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ABSTRACT

Presented is a manual for parents of children in the Papillion (Nebraska) Title III elementary level "engineered classroom" program which stresses accomplishment of academic goals by emotionally disturbed students. Explained are the concept of behavioral modification, how children learn, practical aspects of negative and positive reinforcement, and situations when punishment is effective. Parents are urged to try some of the ideas presented which involve reinforcing the child's good behavior and ignoring bad behavior to prevent problem behaviors from developing. (MC)

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PAPILLION PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Papillion, Nebraska

P A R E N T M A N U A L

TITLE III E.S.E.A.
THE ENGINEERED ADJUSTMENT CLASSROOM

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CG 009 485

Dear Parents:

What follows is an attempt to give you some basic information about how we are trying to work with your child at school. We also hope to give you some ideas about how you can manage your child at home. The ideas to follow are not necessarily original with us, although many times we have had to rely on our own good common sense. Much of the approach we are using at school comes from leaders in education and psychology.

It has been said that there are no training programs for parenthood as there are for other jobs. This seems very strange when one considers the importance of raising children. As corny as it may sound, they are our most important product.

Behavior Modification

You may remember that when we first discussed having your child in the Special Needs Room, we mentioned we would be trying to help him learn to behave more appropriately. We said that the model we would follow was called the "Engineered Classroom" and that this involved behavior modification. At the time, the term behavior modification, probably didn't mean that much to you. We imagine, however, that your child has been coming home and mentioning check marks, M & M's, and rewards, and you may have realized that something different was happening at school. You may have picked this up in your conferences with us also. We wish to, therefore, explain behavior modification to you so that you will get some understanding of what is being tried at school. We hope that this will also help you in your own child rearing activities at home as well.

What Do We Mean by Behavior Modification?

This question could be answered in many ways, but most simply behavior modification is a method or approach to get children to do what we, their parents, and teachers want them to do. When we speak of "Behavior" we mean anything a person does, says, thinks, feels, etc. that can be seen or observed. "Modification" means, of course, to modify, change, or influence. We have all as parents or teachers tried to get our children to behave, to learn, and do what we want them to do. In this sense we have all tried to modify behavior. However, the term behavior modification means special approaches, techniques, and a special way of thinking about kids and their behavior.

How Does Behavior Modification Work?

In order to understand how behavior modification works, we have to make one basic assumption. This assumption is that all behavior is learned. Children learn to be bad, children learn to do their work, children learn to not do their school work. They learn to love, hate, read, listen and talk, as well as to not pay attention, not do their arithmetic, not sit still and so on. In short, children learn to do or learn not to do everything.

How Do Children Learn?

Research with children has taught us that immediately following an act or behavior certain consequences occur which either strengthen or weaken that act. These consequences are called reinforcement and they can be either positive or negative or simply good or bad. For example, in school when a child gives the right answer to a question and the teacher says, "Good for you", or "That's right, Johnny", this is positive reinforcement for the child giving the right answer. Or if a parent thanks a child for taking out trash,

she has positively reinforced him (thanks) for doing as she asked. These are just simple examples of the uncountable behaviors that children perform day in and day out from birth. Each time a child performs an act, some sort of consequence or reinforcement immediately follows that act, which either strengthens or weakens that particular act. The two examples above show how behavior is strengthened, because of positive reinforcement happening after the behavior. Of course positive reinforcement does not always follow a behavior. Sometimes when a child does something right no one notices it or praises him. Thus this behavior would not be strengthened, but would be weakened. As an example, a small toddler begins to say his first words, such as "da da" or "ma ma" and no one notices. If this situation is repeated many times with the toddler jabbering and being ignored, the child's language development will begin to be slowed. Just noticing or paying attention to a child is often a powerful reinforcer. In other words, the behavior in this example, "talking", would be weakened. From the above examples we can see how reinforcement works. When positive reinforcement follows a behavior, that behavior is strengthened or repeated. When positive reinforcement does not follow a behavior, that behavior is weakened or not repeated. This is how children learn.

More About Reinforcement, Behavior Modification and How Children Learn.

You now have the basic idea of how children learn by the workings of reinforcement. The next time your child does something you can assume that he has learned to do this because he has received positive reinforcement in the past for doing it and he repeats it because he wants to get positive reinforcement again. You may also assume that the next time your child does not do something, it is because he has not received positive reinforcement

for that something in the past and there is no reason for him to do it again. The "something", or behavior we refer to here may be a desirable behavior or may not.

Another rule that we have which fits here is to ignore bad behavior. Remember, we said before, that attention and praise or just noticing a child is often a powerful reinforcer for them. This fact can often work against us. For example, when your child misbehaves and you scold him or punish him you are at the same time paying attention to him. We will talk a bit more about punishment later, but right now we are concerned about when we are scolding or punishing that we might be giving a child attention, thereby, reinforcing a wrong behavior rather than correcting it. This is why we have Rule #2 which is: Ignore bad behavior. Obviously we cannot always follow this rule, particularly when a child may be doing something that will hurt himself or others in some way. In school we have found that we can apply this rule and ignore many behaviors which we would have previously scolded or corrected and possibly giving a child attention and reinforcing him for his wrong doing. Also, don't forget Rule #1 which was: Reinforce good behavior. A child can't be good and be bad at the same instance. Therefore, not only is it right to ignore bad behavior, but to reward good behavior which competes with the bad behavior.

More About Positive Reinforcement Behavior Modification and How Children Learn

The question is often asked by parents, "When should I reinforce my child for the right things that he does?" The answer to this is quite simple although not short. When you are first trying to teach a child something new he should be positively reinforced immediately or as soon after he does what you want as possible. This is so things happening later might not be accidently reinforced rather than the behavior in question.

Another question often asked by parents is, "How often should I reinforce my child for a specific right thing that he does?" In the early stages he should be positively reinforced every time he does that right thing. Of course as the particular thing or behavior becomes stronger or learned better, the child will require less reinforcement in terms of amount and how often to maintain the right behavior.

"What kind of things may I use to reinforce my child?", is another question often asked by parents. This is not easy to answer. Not all children find the same things rewarding. As a parent you are probably the expert as to what will reinforce your child. Also because you are the child's parent, reinforcement or rewards coming from you should have a great influence on your child. The easiest and most convenient rewards and reinforcements available to parents are social rewards. These include praise, love, affection, pats on the back, smiles, thank you, and so on. Another type of reinforcement or type of rewards available to parents include candy, gum, toys, trinkets, special privileges, allowances, and so on.

What About Punishment?

Many parents and teachers have gotten the impression that psychologists are strictly against punishment as a means of controlling the behavior of children. This is not necessarily true for all psychologists. Many will tell you that selective use of punishment can be an effective way of dealing with some children in some instances. There are, however, some disadvantages of punishment approaches that parents should know. The first of these is that punishment does not teach a child the right thing to do, but teaches what not to do. Thus when punishing (spanking for example) we often teach the child to

escape or avoid those punishing him. Secondly, as was mentioned above, punishment in mild forms can sometimes serve as a reinforcer for a child in as much as when you are also paying attention to or mildly exciting the child. Thus the attention or excitment can become reinforcing or rewarding and work against the punishment which is being used. Third, it has been proven that the effects of punishment are not long lasting when it is used to get rid of an undesirable behavior of a child. Lastly, when milder forms of punishment do not influence a child and one has chosen to increase the severity of punishment with still no effect what do we as parents or teachers do? We cannot continue to increase punishment can we? If we do, the end result would be inhumane treatment of children, would it not? Thus, for these four reasons and perhaps others, the positive behavior modification approach is recommended.

More About Punishment

Though we recommend the positive behavior modification approach for use at school and at home, we recognize that this is not always possible and that for some children occasional punishment will work. As is the case for positive reinforcement and behavior modification there are certain guides that a parent or teacher should follow for use in punishing children.

Punishment, When May it Best Be Used?

The most logical, if not important, time when punishment may be used is when a child's safety is in question. For example, when little Johnny runs into the busy street, a simple "No, we don't go into the street", followed by a couple of swift swats on the back side would seem to be in order. This same can be true for other like situations with knives, matches and etc.

Another time when punishment would seem to be necessary would be when a problem behavior happens so often that there is never any good behavior that can be positively reinforced. It would seem, though, that this would not be so for very many children.

As another example when punishment might be necessary, consider a bad behavior that was so much fun for the child that he was receiving great amounts of positive reward by doing it. A parent would perhaps in this example find it difficult to find other positive rewards to give to the child for not doing the problem behavior or for behaving desirably.

Other Rules for Punishment

Punishment works best when it is given immediately. This is true as we have said above about positive reinforcement also. Punishment should also be consistent. It also may be possible to warn a child before it becomes necessary to punish him. A warning may be enough, but also serves as a signal that punishment will follow if the child does not obey. However, one of the problems with warning is if they are used but rarely or never backed up with a punishment, the child soon learns to ignore them. Consider for example what would happen if the signals at a railroad crossing came on, but were never followed by the passing of a train. The driver of a car would soon learn to ignore these signals and proceed across the tracks without ever stopping. The same seems to hold true for a child's behavior. Parents who warn, but never back it up, soon have children who tune them out and continue doing as they please.

Another rule for punishment is that it should be carried out in a clam, matter-of-fact way. A child is being punished not because he is not liked, but because what he is doing is not liked.

One final remark about punishment is that it does not always have to be a spanking. The taking away of positive reinforcers or privileges has been proven most effective at times. When punishing one behavior be sure to tell the child what is expected, and then when he does this, reward it. Thus, while you are weakening one behavior with punishment, you should be strengthening competing behavior with reinforcement.

Summary

We hope that this information will be of some interest and perhaps use to you as a parent. It represents the thinking of many educators and psychologists. It also is a general basis for our approach to your child at school. We do not have all the answers, nor do we believe that behavior modification is the only approach to working with children. We feel, however, that the ideas here may be of help to some of your own approaches. We welcome any comments or questions you may have about this information. If you would like to read more about the information presented here, please feel free to notify us. We could recommend several inexpensive books or pamphlets written for parents on behavior modification that you could purchase. If you prefer not to buy such a book, we have several we can loan to you.

As one final note we urge you to try to use some of the ideas presented here. Don't take your child's good behavior for granted. Reinforce, reward, notice, pay attention to, or complement it. Try to ignore bad behavior when possible. Problem behaviors are easier to prevent through this process, than to try to do away with them after they have been learned.