

Six Principles of Behavior Management

By Ron Walker

PRINCIPLE 1: *Negative consequences sometimes change behavior, but they do not change attitude.*

In children who consider consequence structures, negative consequences such as time out, sentence writing, restriction of privileges, verbal correction, and physical punishment, as well as others, will effect at least temporary behavior change. Unless used in combination with equally powerful positive reinforcement strategies, they will, however, worsen the negative attitudes that underlie the misbehavior and increase the likelihood of subsequent misbehavior.

PRINCIPLE 2: *Only positive reinforcement strategies produce long-term attitudinal change.*

As children grow older and into adulthood, positive behavior is not maintained through the threat of negative consequences; it is maintained because the individual has an internal attitude or value system, which discriminates between right and wrong behaviors. In the long term, children behave properly because they want to, not because they are forced to.

PRINCIPLE 3: *Negative consequences do not improve the behavior of impulsive children and frequently increase the frequency and intensity of misbehavior.*

Impulsive children, by definition, do not consider the consequence structure prior to initiation of the behavior. No matter how negative the consequence, it cannot influence behavior unless it is considered prior to the behavior itself. In impulsive children, the consideration of the consequences comes after the behavior, meaning that it has been outside conscious cognitive control. When punished for behaviors that are outside their control, they learn helplessness and respond emotionally with anger, resignation, and eventually depression.

PRINCIPLE 4: *Cognitive control of behavior can be learned through the use of appropriate positive reinforcement systems.*

Even very impulsive and behaviorally difficult children can learn greater behavioral control through cognitive strategies. Time out works very well if used for brief periods for the purpose of establishing emotional control and behavioral calm, and if the time-out period is followed by cognitive discussion of the reasons for misbehavior with appropriate positive alternatives. Where possible, the alternative positive behaviors should be practiced and positively reinforced, even if the behavior occurs only with the direct instigation of an adult. Cognitive cueing strategies, which rely on nonverbal cues for self-control, are the most effective long term strategy for controlling impulsive behavior, but their effective use requires much consistency and patience on the part of the adults involved in the behavior management system.

PRINCIPLE 5: *Positive reinforcement systems must be incremental in nature such that the child can directly observe even small improvements in behavior.*

Many children with significant behavioral problems are very discouraged regarding the possibility that they can effect positive changes in their lives. Positive reinforcement systems which have expectations set too high, such that it is difficult for the child to earn rewards at the outset are a cause of further discouragement and have a negative effect on esteem. Systems that have expectations too low however, where almost all children involved in the program receive the same reward, devalue the accomplishments of the child who makes very significant progress, and can be equally esteem defeating. Well-designed positive reinforcement systems rely on incremental rewards where the range of reinforcement varies from no reinforcement to mild reinforcement to moderate reinforcement to

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intense reinforcement, so that the child can witness in a visible and tangible way relative levels of progress.

PRINCIPLE 6: *You must always reinforce the final compliance with adult authority no matter how long it takes to get there.*

Many children in management systems require numerous requests, or even commands, before their behavior finally complies with adult expectation. The tendency is to not provide positive reinforcement after many reminders, since adult patience is limited and the adult expectation is that the child should do what he is told the first time. Unfortunately, if no positive reinforcement is provided following the final compliance, all that children learn is that there is no reason to comply. The imposition of negative consequences following compliance only increases the likelihood that non-compliant behavior will occur in the future.

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