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Extinction

We all engage in behaviors for a reason. In Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), we call that reason the function of the behavior. When the function of the behavior no longer exists, the behavior no longer occurs; it is extinguished. We cook because we're hungry. Obtaining food is the reason or function of the cooking behavior. Once we've eaten, we no longer want to obtain food, so the function is gone. If every time we cook, the meal is inedible and we don't get to eat, the function for cooking behavior is no longer there. Cooking behavior is not reinforced. It is extinguished.

Here is a common example more applicable to our students:

Joel escalates his behavior to the point it is not safe. When this happens, he school administrator calls his parents to come and get him. The administrator has called the parents multiple times, so the school staff wants to try to determine the function or reason for the behavior through the use of a Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). As a result, they believe his behavior escalates in order to go home and they have labeled it escape behavior. Now that the school staff has hypothesized a reason or function for the behavior, they can do something about it. The staff makes a plan to keep Joel and everyone else safe, but will not call the parents to come and get him. Joel is not being reinforced (being allowed to escape) for the escalating behavior.

In this simplified example, the behavior should cease. However, there is more to it than that. Extinction procedures are typically used in combination with other strategies. When extinction is used alone, the behavior of concern may be reduced or eliminated, but other behaviors may take its place.

So, along with the extinction procedures, the staff will want to explore reasons Joel wants to escape school. Is the home setting more reinforcing? Is the work expected too hard or frustrating for Joel? Is reinforcement for the expectations at school not available or not strong enough for Joel to stay at school? If Joel becomes frustrated with school expectations, does he have a way to ask for help or ask for a break? 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 Joel discovers he is not going home after escalating behaviors, he may increase the behaviors.

This is called an *extinction burst* and will require careful attention to data to determine if the extinction procedure is actually working over time.

As discussed above, sometimes *novel behaviors* occur after extinction procedures occur. In other words, Joel may engage in another behavior 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 Joel 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.

Notes:

Extinction takes place when a previously reinforced behavior is no longer reinforced and eventually stops occurring.

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

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]

Who is it used with?

- It can be used with anyone
- Research has shown that it can be effective for individuals who have autism

Where can it be used?

- It is used in both educational and clinical settings
- It can also be implemented at home

What skills can this be used with? It can be used with all of the following and many more:

- Eating behaviors
- Functional Communication Training
- Decreasing ritualistic behaviors
- Increasing speech/vocalizations

As educators, it is important that we teach the student a replacement behavior when we use an extinction procedure.

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