

Behavior Management: Strategies for Positive Change

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Behavior management is similar to behavior modification. It is a less intensive version of behavior therapy. In behavior modification the focus is on changing behavior, while in behavior management the focus is on maintaining order. Behavior management skills are of particular importance to teachers in the educational system. Behavior management is all of the actions and conscious inactions to enhance the probability people, individually and in groups, choose behaviors which are personally fulfilling, productive, and socially acceptable.

There is a great deal of research related to "behavior change" and "behavior management". B.F. Skinner and Carl Rogers have given two distinctly different approaches for addressing behavior. Skinner tells us that any one can manipulate behavior by first identifying what the individual finds rewarding. Once we know the rewards an individual wants, then we can select those rewards we are willing to give in exchange for good behavior. Skinner calls this "Positive Reinforcement Psychology". Rogers proposes that in order to effectively address behavior problems, we must first get the individual to want to behave appropriately. We do this by teaching the individual the difference between right and wrong including why we should do what is right. Rogers believes that the individual must have an internal awareness of right and wrong.

Uses of behavior management

Many of the principles and techniques used are the same as behavior modification yet delivered in a less intensive and consistent fashion. Usually, behavior management is applied at the group level by a classroom teacher as a form of behavioral engineering to produce high rates of student work completion and minimize classroom disruption. In addition, greater focus has been placed on building self control. Brophy (1986) writes:

Contemporary behavior modification approaches involve students more actively in planning and shaping their own behavior through participation in the negotiation of contracts with their teachers and through exposure to training designed to help them to monitor and evaluate their behavior more actively, to learn techniques of self-control and problem solving, and to set goals and reinforce themselves for meeting these goals." (p. 191)

In general behavior management strategies have been very effective in reducing classroom disruption. In addition, recent efforts have focused on incorporating principles of functional assessment into the process.

While such programs can come from a variety of behavioral change theories, the most common practices rely on the use of applied behavior analysis principles such as positive reinforcement and mild punishments (such as response cost and child time-out). Behavioral practices such as differential reinforcement are commonly used. Sometimes, these are delivered in a token economy or a level system. In general the reward component is considered effective. For example, Cotton

(1988) reviewed 37 studies on tokens, praise and other reward systems and found them to be highly effective in managing student classroom behavior. The most comprehensive review of token procedures to match to children's level of behavioral severity was Walker's text "The acting out child."

Building prosocial behavior

Over the years, behavioral management principles such as reinforcement, modeling and even the use of punishment have been explored in the building of prosocial behavior. This area is sometimes referred to as "Behavioral Development" or Behavior analysis of child development. Midlarsky and colleagues (1973) used a combination of modeling and reinforcement to build altruistic behavior. Two studies exist in which modeling by itself did not increase prosocial behavior; however, modeling is much more effective than instruction giving (such as "preaching"). The role of rewards has been implicated in the building of self-control and empathy. Cooperation seems particularly susceptible to rewards. Sharing is another prosocial behavior influenced by reinforcement.

Reinforcement is particularly effective at least early in the learning series if context conditions are similar. Evidence exists to show some generalization.

More controversial has been the role of punishment in forming prosocial behavior. One study found that donation rates of children could be increased by punishing episodes of failure to donate.

The socialization process continues by peers with reinforcement and punishment playing major roles. Peers are more likely to punish cross-gender play and reinforce play specific to gender.