Changing Children's Behaviors Through Operant Conditioning

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Operant Conditioning Definition

According to Ramnero (2008), operant conditioning, or instrumental conditioning is learning instrumental behavior control through positive and negative consequences. Popularized by theorist B.F. Skinner, operant conditioning is a method of learning that occurs through reinforcements and punishments for behavior. It encourages the subject to associate desirable or undesirable outcomes with certain behaviors. The subject soon finds out that there is a reward or punishment to its actions, and soon behaves accordingly to get the desired consequence. A simple example of operant conditioning is a rat clicking a blue button in order to get food, or a dog retrieving a ball in order to get a treat from the master.

According to Korensky (2008) most bad, or undesirable behavior, stems from discriminative stimuli: this is a stimuli that is always present when any given response is being reinforced into a subject. A child's behavior in the presence or absence of their parent ties neatly into operant conditioning.

Operant conditioning differs from classical condition in that the focus is on reinforcement and punishment that encourages a change in behavior. Operant behavior targets the environment and is maintained by its antecedents and consequences, while classical conditioning is maintained by conditioning of reflexive (reflex) behaviors, which are elicited by antecedent conditions. Behaviors conditioned through a classical conditioning procedure are not maintained by consequences.

Children and Operant Conditioning

Children often access their surroundings before acting, changing from location to location, and therefore are one of the biggest subjects for operant conditioning. The majority of parents know that their child changes acts in such a way. Usually, when a child's environment changes, they act differently depending on who or what is around. Since the majority of the year for a child is spent in school, and once school starts the greater part of the day, it can reasonably be assumed that the atmosphere of school, and all that takes place inside of it, have a great influence on a child's life.

In fact, a school has the largest reservoir of available children/subjects to conduct operant conditioning: therefore, behavior modification has its biggest impacts in schools, which are the nation's largest single enterprise (Korzensky, 2008).

Operant conditioning works best for children grades kindergarten through fifth grade. These grade levels were chosen because operant conditioning works best for them since they only have one teacher, as oppose to the six that a middle/high school has (Korzensky, 2008). Children in this age group (5-12) are very impressionable, especially by each other and their teacher. To learn what behaviors are "conditionable", so to speak, we must first learn what behaviors are not—there are two: aggressive and non-aggressive behavior (Mook, 2005).

 A child is either born to be one or the other, and that will never change. Another limiter in operant conditioning is that therapists only want to study the observable behavior (Ramnero, 2008). If a behavior is not observable, then it is no use to us as the researcher because we cannot see it, and thus do not know if it actually exist, but instead are going off of what the subject as told us as our data for any given experiment.

Coping Strategies and Reinforcement

Let us start at the beginning. When a child is first born, early coping strategies are developed in context to the relationship he is sharing with someone else, and the way he attaches to said person (Adams, 2012). The attachment that an infant produces, with anyone, forms the framework for later relationships for the rest of their lives (Adams, 2012). Thus, coping strategies are already present before a stressful event takes place and the child will know how to deal with it (Adams, 2012). This type of child is not the ideal subject for operant conditioning: he is too stable, already had good coping skills, and has a good, stable set of parents who raised them well, probably doing operant condition themselves.

The type of children that operant conditioning is targeted towards are those who are prone to disorderliness: this includes, but is not limited to, out-of-seat behavior, noise makers, arguers/fighters, wanderers, disrupters, and students who talk back to their teacher (McLeod, 2007). Disorderliness, and the behaviors listed about, can be treated with self-management and token reinforcement (Hassan, 2012). The two-part treatment system can be broken down into the individual parts. The self-management aspect encourages and allows the misbehaving student to actively participate in his counselling and the designing, recording, evaluating, reinforcement, and executing of the techniques that are given to him to improve his bad behavior (Hassan, 2012).

The token reinforcement simply rewards the child for the progress he has made in the form of a prize (Hassan, 2012). This continuous operant conditioning will, in no time, get the child to behave in the desired way.

Why Children Act Out

Regardless of race, demographics and other concepts, there are basic reasons why young children act out at home and school (see table 1). Their acting out is due to a previous request or cry for help that was not adequately addressed by adults. For young children, unmet request and cries for help that fall on deaf ears can lead to acting out behaviors.

Table 1

Attention Seeking	Misguided Power	Revenge
Inadequacy	Health Problems	Emotional Problems
Poor Nutrition	Poor Attachment	Sleep Disturbances
Change Issues	Cognitive Delays	Skill Deficits
Developmental Delays	Low Expectations	Sensory Problems
Family Problems	Inadequate Housing	Limited Resources

Regardless of the reason, most acting out behaviors can be addressed and resolved by operant conditioning principles and consistency on the part of adults.

Ways To Shape Children's Behaviors

Well intentioned parents and educators have found that to shape children's behaviors, an antecedent is needed prior to a child's undesired behaviors happening. As well, reinforcement and punishment are needed to help the child realize the error in their ways.

For the most part, reinforcement increases the probability of a behavior being expressed and punishment reduces the probability of a behavior being expressed. There are three basic consequences associated with reinforcement and punishment (see table 2)

Table 2

Positive reinforcement (reinforcement): Occurs when a behavior (response) is followed by a stimulus that is appetitive or rewarding, increasing the frequency of that behavior. A stimulus such as public praise in front of peers by a teacher can be given when a typically disruptive student engages in acts of kindness towards a classmate.

Negative reinforcement (escape): Takes place when a behavior (response) is followed by the removal of an aversive stimulus, thereby increasing that behavior's frequency. For parents, negative reinforcement can take on the form of giving a young child time-outs and supportive talks, until they stop or sincerely verbalize a desire to no longer annoy others intentionally.

Negative Punishment (punishment): Occurs when a behavior (response) is followed by a stimulus, such as removal of privledges, resulting in a decrease in that behavior. Successful classroom teachers and parents are able to stick to their guns and fully enforce punishment when a child acts out. In today's society, the best punishment for children ages 5 to 12 is the taking away of electronics/video games, restricting cell phone usage, and limiting social media usage.

To increase the liklihood that children will show forth better behaviors and genuine personal growth, it is critical that behavior goals are established, a way to track the child's behavior and progress is in place, and reinforcement of desired behaviors is provided.

Specific Things Adults Can Do To Get
Positive Behaviors From Children

Give Praise/Adored: Children love to be praised and adored. It is in their make-up to want and need to hear positive things about their accomplishments and importance to adults. Praise has the ability to neutralize havoc and acting out behaviors. Giving children praise and adoration is one of the most difficult things for parents and teachers to consistently do.

Selective Ignoring: The successful parent and teacher have learned to pick their battles with behaviorally challenged children. When the goal is to reach the child and decrease their disruptive behaviors, it is sometimes is best to ignore certain things (battles) and focus on the big picture (war).

Consequences: At some point, caring adults must give a child natural consequences for their poor behaviors. Consequences have the ability to right the ship and teach children valuable lesions. The struggle is not with the children or the selected discipline. Rather the cause of unsuccessful consequences is parents and adults not following through on the consequence.

Humor: One of the least used child management strategies is humor. For caring adults, children act in ways and do things that cut them to the core. To prevent deep cutting, early on in the relationship it is important to find humor in a child's ways and behaviors. Humor and laughter can act like medicine and protect.

Reminders: The wise adult has learned that giving children gentle reminders is beneficial to the child and themselves. A critical aspect of parenting and teaching children is the requirement to reinforce and instill certain virtues. Adults sometimes have to step back and realize that there is nothing wrong with giving children reminders.

Negotiation: Negotiating with a child is a concept that some adults totally disagree with. For many adults, children should be seen and not heard. As a result, they would never position themselves to listen to a child, let alone negotiate with them. As quiet as it is kept, there are times when children are right and should be listened to by adults. In addition, there are times when children have better ideas and solutions than adults. It would not hurt for adults to give and take with children (negotiate) so as to get better behaviors for the child. In essence, adults need to give up some of the power and be okay with it.

Structure Day: Structure teaches children to respect others, abide by rules, recognize relationships, accept what is expected of them, etc. A lack of structure is a sure way to encourage poor behaviors by children. Failure to reign in a child's daily activities has the potential to produce unrestricted behaviors. It goes without saying that is it is difficult to structure a child's day when the parent or teacher has little structure in their life.

Rewards: Today's society gives preference and prestige to individuals who work hard. The preference and prestige often is called reward. Children of all ages need to be rewarded for their outstanding behaviors and output. Regardless of their motive, like anyone else, children want and

need to be recognized or compensated (not necessarily financially) for their good deeds. Unfortunately, most adults do not feel that children should be rewarded. They are convinced that the rewarding of children is the wrong message to send and a sure way to spoil a child. To be honest, the unwillingness to give rewards to children is an indication that the involved adult has personal unresolved issues that need to be addressed.

Discipline In Private: Public discipline that usually embarrasses children is not the best or smartest way to handle things. For the last 100 years children have been asking their parents and teachers to not discipline (i.e. correct, yell, threaten) them in front of others. Rather, all discipline of children should take place in private. Discipline was never intended to be public attestment or show. The astute parent and teacher have learned that private discipline encourages children to produce improved public behaviors.

Learning from Mistakes

Matthys et al., (2012) reported that some children cannot make connections between their behaviors and consequences. Matthys et al., (2012) also stated that the failure to make the connection is due to oppositional defiant (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD). In a nutshell, these are neurocognitive setbacks that a child has which causes one to have difficulty learning good versus bad behavior: this is mainly because one does not learn from their mistakes like children normally do (Matthys et al., 2012).

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) also encounter these same problems along with communication and social barriers due to the behaviors that are repetitive (B., & Hume, K.A., 2014). Despite this disadvantage, operant conditioning can still work on oppositional defiant and conduct disorder children. However, it will be a slower and longer process towards change, but still produce the desired outcomes nonetheless.

Post-Reinforcement

One way to ensure that the improved behaviors stay with any child, and does not just come and go as the rewards do, is to acknowledge the post-reinforcement pause (Swope, 2013). Post-reinforcement is rewarding the subject in a timely fashion after they behave in the desired way. For instance, if the subject does not like math, but does like painting, have the subject do the painting after the math. By implementing the stated, the math homework gets done.

The painting is used as an incentive and reward for finishing the math homework. The subject will now associate doing math homework with something that is fun because it was immediately being followed by painting, which is something that is fun for the subject. This action of following something that the child does not like with something that the child does like is known as the Premack Principle (Hassan, 2012).

Other strategies used to carry out operant conditioning, or changing behavior, are to use children's well-behaving peers against them, reinforce good behavior, ignore or not enforce bad behavior, and thinning/randomizing reinforcement schedule (Korzensky, 2008). The stated strategies are self-explanatory, however the last one warrants further explanation. Once the subject regularly exhibits good behavior, the rewards should slowly come to an end. The subject cannot think that they only are to behave well for treats. Rather, the goal is for them to behave

better because it is the right and most acceptable thing to do. Therefore, the treats must begin to come few and far between, as if it is a gift now, instead of their expectation.

Through operant conditioning, teachers can have better control over their misbehaving students and eventually turn them into one of the best-behaving students. A classroom of students can all be taught how to correctly behave, even those with ODD and CD, or ASD. The teacher does not have to use physical force, a rising of their voice, or any use of other measures that may be traumatizing to the child (Swope, 2013)

Conclusion

Operant Conditioning can be a useful tool in the classroom to help teachers manage students who conduct themselves in undesirable ways. The rewards and punishment system is very effective in getting the outcomes that are wanted, as well as peer-pressure, reinforcing good behavior, ignoring bad behavior, and, eventually, thinning/randomizing the reinforcement schedule, and the premack principle. As long as the post-reinforcement pause is honored and a reasonable size reward is rendered upon good behavior, the student will soon act in a civilized manner continuously.

An ODD, CD, or ASD child will need more one-on-one time, but even they will change their behavior for the better in due time. Altogether, operant conditioning is the best way to change a child's behavior without traumatizing them.

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