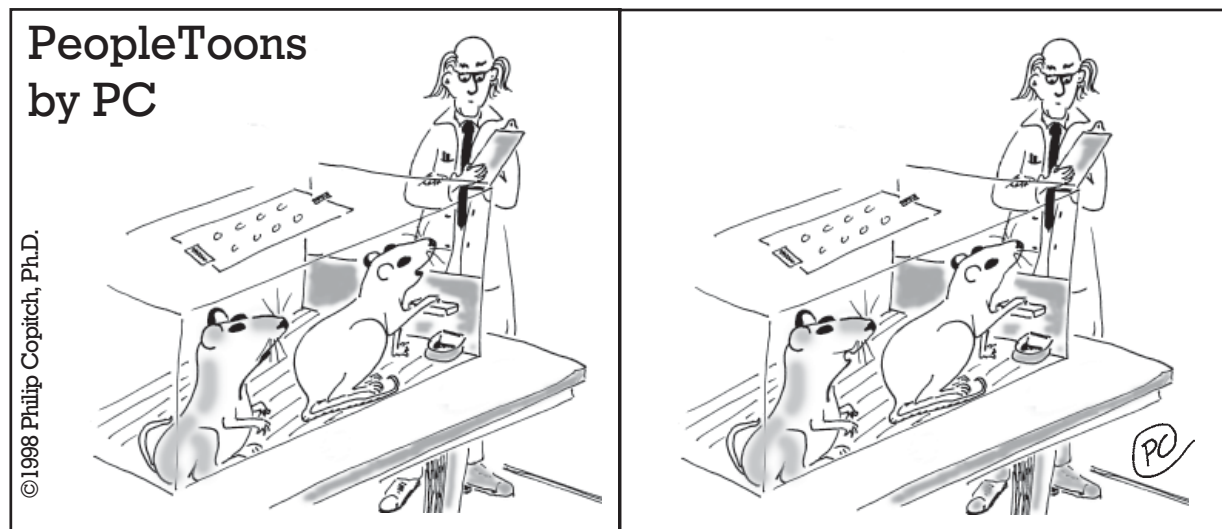
Through the process of extinction we unpaired the initial conditioning by reconditioning a new response to balloons. Mrs. Rizzo felt triumphant.

The same process was implemented to recondition Amy with her fear of dogs. We developed a hierarchy of contact with dogs that caused Amy's fear. We methodically relearned a more comfortable relationship for Amy with dogs. Within a month, Amy and I went to the county pound to befriend dogs and cats.

Due to the powerful effect of classical conditioning, we parents need to keep our eyes open to what we may be accidentally teaching our children by pairing conditioned and unconditioned stimuli. Children are sponges needing to soak in information. I was in a local supermarket and heard one mom say, "I told you not to touch that. If you touch that, the policeman (pointing to a uniformed guard) will take you off to jail! Do you want to go to jail?" The guard playing along with the mom, put his hand on his gun and leered at the toddler. It will not take many pairings such as this for a toddler to learn that "police" take you to jail and that police are scary. I point this out, because this innocent looking interaction is well learned by our children.

In classical conditioning the process of learning is thought to be "passive." The child elicits a response. This response is reflexive in nature. The loud noise makes the child jump. The puff of air makes the child's eye blink. The child is passively being influenced by the stimuli. Next we will learn about an interactive teaching method called operant conditioning.

BILLY THE BOMBER



"Check this out Charley, I've taught that scientist to give me food every time I hit this lever."

"Wow, they aren't as dumb as they look."

Billy was referred to my office by his probation officer. That within itself was a cause for alarm. You see, Billy was a scrawny, blond haired, mouse of a child. He was nine years old on the day I met him. He was frail looking and at first glance he looked all of six. Billy had been expelled from three schools in a nine week period. Other students' parents had formed impromptu groups in two of the schools to demand that Billy be stopped. Things got so out of hand, the principal of the third school called the police and requested assistance from the county probation department.

Earlier in the week, when I talked to the probation officer by phone, he asked if I was willing to see this lad. "Sure, he sounds like my kind of kid," I exclaimed. "Really?" He queried, "What did I say that makes you think this is a nice kid?" I explained:

I didn't say he was a nice kid. I said he was my kind of kid. It seems to me that this kid must be brilliant. He has three principals perplexed and is able to get parents to come to school. Parents don't even show up for teacher conferences any more. I'm looking forward to meeting him.

Through no fault of his own, Billy lived in a foster home. His mother had severe mental problems and his father was not known. Billy had not had contact with any family members since he was three.

Billy was brought to my office by his foster mother. He had lived with her for about three months. (He was asked to leave his last foster home due to his negative behaviors.) When I first met Billy he bopped into my office and plopped into a stuffed rocking chair. He looked me straight in the eye and announced, "So, you're my new shrink. Why you so !@#\$\$% fat?"

"Because I eat too much." I answered. "How come you're here?" (At this point I knew I was in for a great therapeutic ride, Billy was most definitely my kind of kid.)

Billy: I had to come here because the !@#\$\$% told me to.

Dr. Phil: You do what you're told?

Billy: Most of the time, I only *@%! up some times. How about you, are you a !@#\$\$%& up?

Dr. Phil: Sometimes, mainly when I try hard.

Billy: You don't mind if I !@#\$\$% swear?



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- Dr. Phil: Swear? What do you mean?
- Billy: You know fat man!
- Dr. Phil: I don't care about words very much. You can swear in here if you need to. So, how come you had to come here?
- Billy: Mr. Dickhead (probation officer) told my new mom that I had to.
- Dr. Phil: How come?
- Billy: Because the kids all call me 'Billy the Bomber.'
- Dr. Phil: How come?
- Billy: 'Cause I can spit so good.
- Dr. Phil: Spit good?
- Billy: Yeah, don't you @##@\$, oh- I'm sorry. Don't you listen?
- Dr. Phil: Sure I do, but I just don't understand.
- Billy: Man! When the kids get in my face I spit at them.
- Dr. Phil: Does it work?
- Billy: Sure enough. They all fall down, or run. No one likes to get spit on. Don't you know nothin'?
- Dr. Phil: Give me a break, I'm fat. I just don't get it. You like to spit on your friends?
- Billy: No man! I don't have no friends. I spit on the other kids.
- Dr. Phil: Oh, I get it. You don't have any friends.
- Billy: I didn't come here to talk about friends, I came here to talk about spittin'!

As it turned out, Billy had learned to keep people away by spitting at them. He had quite a record. He wasn't allowed on any school bus. He wasn't allowed out at recess. He wasn't allowed in a classroom desk row. His spitting worked very well for him. He had pushed his world away. Parents in the school secretly talked about Billy the Bomber. It got back to the principal of school number two that Billy

must be crazed because of the AIDS virus and that he was endangering the other children by spitting on them. The facts didn't seem to matter. Billy didn't have AIDS. But the rumors persisted.

Billy was in need of crisis counseling. Before Billy could attend another school, his spitting behavior had to stop. As we discussed earlier, any behavior that can be learned can be unlearned. Seeing Billy was in control of his behavior (spitting), desensitization through classical conditioning would not work. As you recall, in classical conditioning, the child is passively taught. In this case, Billy was involved with his learning.

When the response of the child influences their surroundings, it is known as **operant conditioning**. In the model of learning called operant conditioning, the responses of the child "operate" on the environment to produce rewarding consequences.

In 1911, E.L. Thorndike explained the **Law of Effect**. Thorndike showed that when learning, *responses may be altered by their effects on the environment*. What this means in plain speak is that behaviors (responses) that lead to positive outcomes (as defined by the child) are increased and behaviors that lead to negative outcomes are decreased. Simply, Thorndike noted what we all know, if something works for us, we do it again, if it doesn't work for us, we stop doing it.

Let's go back to Billy. Somehow he had learned to spit when he was upset. When I asked Billy how he started spitting, he told me, "I always have." I'm pretty sure Billy didn't pop out of the womb and spit at the hospital staff, at least not intentionally. Spitting, for Billy was an adaptive behavior. One he learned to use to get a need met, "...get kids out of my face."

I would imagine it all started something like this. Little Billy was feeling picked on by some other child. He felt frustrated. He felt angry. He wanted the other child to leave him alone, then it happened. Splat! Billy spat at the other child. The other child was not overcome with joy and he ran off to some adult to tell on Billy. Did you see the reinforcement? Billy was reinforced when the other kid got out of his face right after Billy spat at him. Billy got his needs met. Billy was rewarded (kid left) for his behavior (spitting). A behavior that is reinforced will increase.

The reward in Billy's case was the removal of an adverse stimulus (the other kid). This is an example of **negative reinforcement**. By definition, negative reinforcement is the removal of an adverse (negative) stimulus that increases a response. We know it increased Billy's response (spitting), he was raining down like El Nino.

Negative reinforcement tends to be tricky to understand. Many confuse it with punishment. But you can keep it clear in your thoughts if you remember that it is a reinforcement; it increases the likelihood of a behavior. It is a reward. The reward in negative reinforcement is the removal of the negative stimulus.

Punishment is the most common technique for weakening behavior, which is, at the same time the most complex and controversial.

E.P. Reese

One day, for the fun of it, when I was setting the dinner table, I placed a small piece of candy under each of my children's plates. By the end of the meal I had forgotten about their little surprise. When one of the boys started to clear his plate he found the candy. What fun! Both boys thought that this treat should be repeated at every meal. The next morning, my youngest, then four, came to the breakfast table and tilted his bowl, spilling milk and cereal. "What are you doing?" I questioned. "Where is my candy?" He asked sadly. I had accidentally taught my four year old to spill his cereal. Which, incidently, he did regularly without my help. For days my kids looked under stuff at every meal. The boys were positively reinforced to look under their plates. This is an example of **positive reinforcement**. By definition, a positive reinforcer is a stimulus that increases the likelihood of a response. Finding the candy under the plate increased the likelihood of the children looking under the plates.

EXTINCTION

Mrs. Messick was concerned about her four year old daughter. She explained:

Wendy is a very bright little girl. She is so sweet, but... she refuses to pick up after herself. It has become a huge battle. I'm getting to the point that I'm afraid to ask her to pick up her own toys. When I do she throws a fit. She yells and screams as if she is being beaten. I'm concerned that my neighbors may think that I'm beating her. But she has to learn how to pick up after herself.

My advice to Mrs. Messick was to ignore the screaming and be honest to her reasonable request. This turned out to be a real chore for Mrs. Messick. The following week she told me what had happened.

I did just what you told me. At first I thought that this would never work. I even told my husband that you were silly. I just didn't think that something this major could be solved so simply.

I visited all my neighbors and told them a little about my problem. I told them that we never beat Wendy and that the increased screaming over the next week was your fault. I'm sorry Dr. Phil, I just didn't think it was going to work.

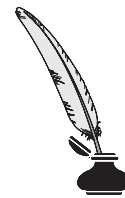
That same afternoon I told Wendy that she was a big girl and would have to pick up after herself. She seemed to accept this with no problem. Just before

dinner I asked her to pick up her toys in the living room. She went nuts. In minutes she was screaming at the top of her lungs. I ignored her. After three or four minutes she was the loudest I had ever heard her. After about five minutes of this screaming she came into the kitchen and calmly asked why she had to pick up her toys. I told her again about being a big girl and her responsibility. She went nuts, again! I did what you told me and calmly walked away. She followed me—screaming! I went into the bathroom and she sat at the door crying and yelling about how picking up her toys was too hard to do all by herself. She even kicked at the bathroom door a few times. This went on for another five minutes. Then she stopped. The house was too quiet so I went looking for her. She was in her room playing with the toys that had been in the living room. She seemed just fine ... as if she had never cried at all. Over the next few days we played the same game, but only for a few minutes each time. It seems like a miracle. The last few days she just picked up her toys as if she had never had a problem. She just complains a little, just like a kid should.

With a big smile on her face she asked, “How do I get my husband to pick up his dirty clothing?”

What seemed like a miracle to Mrs. Messick is actually called **extinction**. Mrs. Messick extinguished Wendy’s learned behavior (the tantrum) by not reinforcing Wendy’s crying and screaming behaviors. Remember, behaviors have to be reinforced or they weaken (occur less). When mom backed down and picked up Wendy’s toys she was teaching Wendy to tantrum. The positive reinforcer of picking up Wendy’s toys was working quite well for Wendy. But Mrs. Messick did not want to teach this so, she had to extinguish that learned behavior. By not reinforcing Wendy’s crying tantrum the tantrum stopped working for Wendy. By definition, extinction is the process in which a learned response, which is no longer reinforced, reverts to its preconditioned level.

It is also interesting to note that Wendy’s crying was a negative reinforcement on her mom’s behavior of picking up Wendy’s toys. When mom backed down and picked up the toys she was able to turn off the aversive stimulus of Wendy’s crying. This removal of an aversive stimulus reinforced mom to continue picking up the toys. (This circular reinforcement can keep us parents up at night if we think too hard about all the layers of reinforcement in our life.)



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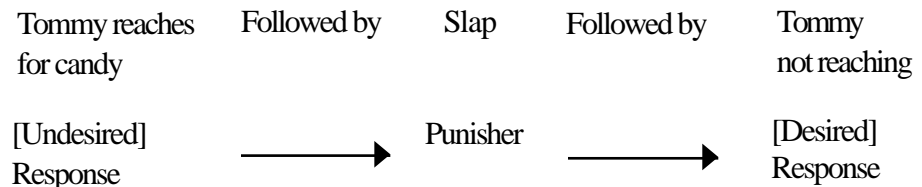
PUNISHMENT

For most parents, punishment is the most often used behavior controlling mechanism. While shopping in a local supermarket I observed a little boy who looked to be about four years old. His mother's patience was wearing thin. Over the next four or five minutes her statements went from, "Not now Tommy!" to "Tommy, damn it! Do you want a spanking?"

When I got to the checkout, by chance, there was Tommy, sitting in the child seat looking angry. Mom was conducting business with the cashier when she spied Tommy reaching for the candy shelf just inches from his grasp. Slap! Like a King Cobra, mom slapped Tommy's hand without missing a beat of her checkout conversation.

Tommy recoiled his hand. Held it to his chest and seemed only a little bothered by the slap. This is what most parents understand punishment to be. Tommy got his hand slapped so he should now know not to reach for candy. Specifically, Tommy's reaching is the response that his mother found to be undesirable. The slap is an aversive stimulus designed to decrease the likelihood of the undesired response. The slap caused Tommy to replace the undesirable behavior (reaching for candy) with a different behavior, not reaching for candy (desired response).

This looks like:



By definition, punishment is the presentation of an aversive stimulus, following an undesired response, that decreases the likelihood of that undesired response.

The actual use of punishment is quite complicated. A few seconds following mom slapping Tommy's hand Tommy reached his left foot out towards the candy shelf. Mom slapped the foot and exclaimed, "Tommy, stop being a pain, just sit still!" Tommy then reached with his right foot and was able to kick the candy box off the shelf. M & M packets covered the floor. Mom got angry. Tommy got angry. The cashier seemed unphased. As mom pushed the cart with screaming Tommy out of the store, the cashier said to me, "People should leave their damn kids at home, they give me a headache."

Punishment is a powerful teaching tool. However, it has two major drawbacks to its effectiveness. First, for punishment to be effective it must be severe. If not, its effectiveness is only tempo-

rary. Second, punishment brings to the relationship powerful feelings such as anger and revenge which can destroy a positive learning situation. Let's look at each of these drawbacks individually.

For punishment to be effective it must be severe, if not the lesson is only learned for the short term. Tommy did not truly learn not to reach for the candy. If the punishment was severe enough to teach that we would call it child abuse. My friend Stephan is a locksmith and he is very good at his job. I bring this up because once he suffered an accident to his hand. He was preparing to take out the garbage. When he was pushing the refuse down into the can a glass jar, under the top papers, broke. A large piece of glass protruded up and severely cut his hand between his thumb and palm. The damage was massive, limiting the movement of his thumb. Years later I watched him while he was closing up his shop. As he was taking out the garbage I asked him what he was looking for. "I'm looking for something to push the garbage down with," he said as he held up his damaged hand, "You won't catch me using my hand to do it." Stephan had learned, through the learning process of punishment, not to push garbage into a garbage can with his hand. The lesson had been well learned over fifteen years earlier.

For Stephan, the act of pushing garbage down (response) was followed by the severe pain of the glass cutting deep into his hand (punisher) causing a different behavior. He now uses something to push the garbage down (desired response). Please note, this just happened. Stephan was punished by chance, severely. Due to the severity, the lesson was well learned.

In the real world of parenting, for punishment to work, the severity of the punisher would be much too severe for a parent to implement. Tommy's mom could probably teach Tommy not to reach for candy by criminally (child abuse) hurting Tommy's little hand. Obviously, this would be outrageous. Most parents learn that punishment produces only short term learning.

The second major undesirable effect of punishment is the emotional turmoil that can develop.

On a regular basis I have parents tell me:

I can't believe I can't get through to my kids.

Will my children ever learn?

What do I have to do to get through to them? I grounded them last week for the exact same problem!

And I hear children say:

My parents don't understand ... all they do is yell at me.

My folks don't even know who I am!



Quick Reference Guide

Schedules of Reinforcement-

1. Fixed-ratio schedule of reinforcement: Reinforcement is given after a fixed number of correct behaviors.
2. Fixed-interval schedule of reinforcement: Reinforcement is given for the first desired behavior following a specific period of time.
3. Variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement: Reinforcement is given after a varying number of desired responses.
4. Variable-interval schedule of reinforcement: Reinforcement is given for the desired behavior based on a varying interval of time.

What do I have to do to get my parents to understand. They grounded me last week for the same thing. I just don't care!

Mr. Knapp came to my office out of frustration. He said his fourteen year old daughter, Ellen was out of control. "I can't get her to do anything. Even when I spank her she just yells, 'You don't own me!' I've grounded her, taken away her stuff and told her that she can't have her driver's license next year. Nothing seems to get through to her!"

Ellen was a bright and stubborn young lady. During our first family counseling session, she stated the situation quite clearly. "I don't care what my mom and dad do! They can't hurt me. I haven't cried from a spanking since I was seven!"

What Mr. Knapp was experiencing was the disruptiveness of emotions that destroy the limited effect of punishment. The act of punishing a child brings up in the child many disruptive thoughts and feelings. These feelings tend to get in the way of our goal as parents, to teach our children appropriate social behaviors. It is common for a child to receive punishment for a misbehavior, only to stomp off to their room and spend the next few hours focusing on their parents' behavior, the act of punishment, rather than their own inappropriate behavior.

God could not be everywhere, therefore he made mothers.

The Talmud

TIMING IS VERY IMPORTANT

This next section is very confusing for the average parent. I don't get bogged down with the particulars. The important part is that parents learn that the timing of their reward and punishment is very important. I find that by telling the following stories this concept is understood at a gut level. Very few parents need or want to learn the particulars of each of the following. However, the general facts are very important to understand when trying to change a child's behavior.

Mrs. Babcock read in a children's magazine about a parenting technique that helped toddlers pick up after themselves with little fuss. So she tried it. She made a chart on a piece of paper showing the days of the week followed by three circles. She told her daughter, Mandy (age 3), that after breakfast, lunch, and dinner it was clean up time. She explained to Mandy that if she helped clean up her toys with mommy, mommy would put a sticker on the correct circle. Mandy was very excited by the colorful stickers. Over the next two weeks Mandy was reasonably helpful in picking up her belongings.

On the two week anniversary of the sticker chart mom couldn't locate the stickers. She looked high and low but had to tell Mandy

that she had no stickers to give. Mandy went ballistic and threw her toys at her mom. From what I was told, Mandy was an accurate little pitcher, future Baseball Hall of Fame material.

To this point we have discussed continuous schedules of reinforcement, which simply means, every time the correct behavior is shown, the child receives a reward. Every time Mandy helped with the clean up, she received a sticker for her chart. One act of helping earned one reward sticker. This is written as 1:1 (1 to 1).

In the real world, reinforcement is seldom 1:1. In the real world reinforcement is usually *partial* (not 1:1). Psychologists have investigated this fact and have grouped reinforcement into schedules. There are four major groups of reinforcement parents need to understand. Each type of reinforcement has its place in teaching our children.

FIXED-RATIO SCHEDULE OF REINFORCEMENT

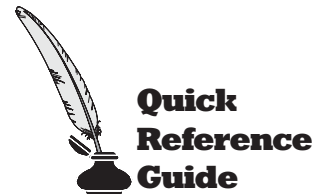
In a fixed-ratio schedule, reinforcement is given after a fixed number of correct behaviors. So, in the example above, Mandy was reinforced on a schedule of 1:1. Every time. However, if she had been given a sticker after three helpful cleanup experiences, the ratio would be 3:1 (3 behaviors to 1 reward).

Learning with a fixed-ratio schedule tends to be the quickest of all schedules. This makes sense. Mandy was able to connect the reward with the desired behavior easily. However, unlearning behavior (extinction) is also quick with a fixed-ratio schedule of reinforcement. Mandy knew right away that she wasn't receiving any reinforcement so she stopped picking up.

Workers who get paid by the piece or by commission tend to be highly productive as long as the reinforcement is received. I once knew a commissioned car salesman who almost got into a fist fight with the sales manager when asked to vacuum the showroom. In the salesman's eyes he was there to sell cars. He didn't get paid to pick up around the showroom. Without the direct reinforcement both the car salesman and Mandy refused to help out around the place.

FIXED-INTERVAL SCHEDULE OF REINFORCEMENT

In a fixed-interval schedule, reinforcement is given to the first desired behavior following a specific period of time. For example, Mr. Randel was a strict parent. He believed that his military training was pivotal in his success as an adult. In the Randel family bedroom inspections were Sunday at 5 PM. At 5 PM sharp, Mr. Randel walked through his children's rooms. If they were shipshape he would leave their allowance on their pillows. He was proud to say, "At 5:01 my children's rooms are perfect." He was sheepish to say,



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“By Monday morning the rooms look like a war zone. I can’t believe how undisciplined my children are.”

A fixed-interval schedule of reinforcement tends to show rapid learning, but the results are sporadic. The Randel children, all nine of them, cleaned their rooms Sunday afternoon. The Randel children learned to anticipate the reinforcement and were ready to receive it at 5 PM Sunday.

A fixed-interval schedule of reinforcement is used in most school testing situations. The student knows when the test is and studies (crams) just before. Right after the test the desired behavior, studying, rapidly decreases.

VARIABLE-RATIO SCHEDULE OF REINFORCEMENT

My beloved wife, Mrs. Copitch, is an elementary school teacher. She has this classroom currency called *Copitch Cash*. If you are caught being kind, helpful or just down right wonderful you receive \$1 *Copitch Cash*. At the end of the week the *Copitch Cash* can be used in the class store or saved for bigger and better goodies. Don’t tell the students, but Mrs. Copitch wants every child to earn lots of *Copitch Cash* throughout the week. She knows, hopefully from all her proof reading of my work over the years, that a variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement is a powerful and long term learning mechanism. Let’s say, for example, that Mrs. Copitch wants every child to earn at least three dollars in *Copitch Cash* per day. The students know that there is potential cash to be had. They just don’t know when they are going to be “caught being nice.” Sometimes they do nice things 36 times before getting caught. Other times they get caught on their third nice behavior. This schedule of reinforcement takes a little longer to teach but the durability of the behavior is greater.

In a variable-ratio schedule, the reinforcement is given after a varying number of desired responses. In the adult world, a variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement is the key to how a casino gets gamblers to play slot machines. The slot machine is programmed to let the gambler win, get reinforcement, at a varying ratio, over a set number of plays. This reinforces the gambler to put money into the machine. The gambler *knows*, “This machine is just about to pay off.” A variable-ratio schedule of reinforcement is very powerful. I have had patients, after putting their rent money into a slot machine, tell me, “If I only had a few more dollars. I just know the machine was ready to pay.” What the person doesn’t see is that the machine is programmed to *let you feel* that the reward is just one pull away.

VARIABLE-INTERVAL SCHEDULE OF REINFORCEMENT

Jason was 16 when I met him. He had been expelled from school for smoking in the bathroom on three separate occasions. He asked his parents to help him stop smoking and, after months of failed attempts, Jason and his family were convinced that Jason had, what his father described as, an “Addictive Personality.”

Jason told me how he got started smoking. When he was 13 he thought that he had to try cigarettes. He stole a smoke from his father’s jacket. Jason whispered as he told his story.

I snuck out into the back yard and lit it up. It was so exciting. Getting over on my parents was great. I hated the cigarette. It was nasty and made me choke. But every night for a month I stole another.

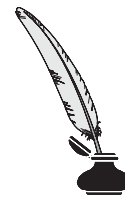
Then my father became suspicious. He started taking his pack of cigarettes up to his room at night. Some nights he forgot. I would steal one and smoke it. This went on for months. I guess I was smoking 2 or 3 cigarettes a week. I was hooked. I now smoke a pack and a half a day. I can’t stop.

Without knowing it Jason was defining a learning schedule. Every night for a month (fixed-ratio schedule of reinforcement) Jason was reinforced for stealing and smoking a cigarette. The reinforcement was his excitement of “getting over” on his parents. Then, when his father became suspicious and began taking his cigarette pack to his room, Jason was only reinforced at a variable interval, every few nights. Jason never knew if tonight was the night. Jason didn’t know the reinforcement schedule, but the reinforcement was powerful. Even with a nicotine patch Jason could not stop smoking.

A variable-interval schedule of reinforcement taught Jason that the reinforcement was some time interval away. Maybe one day maybe six days. This is why Jason was having such a hard time staying away from cigarettes even after weeks with no reinforcement.

SCHEDULES OF REINFORCEMENT AND EXTINCTION

A fixed-ratio schedule of reinforcement is usually referred to as constant reinforcement. Due to the constant nature of this reinforcement, extinction of the new behavior tends to be rapid. The other three schedules of reinforcement are usually referred to as partial schedules of reinforcement. Partial reinforcement is extremely effective in maintaining a behavior. The learner is not expecting a reward every time so, the behavior is not weakened as quickly when the reward is not received. Sometimes this works wonderfully, such as when your child is motivated to clean their room without you asking. Sometimes it is a disaster, as Jason found when



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he tried to stop smoking.

As parents, we need to be attuned to the schedules of reinforcement so that we can teach our children effectively. We must also understand schedules of reinforcement so we can use extinction effectively. As humans we are prone to frustration when what we expect does not occur. Earlier, we found Mandy throwing things at her mother when she did not get the sticker she expected. By understanding the powerful influence schedules of reinforcement have, we can be more patient and understanding when our children experience frustrating situations.

DR. PHIL'S RULE OF 10:1, 100:1, OR 1000:1

Schedules of reinforcement, and children over the years, have taught me that changing an undesirable behavior is very, very difficult. I have a simple but relatively unscientific Dr. Phil Rule. I say it is unscientific because I have no empirical data for the number part of the rule. But, I have not yet found a parent who didn't experience the wrath of this rule.

DR. PHIL'S RULE OF 10:1, 100:1, OR 1000:1 USUALLY SHORTENED TO: DR. PHIL'S 10:1 RULE:

*HOWEVER MANY TIMES YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN
REINFORCED FOR AN UNDESIRED BEHAVIOR,
IT WILL TAKE AT LEAST 10 TIMES THAT NUMBER
TO CHANGE THAT BEHAVIOR.*

For example. If your child learns that if he whines you will sometimes back down, you are teaching your child to whine using a variable schedule of reinforcement.

An example of this would be when you say "no" to your darling seven year old and he says, "But, mom!" or "Please, please, please..." and then, after a while, you get worn down and change your mind (usually just before you lose it). Take the quantity of whines you taught him to have (variable reinforcement), and multiply it by at least ten to find the number of times he will whine before he believes whining doesn't work any longer (extinction). Use the multiplier of ten if your child is not too bright. The brighter your child the greater the multiplier. For the average kid multiply by 100. For a smart kid, one who will someday run the world, multiply it by 1000.

What this means is, if you teach your child to whine seven times before you back down, you will have to un-teach him 70, 700 or 7000 times. It is important that parents are careful about what they inadvertently teach their children. (See WHINING in Chapter 5 if you need encouragement to continue.)

The trouble with this world is that too many people go through life with a catcher's mitt on both hands.

SHAPING

I once did a weekend seminar for one of those big companies that can afford to advertise during the Olympics or the Super Bowl. The seminar was devoted to helping middle managers learn how to motivate their sales force. On Saturday morning I was surprised to find a room full of bright eyed, white-starched-shirt-wearing, power-tie-toting, middle aged men. I had just crawled out of bed, showered under a tiny water saver shower-head, and had not yet had any coffee. It was 8:30 AM and my day was only thirty minutes old. The men in the audience were awake. Happily awake. I was disgusted. To me, the only way I could be happy at 8 AM was if I was up to deliver my wife's baby. Saturday mornings are for sleeping, everyone knows that. (Except during youth soccer season.)

I talked to the group about my plan for the day and pointed out a few goals and objectives. I asked if there were any questions and waited for some. I have talked to hundreds of parent groups, teacher groups and therapist groups. Someone always has a question. This group looked fearful. It dawned on me that this group wasn't expecting to participate. They thought they were there to listen and absorb information. Boy, were they in for a big surprise.

I called on people. "What is your biggest problem with your work force?" "How do you motivate people to work?" "Tell me your biggest thorns-in-your-side and who put them there?" Finally, after some fifteen minutes, one older gentleman stood up and growled, "Well DOCTOR, I have to spend my weekend here, are you going to tell me how to find employees that will follow directions... I need winners! Where do I find them!?" Then he crossed his arms and

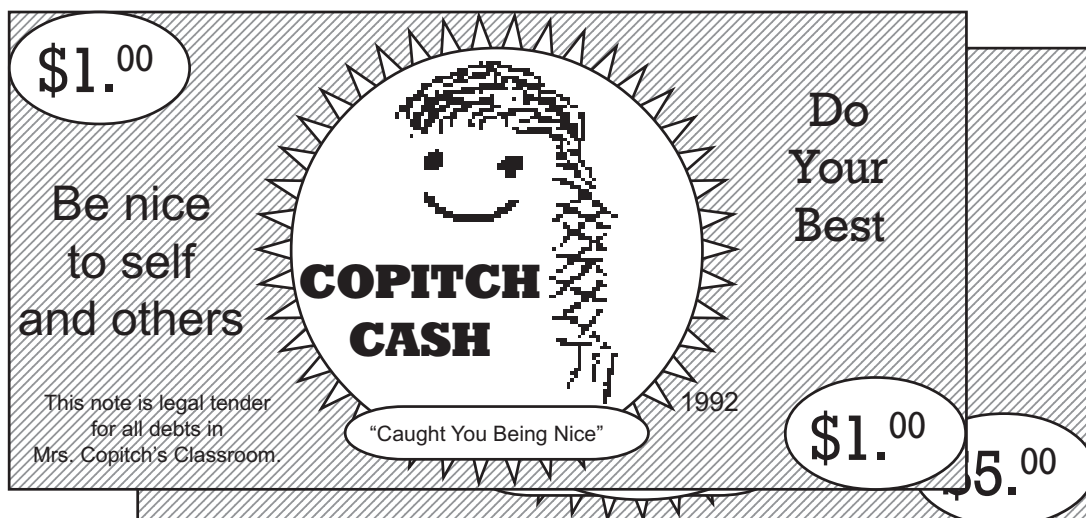
Excellence I can reach for; perfection is God's business.

Michael J. Fox



Quick Reference Guide

Token economy: A behavior modification system that uses a token as a conditioned reinforcer.



The "Token" currency of Copitch Cash

plopped himself into his chair. The room became alive with murmuring. It seemed that this man had shared a problem that was common for the attendees. I was so excited. Anger. Pure and simple anger. An emotion I could work with. What a wonderful opportunity. So, I told a story. (I'm a cognitive, behavioral therapist - I always tell stories.)

A couple of months ago I was at Sea World. I saw the dolphin show. This gray sleek mammal leaped out of the pool, did a forward flip over a bright red nylon rope, and dove back into the water. What a sight!

A small boy in front of me asked his grandfather, "How did they teach the dolphin to do that?" The grandfather said, "They go out into the ocean and scare the dolphins out of the water with their big boat engines. The ones that jump the highest they capture and bring here for the show."

An old man sat outside of the walls of a great city. Whenever travelers stopped and asked him, "What kind of people live in this city?" The old man would reply with the question, "What kind of people live in the city you come from?"

If the traveler said, "Only bad people live in the city I come from." The old man would tell them, "You should not stop here. You will only find bad people living here." If the traveler said, "Only good people live in the city I come from." The old man would reply, "You should stop here. You will find good people living in this city."

Yiddish Folk Tale

This was an intriguing theory but not an accurate one. I postulated the boy's question to my hostile audience: "How do you teach a dolphin to jump over a rope?" I ask you the same question, "How would you teach a dolphin to jump over a rope?"

The most common answer to the question was, "I'd hang a fish from a rope above the water." The problem with this is how to get the dolphin to look up at the fish. Dolphins don't go around in their natural environment, looking up out of the water expecting mackerel. Most fish don't jump out of the ocean. And even the motivated ones that do would not be enough to fill the bellies of many a dolphin.

The way you teach a dolphin to jump is by using a process called **shaping**. Shaping is the process of rewarding a behavior each time it gets closer and closer to the desired behavior. You can't go out into the ocean, with a loud speaker attached to your boat yelling, "Jump! Jump! Come on Flipper, JUMP!" You won't get a dolphin to jump out of the water, do a back flip, smile at the camera and come to the boat to be captured. If you did, you would have what corporate middle managers call a "WINNER!" It just doesn't happen. At first, dolphins don't know anything about show biz.

Dolphins are not fools. They are readily willing to investigate their world and find food. That is their job. At first you have to get the dolphin to recognize the importance of the rope. If you place the rope in the pool so the dolphin can swim above it and below it they will do just that. When the dolphin "accidentally" swims above the rope you drop a fish in the pool. After a few chance encounters the dolphin says to itself, "Hmm... I think there is an interesting relationship here. Something is going on between that lifeless piece of seaweed and a fish falling from the heavens. I'll call that new kind of plant, Hmm... rope. Now let's see, if I swim under the rope noth-

ing happens. But, if I swim over the rope, lunch. This I can live with. In fact, I feel encouraged to keep swimming above the rope.”

Then the trainer raises the rope. Just a little each time. Not to be mean, but making it harder for our friend Flipper. It’s just not much of a show if the rope is in the water. Spectators would say, “Big deal, the dolphin can swim at the top of the pool.” You’re not going to get \$14.50 a head for a dolphin fin poking out of the water playing shark! The trainer keeps raising the rope slowly, over time, until it is well above the water.

We do the same thing with our children. If you want to teach your 18 month old to politely say, “Excuse me mother, could I please have a piece of toast?” You don’t wait until the kid is completely verbalizing his needs. If you wait that long, you’ll end up with a skinny dead kid. That’s not good!

What we want to do is shape the child’s behavior. Mom says, “Do you want toast? Toast, toast, toast?” Then one day your little buddy says, “ Ta Ta Ta” for toast and you get all excited. You get out the video camera. You call the grandparents. You declare your child to be a genius. But, at 16, if your son starts saying, “Ta Ta Ta” for toast you’d have his urine checked for street drugs.

You reward as you catch your child making progress. “Ta Ta Ta,” works for a while. But in no time “Ta Ta peas” is needed. Then “toes peas” is changed to “toast please” and you don’t even think about the fact that your little baby isn’t as cute anymore.

This is shaping. Some psychologists call it *successive approximation*. Shaping behavior accounts for the vast majority of complex learned behaviors.

MODELING

Modeling is a hands on form of shaping behavior. It is learning by imitation. When the coach stands next to the little leaguer and shows her how to swing the bat the coach is modeling the desired behavior. When the martial arts instructor repositions a student’s hand or foot, showing the correct position, the instructor is modeling the student’s behavior.

Many children have acted out a negative behavior they observed another child doing only to be surprised at their parents’ response. This is a form of shaping where the child learned from the behavior another child modeled.

Modeling is a powerful learning tool. If the modeled behavior is reinforced it will be maintained. Many parents are correct to be concerned about what their children can learn through inadvertent modeling. For example, children (and adults) will learn behaviors modeled on television or on the big screen.

BRIBERY DOES NOT WORK

Mrs. Conrad was very concerned that Paul, age 14, was not getting his homework done. So, she decided to motivate Paul to do his homework with a deal she heard that had worked for her friend's child. If Paul did his homework every night she would give him \$1 per assignment. She and Paul calculated that he could make around \$30 dollars a week. Paul was highly motivated to do his homework. Every night for three weeks Paul proudly presented his assignments to his mother. Depending on the night, Mrs. Conrad gave Paul three to five crisp dollar bills she got from the bank for this very purpose. Mrs. Conrad told me:

I thought I had found homework heaven. Paul was doing his work. We had stopped arguing over his homework. I really thought I was brilliant. I told my friends how easy it was to be a great mother.

Then the report card came home. I was dumbfounded. Paul's grades were worse than ever. He was failing half his classes. I was positive there was a mistake. I was sure that if I showed Paul his failing report card he would feel like a failure. I didn't tell him it came. I had seen Paul's work and he understood his assignments. I was sure the school had messed up. I marched right down to that school. I was furious that they couldn't get their act together.

I found Paul's math teacher in the hallway. Do you know what? My damn kid hadn't turned in any of his assignments. Not one! Every teacher told me the same story. "Paul is a great kid, but not very motivated, he never does his homework." Almost \$200 dollars, and for nothing!

This is an example of bribery. Bribery is when we put the proverbial cart before the horse. That is, when we give the reward before the behavior. At first it makes so much sense. If I give you your reward why wouldn't you do what I asked you to do? The simple answer is that we humans, and every other animal we have ever tested in the lab, need to work for our rewards. By giving the reward we are reinforcing the behavior that comes before the reward. In bribery, the behavior just before the reward is doing nothing and that is what we tend to get. Nothing. In the above story, Paul received the reward when he showed his mother the completed homework assignment. There was no incentive to turn the assignment in. If most adults were paid prior to the work period, what incentive would there be for going to work?

In my office, Mr. and Mrs. Conrad confronted Paul with the homework fiasco. Paul was calm. He simply said, "Mom, you only

paid me to do my homework. You didn't pay me to be a delivery man."

Using a reward as a promise is useless. It does not teach children to complete a task. The child feels manipulated into doing something they do not wish to do. They are behaving for the reward, not because it is the "correct" way to behave. A child who follows the rules because of the bribe is bound to be a spoiled, manipulative individual. Such a child is going to go through life looking for what he can take. What is in it for him.

I will state it very clearly: BRIBERY DOES NOT WORK!

THE POWER OF A TOKEN ECONOMY

I recently read a news story about an enterprising college student who had organized his friends to help him win a war plane. As I understand it, one of the big cola companies had a promotion running that encouraged people to collect cola points. With these cola points one could purchase fun products. So, for example, if you collected 100 cola points you could earn a free cola, for 1000 points you could obtain a hat with a cola insignia. In the commercial one was led to believe that, with some astronomical amount of points, you could win a Harrier Jet. Some enterprising young person pooled his resources and gathered this astronomical amount of cola points. The newspaper article pointed out that the cola company and the advertising company were making the offer of a war plane as a joke. The point collecting self starter was demanding his plane. I wonder how it ever worked out.

I would imagine that the advertising company executives sat around a large oak conference table and pitched their idea to the cola executives. The ad folks said something like, "Well, we believe you will sell a heck of a lot of your soda if kids could save cola points to win a prize. We think that kids would be encouraged to buy maybe a thousand cans just to get a hat. Hats don't cost much, so you'll make a lot of profit. You could also put your company logo on each hat and have every sixteen year old forehead act as your walking bulletin board."

Psychologically speaking, collectable coupons are very rewarding. Many companies have used them to build customer loyalty. I recall my mother saving S&H Green Stamps for years. She loved the little things. My brother and I would beg for the new bike which was only 64 gazillion points. We were dumb struck when mom traded her boxes of stamp books in for an electric can opener. (It made no sense to ten year old me. You can't ride a can opener. Only 63 gazillion more stamps and I would have been the happiest kid on Elm street. Moms. Go figure!)

Stamps, coupons and cola points are real life examples of a

token economy. A token economy, by definition, is a behavior modification system that uses a token as a conditioned reinforcer. In a token economy behavior is shaped towards being more socially acceptable. For example, a preschool teacher may give out stickers to his students when they pick up their toys appropriately. A very bright elementary school teacher may give *Copitch Cash* when a student uses her words to help another. A high school teacher may give painted checkers to students who return their homework in a timely fashion. In all these classroom situations, the student can accumulate the tokens (stickers, *cash*, or checkers) and use them to buy something at the class store or treasure box.

The delayed reward in the token economy often adds to the “fun” of the recipient’s experience. The anticipation is part of the reward. Later we will discuss how we can individualize the reward system for a particular child. But, for now we can look at two examples.

Randy is a rambunctious five year old. His energy level is difficult to contain in the kindergarten class. The teacher was experienced and knew that a token economy could help Randy focus on his work. She explained the procedure to Randy’s mother and asked for her to be the giver of the reinforcer. The teacher proposed that throughout the day, Randy could earn points on a chart. If he earned 5 points, Randy would be able to pick a five minute special time with his mother. The special time would occur when mom picked up Randy at the end of the school day. Randy could pick playing with mom on the swings, playing kick ball with mom, or having a story read to him, by mom, in the over-stuffed chair at the back of the room. If Randy did not earn five or more points then his mom was to “play” sad and say, “Oh, what a shame, I was looking forward to our special time. Maybe tomorrow?”

By the end of the first week, Randy had earned his special time with his mother on all but the first day. At the end of the second week mom, the teacher, and Randy decided to change the rules just a little. Instead of it being five or more points to earn five minutes, Randy could earn one minute of special time for every point over five points. By the end of the third week, Randy was consistently earning fifteen minutes of special time with his mom. Mom was happy with the change and spoke openly about how she looked forward to her “special time.” Only the teacher and I knew how much of a change had really happened.

At first, Randy was able to earn points for just not being obnoxious in class. By the middle of the second week, Randy could only earn points for being on task with the class. By the third week Randy could only earn points for being in a good mood while being on task. In as little as a month, Randy’s behavior went from bouncing around the room to relaxed and creative. Randy was enjoying school and his mother was enjoying her part as the special reward.

Within the token economy the child's behavior is shaped. If we expected Randy to sit and happily do his work from the beginning, he probably never would have earned his first five points.

In Mrs. Copitch's class a student earns *Copitch Cash* for being nice and working hard. This is personalized for each student. Each student is treated as special and as an individual. This class management system allows for more time for teaching and more warm fuzzies along the line of "caught you being nice." Everyone is a winner.

Most token economies are what I call "positive token economies." This means that the child only earns tokens. Personally, I prefer a Positive/Negative Token Economy. In this more sophisticated system, the child can earn (reward) as well as lose tokens (punishment). (Please note that this is much more work for the adult.) For example, in Mrs. Copitch's class if you lose your homework you need to purchase another copy of the homework assignment. A pencil costs a dollar, a bad word costs five dollars. This behavior modification system is a lot of work for the teacher because the child's academic and personal needs must always be factored into the equation. A positive/negative token economy tends to be a warm learning environment that encourages personal responsibility.

POSTTEST

When you're ready, take the posttest to obtain your CEU certificate. Your test consists of 5 multiple choice or true/false questions per Continuing Education Unit (3 CEU = 15 questions).



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