
Behavior Modification...

a proactive intervention for the classroom

This Intervention Tip Sheet has been developed to assist teachers and parents in providing the best possible educational opportunities to students with emotional and behavioral disorders. This Tip Sheet was published by the Institute on Community Integration, College of Education, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and was authored by Kareen Smith of the Institute.

Introduction

Teachers spend a good deal of time dealing with inappropriate, disruptive behavior. Oftentimes attempts to modify student behavior are unsuccessful due to time constraints, inconsistent implementation, and a lack of understanding of the principles of behavior modification. Here you will find the basic premises of methods of behavior modification which should help you approach student behavior and the development and administration of behavior modification plans in a consistent and more effective manner.

What is behavior modification?

There are many different methods and philosophies of dealing with “inappropriate,” “abnormal,” or “undesirable” behavior. Behavior modification is one of these. It is different from other methods and philosophies in that it focuses only on observable, describable, and measurable behaviors, as opposed, for example, to psychoanalytic theory which focuses on finding the underlying cause (i.e., childhood trauma) of behavior. Behavior modification, based on behaviorist principles, operates on the following tenets:

- 1) Behavior is controlled by antecedents, events which occur before a behavior is exhibited, and
- 2) By consequences, that is, events which occur after a behavior is exhibited.
- 3) These antecedents and consequences can be changed in order to increase or decrease the chance that a given behavior will continue to be exhibited.
- 4) Behavior, appropriate as well as inappropriate, is learned.

What are the aims of behavior modification?

Behavior modification techniques aim to manipulate the antecedents and consequences of behavior so that the likelihood of appropriate behavior is increased and inappropriate behavior is decreased.

Proactive behavior modification, interventions which avoid the utilization of aversive consequences, also involves teaching new and more appropriate skills (positive programming). The reason for this is the belief that all behavior is learned. If you are trying to reduce an inappropriate behavior, an appropriate behavior must be taught as an alternative.

When should behavior modification techniques be implemented?

Before introducing an intervention, several things must take place. First, it must be established that there is, indeed, a behavior problem. Factors which may influence or cause a student’s behavior, such as a medical condition, language difficulties, or cultural differences, must be investigated. Additionally, input from other staff and from parents is necessary in establishing which behavior is problematic. Second, a functional analysis needs

to be completed in order to establish which antecedents and consequences are supporting the behavior (or which antecedents and consequences are needed in the case of promoting behavior). Third, it must be determined whether the target behavior is of priority to justify intervention. For example, while pencil tapping may be an annoying behavior, it probably does not warrant implementation of a token economy. In deciding whether a behavior necessitates intervention, you will need to look at its frequency (how often it occurs as compared to peers), the intensity at which the behavior is exhibited, and the rate at which the student is able to learn new behaviors.

After these steps have been taken and it is agreed that a problem which warrants intervention does exist, behavior modification can be implemented.

What are examples of behavior modification interventions?

Examples of behavior modification which can be used to increase behavior are: praise and approval, modeling, positive programming, shaping, token economy, self-monitoring, and shaping. Methods which can be used to decrease behavior are: extinction, reinforcing incompatible behavior, relaxation, self-monitoring, and shaping.

What are other considerations to take into account when implementing a behavior modification intervention?

When deciding on an intervention, the least intrusive and restrictive intervention deemed likely to be effective should be chosen. For example, if a student is likely to respond to verbal praise in increasing assignment completion behavior, it would be unnecessary, and perhaps even detrimental, to implement a token economy in changing this behavior.

It is also important to include positive programming as part of any type of behavioral intervention. For many students, inappropriate behavior may be the only behavior in a student's repertoire which has been effective in meeting his or her needs. Positive programming serves to increase the options in a student's repertoire and provide more choices for the student.

Finally, it is important to remember that it is the behavior which is troublesome, not the student. It is important to make this distinction even though in some cases a student may seem to continually try your patience. Separating the student from his or her behavior will help prevent and dissipate negative feeling that you may have about a student and help make you and your intervention more effective.

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