

REWARDED ALTERNATIVE METHOD

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1. Core Definition

The **Rewarded Alternative Method**, often formally referred to within the field of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) as Differential Reinforcement of Alternative behavior (DRA), is a robust and widely utilized behavioral intervention technique. Fundamentally, this method operates on the principle of differential reinforcement, seeking to decrease the occurrence of an inappropriate or maladaptive target behavior by actively increasing the frequency of a desired, functionally equivalent, or incompatible alternative behavior. The core mechanism involves a dual-pronged approach: simultaneously providing **positive reinforcement** only when the acceptable alternative behavior is exhibited, while withholding reinforcement (extinction) when the undesired target behavior occurs. This strategy directly addresses the environmental contingencies that maintain problematic behavior, effectively teaching the individual a more constructive way to achieve the desired outcome or environmental consequence that the original poor behavior was serving.

The power of the Rewarded Alternative Method lies in its constructive nature. Unlike reductive procedures that solely rely on punishment or penalty to suppress behavior, this method focuses proactively on teaching and strengthening appropriate behavioral repertoires. It is crucial that the chosen alternative behavior is either incompatible with the target behavior--meaning the individual cannot perform both simultaneously (e.g., keeping hands still versus biting)--or is a functionally equivalent substitute that serves the exact same purpose as the challenging behavior (e.g., asking for a break instead of screaming to escape a task). The success of the method hinges on accurately identifying the function of the undesired behavior, a process formalized through a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA), ensuring that the alternative behavior is truly rewarded for achieving the same environmental consequence, thereby making the maladaptive behavior inefficient and unnecessary.

By systematically denying the maintaining reinforcement for poor behavior while rapidly delivering high-quality reinforcement for the appropriate alternative, the behavioral landscape is shifted. Over time, the previously reinforced undesirable behavior undergoes extinction due to the lack of consequence, and the new, adaptive behavior is strengthened and maintained through consistent reinforcement schedules. This method is highly valued in clinical and educational settings because it aligns with ethical practices that prioritize teaching new skills over merely suppressing unwanted actions, providing individuals with durable, socially acceptable means of interacting with their environment and meeting their needs.

2. Theoretical Foundations and Mechanism of Action

The theoretical grounding of the Rewarded Alternative Method is firmly rooted in **B.F. Skinner's** principles of **operant conditioning**, particularly the concepts of positive reinforcement and extinction. Operant conditioning posits that behaviors are learned and maintained by their consequences; behaviors followed by satisfying consequences (reinforcement) are likely to be repeated, while behaviors followed by no consequences or adverse consequences are likely to diminish. The mechanism of DRA explicitly manipulates these consequences. The reinforcing stimulus that historically followed and maintained the problematic behavior is identified and then systematically redirected to follow only the desired alternative behavior.

The mechanism involves two synchronous processes: reinforcement and extinction. The reinforcement component involves identifying a powerful, high-preference reinforcer and delivering it immediately and consistently upon the emission of the alternative behavior. This immediate contingency strengthens the neural pathways and behavioral association for the desired action. Simultaneously, the extinction component requires that when the undesired target behavior occurs, the interventionist must ensure that the specific reinforcement that previously maintained it is withheld. For instance, if a child typically screams (target behavior) to gain attention (reinforcer), the screaming is ignored (extinction), and attention (reinforcer) is only provided when the child uses an appropriate communication strategy, such as tapping an adult's shoulder (alternative behavior).

Critical to the success of this mechanism is the concept of **reinforcement schedules**. Initially, the alternative behavior must be reinforced on a continuous schedule (every time it occurs) to rapidly build and strengthen the new response. As the alternative behavior becomes more established and frequent, the reinforcement schedule is gradually thinned (intermittent reinforcement). This thinning process helps the behavior become more resistant to extinction and ensures that the skills generalize and maintain across various settings and over time, moving from reliance on continuous external rewards to more naturalistic or inherent environmental reinforcement.

3. Etymology and Historical Context

While the application of rewarding desired behaviors over undesired ones is an intuitive pedagogical approach, its formalization as the Rewarded Alternative Method (DRA) emerged directly from the empirical science of **Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)** in the mid-to-late 20th century. Early behavioral psychologists, following the experimental work of Skinner, focused primarily on understanding basic reinforcement and punishment. However, as ABA developed into a practical discipline aimed at addressing socially significant behaviors, there was a growing recognition of the ethical necessity and clinical efficacy of positive, constructional approaches over solely suppressive, punitive ones.

The formal classification and standardization of differential reinforcement procedures, including DRA, grew significantly during the 1960s and 1970s as researchers sought alternatives to aversive control methods. Techniques like punishment were often found to have negative side effects, such as emotional reactions, aggression, or skill deficits, prompting a shift toward methods that taught functional skills. The emphasis moved to identifying the function of behavior, leading to the development of the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) methodology, which became inseparable from successful DRA implementation.

The historical evolution saw differential reinforcement strategies--including Differential Reinforcement of Other behavior (DRO) and Differential Reinforcement of Incompatible behavior (DRI)--formalized and refined. The Rewarded Alternative Method (DRA) specifically gained prominence because it offers a direct and constructive replacement for the problem behavior, making it more effective and ethically defensible than methods that merely reinforce the absence of the behavior (like DRO). The modern application of DRA is a testament to the field's commitment to evidence-based, humane, and constructive behavior change practices.

4. Key Characteristics and Components (The DRA Protocol)

The successful deployment of the Rewarded Alternative Method requires strict adherence to a multi-step protocol, ensuring consistency and precision in application. The first crucial step is conducting a thorough **Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA)** to determine the actual maintaining function of the undesired behavior. The FBA reveals why the behavior is occurring--is it for attention, escape from a task, access to tangible items, or automatic sensory stimulation? Without correctly identifying this function, the alternative behavior chosen will likely fail because it will not address the individual's underlying motivation.

The second essential characteristic involves selecting the **alternative behavior**. This behavior must meet several criteria: it must be socially acceptable, easily performed by the individual, and crucially, it must be functionally equivalent or incompatible with the target behavior. For example, if the function of hitting peers is to gain a preferred toy (access to tangibles), the alternative behavior chosen might be using a picture exchange system or verbally requesting the toy. If the function of pacing and hand-flapping is automatic sensory stimulation, an alternative might be playing with a specific sensory object or taking a short, structured movement break. The alternative must effectively compete with the target behavior for the reinforcement.

The final defining components are the precise application of reinforcement and the consistent use of extinction. Immediate and potent reinforcement must be delivered every single time the alternative behavior occurs, especially during the acquisition phase. Conversely, extinction must be rigorously maintained: every instance of the target behavior must result in the complete removal of the previously identified reinforcer. If the problematic behavior is inadvertently reinforced even

occasionally (an extinction burst), the intervention's efficacy is severely undermined, and the problematic behavior may become even more resistant to change. Therefore, environmental control and consistency among all intervention providers are paramount characteristics of a successful DRA implementation.

5. Practical Implementation and Functional Equivalence

In practical settings, the Rewarded Alternative Method demonstrates its versatility across diverse clinical populations, including individuals with developmental disabilities, children with emotional and behavioral disorders, and in general education classroom management. A key element ensuring practical success is **functional equivalence**--the alternative behavior must provide the same environmental consequence or outcome as the target behavior. If the target behavior is functional (i.e., it works to meet a need), the alternative behavior must work better and more efficiently to permanently replace the old response.

For instance, in a classroom setting, if a student consistently yells (target behavior) because they struggle with a worksheet and want to escape the task (function: escape), a DRA intervention might involve teaching the student to raise a hand and say, "Help, please" (alternative behavior). When the student yells, the teacher provides no attention or remediation (extinction of escape). When the student raises their hand and requests help, the teacher immediately offers a brief, supportive intervention or allows a short break (reinforcement: escape/support). The speed and reliability of the reinforcement for the appropriate request must surpass the previous success rate of yelling, rendering yelling obsolete as an escape strategy.

Furthermore, effective implementation requires teaching the alternative behavior explicitly if it is not already in the individual's repertoire, often through modeling, shaping, or prompting. The method is not merely about waiting for the desired behavior to appear; it often involves proactive teaching and environmental modification to set the stage for success. Prompting should be used initially to ensure the individual experiences success and reinforcement frequently. These prompts are then systematically faded out to ensure the behavior comes under natural stimulus control. This systematic teaching and immediate reinforcement are what make DRA a powerful tool for skill acquisition alongside behavior reduction.

6. Significance, Applications, and Ethical Superiority

The Rewarded Alternative Method carries immense significance in behavioral science and practice, primarily due to its emphasis on constructional approaches and its ethical superiority over punitive techniques. Historically, suppressing severe challenging behaviors often relied on punishment, which can lead to negative side effects, emotional trauma, and only temporary behavior suppression without teaching a valuable replacement skill. DRA, conversely, is a positive,

teaching-focused intervention that improves the individual's overall behavioral repertoire and quality of life by providing them with effective tools to navigate their environment.

Applications of DRA are widespread. In clinical settings, it is foundational for treating severe behaviors such as aggression, self-injurious behavior (SIB), and stereotypy, particularly in individuals with autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disabilities. In educational contexts, it is used for improving compliance, managing disruptive classroom behaviors, and promoting social skills. Its efficacy is not limited to pathology; it is equally effective in parenting strategies and organizational behavior management (OBM), where reinforcing productive or collaborative behaviors while ignoring counterproductive actions leads to systemic improvement.

The ethical strength of the Rewarded Alternative Method is its focus on dignity and empowerment. By teaching a functional replacement skill, the intervention grants the individual greater control and agency over their environment. Instead of simply being told "No" or penalized for a behavior that stems from an unmet need, they are guided toward a positive, successful means of fulfilling that need. This focus on skill acquisition aligns with modern ethical guidelines in psychology and ABA, positioning DRA as one of the preferred, first-line interventions for behavior reduction across professional domains.

7. Debates and Implementation Challenges

Despite its efficacy and ethical advantages, the Rewarded Alternative Method is not without its implementation challenges and conceptual debates. A primary challenge lies in the requirement for absolute consistency, particularly regarding the extinction component. In real-world settings--such as busy classrooms or family homes--it can be incredibly difficult to withhold the maintaining reinforcer 100% of the time, especially when the target behavior is highly disruptive or dangerous. Intermittent reinforcement of the target behavior, even accidentally, can lead to the persistence of the problem behavior and may necessitate a more intense intervention later.

Another significant challenge revolves around the complexity of the Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). If the FBA is conducted incorrectly, and the true function of the behavior is misidentified, the alternative behavior chosen will fail to provide the necessary consequence, rendering the entire intervention ineffective. For example, if an interventionist assumes a child is biting (target) for attention (function), but the behavior is actually maintained by sensory input (function: automatic), rewarding the child for sitting quietly (alternative) will not replace the sensory input they are seeking, leading to the failure of the DRA procedure.

Furthermore, debates sometimes arise regarding the practicality of identifying and rapidly delivering high-quality reinforcers, particularly in group settings. Maintaining the potency of reinforcers over time requires continuous preference assessment, and relying heavily on tangible or edible reinforcers can sometimes overshadow the goal of generalizing behavior to more

naturalistic social reinforcement. Critics emphasize that while DRA is highly effective, its success is intensely reliant on the skill, training, and resources available to the interventionist, making fidelity of implementation a constant professional concern.

Further Reading

[Applied Behavior Analysis \(ABA\)](#)

[Operant Conditioning](#)

[Differential Reinforcement Procedures](#)

[Positive Reinforcement](#)

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