



Extinction



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We all engage in behaviors for a reason. In Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), we call that reason the function of the behavior. Sometimes we engage in behaviors to avoid or escape something we do not like, or to obtain something we want like food, water, attention, toys, etc. Extinction is when a behavior that was previously reinforced, is no longer reinforced. Typically, when a behavior is no longer reinforced, the behavior will stop occurring. We can extinguish positive or negative behaviors.



SENARIO

For example, Jonny screams "I HATE YOU" and in small group and the whole class erupts in laughter and the teachers turns red and says "Jonny, That's not nice. Don't say that." It is hypothesized that Jonny engages in screaming for attention. The teacher implements extinction and the students and teacher all ignore Jonny. The teacher teaches Jonny to raise his hand as a replacement behavior and reinforces when he raises his hand by providing attention. The behavior of screaming was placed on extinction because reinforcement was no longer provided for that behavior and is being ignored. Now, the replacement behavior of raising his hand is being reinforced by the teacher providing attention every time Jonny raises his hand.

Now, Jonny is raising his hand 10-15 times in a 30 minute period. The teacher is tired of providing attention to Jonny when he raises his hand so she stops responding and reinforcing this replacement behavior. Now the behavior of raising his hand is placed on extinction. And you guessed it! The child starts screaming again to gain attention and the teacher and students provide attention for screaming because it is so disruptive. In this part of the senario, the replacement behavior of raising his hand has been placed on extinction and is no longer being reinforced.

DISCUSSION

Extinction procedures are typically used in combination with other strategies, such as teaching a replacement behavior. When extinction is used alone, the behavior of concern may be reduced or eliminated, but other behaviors may take its place to meet the same function. We must always teach an appropriate replacement behavior to make sure the function is being met.

So, along with the extinction procedures, the staff will want to explore reasons Jonny wants attention. Has he just transitioned from a class where he is not receiving high rates of attention? Is he receiving attention out side of school?

The staff will want to consider extinction as only a part of a complete support plan.

There are additional considerations when applying extinction procedures. For example, when Jonny discovers screaming "I HATE YOU" does not get the attention he is wanting, he may increase the behaviors and up the ante.

This is called an extinction burst and will require careful attention to data to determine if the extinction procedure is actually working over time. He may begin cursing, saying explicit phrases, and targeting inappropriate things at other students. Because of the nature of the school setting, often times, extinction procedures such as these may require intervention because the behaviors may become so severe a teacher or admin must step in, and in return, attention is provided and the WORST behaviors are then reinforced.

As discussed above, sometimes novel behaviors occur after extinction procedures are put in place. In other words, Jonny may engage in another behavior (cursing, hitting, stomping, spitting, etc) to meet the function of escaping school.

Spontaneous recovery may occur. This is the tendency for the behavior to occur unexpectedly after extinction procedures have been successfully applied. This is usually short-lived.

Extinction procedures only apply to the consequences of the behaviors. The staff working with Jonny will want to design a program of multiple strategies, including looking at antecedents to the behavior. They will want to try and create an environment where the behavior becomes unnecessary. They will also want to teach a replacement behavior so Jonny is able to get his needs met (attention) in an appropriate way (raising his hand). As behaviors decrease and the appropriate response increases, the staff can work on teaching Joel to tolerate being told no, not right now, in a minute, etc. Or maybe Jonny is taught to save his comments and questions until the end of the lesson. This will take time and must be done slowly. When beginning to teach a replacement behavior, the behavior should be reinforced EACH time the child emits the appropriate response.

TAKE AWAYS

Extinction is not the same as ignoring- if the behavior is not maintained by attention, then ignoring will not stop the problem behavior from occurring. For example, if a student engages in head-banging because it is automatically reinforcing, then ignoring does not withhold the reinforcement. This is why it is important to know the function of the behavior. Ignoring can be used if the behavior is maintained by attention but a replacement behavior should always be taught.

Steps for Implementation

- Identify the target behavior
- Conduct an FBA or FA to identify the function of the behavior
- Administer a reinforcer preference assessment
- Teach a functionally-equivalent replacement behavior
- Provide reinforcement for the replacement behavior
- Do not provide reinforcement for the target behavior [that is, place the behavior on extinction]

What type of behaviors are good to use Extinction and what replacement behaviors can be taught?

- Shouting out → Raise hand or say excuse me
- Putting head down to escape from work. → Raise hand and ask for help
- Running out of room to go home. → Figure out why they are wanting to go home and meet that function.
- Stealing food out of cabinet. → Do not allow access and teach to ask for food with voice, AAC, pictures, etc.



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