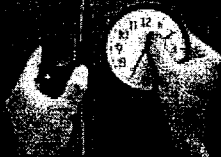


Time is  
not money.



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## Behavior Modification: An Introduction

What is the difference between a child who cannot do something and a child who will not do something? Although there may be great differences in intellect, skill, and attitude between these two children, in one sense there is very little difference. The end result is the same. What you told the child to do, did not get done.

It is my belief that behavior is the most important issue to deal with in autism. It is the child's behavior that will determine where he lives his life, what school classroom he attends, who his friends will be, what sort of job he will have, how many medications his physician will order (if any), how long he can live at home, and how independent he will be. Behavior is more of a factor in these decisions than IQ, skills, education level, and probably anything else. For this reason, it is absolutely vital that your child's behavior be brought under some control (preferably self-control). Let me tell you a story to illustrate. Many years ago, when I was just a young parent with one child, I thought I knew it all. I was a modern parent of the 70's who was not going to be as mean to my child as my parents were to me (in truth, they should have been a lot meaner!). The result was that my little Charity was a monster! When I called her, she ran in the other direction. She got into everything and probably single-handedly defined the "terrible

Tools

two's" for an entire generation of Oklahomans (where we lived at the time). Of course, I didn't see it like this at the time. She was spirited, strong-willed, and Daddy's little girl. One morning my wife shared a disturbing dream she had had that night. She said she was standing near the house and Charity was near the road. A large truck was racing down the street as my wife called to Charity to "come here." Charity looked at her, turned the other way, and ran into the path of the truck. Instead of waking up from the terrible dream at that awful point, a Voice from Heaven said, "That is what will happen to Charity if you do not get her under control." When my wife told me of the dream, while not a strong believer, I took the message to heart, set aside my psychology books, and began to make Charity do what I told her to do. It was not easy (she was so-o-o bad!). But I distinctly remember the day I learned that I could stand up to the Mighty Charity's temper tantrum and survive! No, she did not have autism, so I cannot say I know what you are going through but I have seen the same methods I used with Charity work with many children with autism.

**Where to Start:** Start by scrapping the idea that the child is handicapped and "can't help it." This idea can become more handicapping for the child than the autism, believe it or not! Have high expectations for the child with autism. Do not assume the child cannot do something just because he or she has autism. Do not be controlled by the child's IQ score. It is very difficult to accurately measure the IQ of a child who has autism. Expect the child to behave, to answer you when you ask a question, to come when you call, and to complete a task you assign. The child with autism may need more time than others to do these things and may need your help, but continue to expect good things from the child.

Behavior management (also known as behavior modification) does not try to determine the reasons for behavior, just the

results. It makes no assumptions about why children behave the way they do, whose "fault" it is, or even how long it has been going on. Behavior management is more concerned with the present: what is happening now?

**Objectivity Vs. Subjectivity:** In order to do this, the behavior management process must define behavior objectively. Behavior is something that can be seen (it is observable), it can be measured (it is measurable), and each person seeing it will define it in the same way (it is definable). When behavior is defined in this way, all assumptions, opinions, and guesses about why people behave the way they do are ignored. For example, instead of saying the person is angry (a subjective interpretation of an inner feeling), we would have to describe what the person did: "Billy threw his book across the room." He may be angry and throwing the book may be a part of that. But I can't see angry. However, I can see a book flying across the room (hopefully).

**The A-B-C Model:** Most behavior does not just randomly happen. It occurs in a context. Some behavior preceded it and some behavior followed it. Behaviorists are persons who study the behavior of others. A behaviorist would be very concerned with the behavior that preceded the behavior of the child - this is called the Antecedent. The behaviorist would objectively describe this antecedent behavior as well as the behavior of the person being studied. Using the above example, let's say the antecedent behavior was this: "The teacher said, 'Time for math'." The Behavior was Billy throwing a book across the room. A behaviorist would not necessarily conclude that what the teacher said caused Billy to throw the book. At this point we are just looking at the facts of the situation. To get a true picture of the situation, we need to see what happened after Billy's behavior (throwing the book). This is known as the Consequence. In this

case, the consequence was this: "All the students laughed."  
Let's chart these behavior observations:

- **Antecedent** - "The teacher said, 'Time for math'."
- **Behavior** - "Billy threw his book across the room."
- **Consequence** - "All the students laughed."

What can we guess about what is going on here? Billy is in school. Probably math class will be starting. It may be that Billy is not fond of math (although we do not know this for a fact). Billy has at least some effective motor skills. The students laughed at Billy's behavior (although this is not absolutely a fact either - they could have been laughing at something else). Let's look at what we do not know: We do not know that the impending math class triggered Billy's behavior (it could have been a random event, it could be a reaction to the teacher's voice or presence). We do not know that Billy's behavior was influenced by the other student's laughter. A behaviorist, though, would begin to make some assumptions. He would begin to think that Billy responded to the teacher's announcement by throwing the book and that the students laughter will impact the likelihood that Billy will throw other books in the future. The true test of this hypothesis (guess) is observing Billy's behavior over time. Let's look at why:

Whether a behavior is learned or not depends upon the consequences that follow the behavior. Look at the following Principles of Behavior Chart:

If the Consequence is:	Then the Behavior will:
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Desirable	Likely be repeated (also known as reinforcement).
Not Desirable	Probably not occur again (at least not in the same situation).
Nothing	Likely not occur again (also known as extinction).
Unpleasant	Likely not occur again (also known as punishment).

As you can see, if the person likes the outcome of his behavior (that is, the consequence), then the behavior will be strengthened and is more likely to occur again. If the person does not like the outcome of his behavior, then the behavior has been weakened and is less likely to occur in the future. However, a reinforcer must be powerful enough to motivate the child to do what we are asking the child to do. Let me give you an example. Let's say I live in a 50-room mansion (yeah, right!) and I offer you \$20 to clean my entire house. I don't think I would have any takers. But if I increase my offer to \$20,000, I am certain that many of you would consider a new career. Similarly, we may think M&M's will be a motivator for our child but as it turns out, his favorite food is pickled onions! Finding a reinforcer should be your first major goal in changing your child's behavior.

**How to choose a reinforcer:** Try various things by trial and error and watch for what "things" motivate what actions. Ask someone who has regular contact with the child and knows his interests and preferences (e.g., parent, teacher, other relative, friend). Watch the child during unstructured times and see what he chooses for himself when no restrictions are placed on his preferences. Don't just focus on food - challenge all the senses. Remember, whatever increases a behavior is a reinforcer for that behavior. (No one else has to like it).

More to Come.

**Please send questions, comments, & suggestions to: Gary J. Heffner.**

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