
Modeling...

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

Role models are important to human development. When a person consciously exhibits specific behavior in the hope that it will be imitated, this is referred to as "modeling." This guide explains the principles of modeling and the conditions under which it can be expected to be an effective intervention.

What is the foundation of modeling?

The research of Albert Bandura supports his hypothesis that behavior is strengthened, weakened, or maintained by the modeling of behavior by others. When a person imitates the behavior of another, modeling has taken place. It is a kind of vicarious learning by which direct instruction does not necessarily occur (although it may be a part of the process). For example, an athlete's violent outbursts on the football field can serve as a model which a high school player might imitate, although the high school player is not being directly instructed on how to have a violent outburst. On the other hand, a parent can serve as a model for downhill skiing by showing interest and enjoyment in the sport, and through the child watching the parent, successfully master the slopes while also providing his or her child with direct instruction on the techniques of downhill skiing.

Who will serve as an effective model?

The two most important factors which contribute to model effectiveness are the importance or prestige of the model and the model's similarity to the student. As a teacher you have much prestige in the classroom and you will serve as a model, whether or not this is conscious on your part. Peers also serve as effective models due to similarity. Depending on their prestige in the classroom, peer models can be very powerful.

Models do not have to be "live." People on television-puppets and cartoon characters-can, and do, serve as models. Prosocial T.V. shows such as Sesame Street and Mister Rogers all serve to model appropriate behavior, just as violent shows are often cited as models for inappropriate behavior.

What kinds of behaviors can be modeled?

Just about any type of behavior can be modeled. Modeling has been shown to be especially effective in the development of social skills (i.e., saying "please" and "thank you," helping others, etc.), appropriate classroom behavior (i.e., staying on task, working quietly), and work skills (i.e., punctuality, taking initiative).

Remember that inappropriate behavior can also be modeled. Peers often serve as such models; throwing spitballs, cheating, and name calling are often modeled by students. Adults, too, often serve as models for inappropriate or undesirable behavior, such as swearing and smoking. For this reason it is very important that you view yourself as a model whenever you are around students, whether or not modeling is your intent.

Some examples of modeling are:

- keeping your desk neat as a model for your students,
- not interrupting students or adults,
- apologizing when appropriate,
- not eating or drinking during classtime if this is not permitted for students,

- giving instruction for written work (arithmetic or writing) on an overhead or blackboard so that students can see how their assignments should look,
- making "I" statements (i.e., I feel bad when you talk while I am teaching class).

There is an unlimited number of examples of modeling; these are just a few common examples.

What makes modeling an effective intervention?

As already stated, the prestige and similarity of the model are what makes him or her potentially effective. What serves most to make it effective, however, is reinforcement. This can occur in one of two ways. First, a student can be directly reinforced for modeling appropriate behavior. When you observe a student imitating another's desired behavior and reinforce this (see guide entitled "positive reinforcement"), you increase the likelihood that the behavior will be repeated. Similarly, you must be careful not to reinforce imitation of undesirable behavior.

The second way reinforcement can be delivered is vicariously. For example, when a teacher says, "My goodness, Chris, you sure are working hard today. Your work is coming along very nicely," not only is Chris being reinforced, but other students, for whom praise is reinforcing, are likely to imitate this behavior in order to receive reinforcement themselves.

In the same vein, modeling can decrease behaviors. When you redirect a student from an inappropriate to an appropriate behavior, other students learn through their peer model what is unacceptable behavior.

How do I make a big impact and achieve long-lasting effects with modeling?

Modeling is easy to use, is widespread, and is one of the oldest methods of changing behavior. However, modeling alone has not been shown to have a big impact or to have long-lasting effects. It can be made a much more effective intervention if used in conjunction with another behavioral intervention.

The preceding example of reinforcement is one way which has been shown to make modeling a successful reinforcement. Other interventions which can successfully be paired with modeling are shaping, cuing, cooperative learning and token economies (*please see tip sheets entitled "Positive Reinforcement," "Cuing," "Shaping," Cooperative Learning," and "Token Economies"*).

Most importantly, though, remember that you always serve as a model. Students watch how you behave, and what they observe shapes their understanding of what is and is not acceptable. They observe how you interact with others, how you deal with conflict, and how you deal with making mistakes and apologies. These are perhaps the most important things you model to your students, as they are ongoing behaviors and are not always consciously exhibited.

References

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