

Verbal Behavior

Michelle Geist, B.S., BCaBA

Mary Gill, B.A., BCaBA

Applied Behavior Analysis

- Applied Behavior Analysis is the study of human behavior.
- Behavior can be learned.
- Behavior is either strengthened or weakened by the consequences.
- We can predict and control behavior when we discover the variables governing a particular behavior

Reinforcement

- Learning is the result of reinforcement
- Reinforcement increases behavior
- The skillful utilization of reinforcement is crucial to successful teaching

Positive vs. Negative Reinforcers

- In behavior analysis, positive does not mean “good” and negative does not mean “bad.”
- A positive reinforcer (+) involves the addition of a stimulus following a behavior, which increases that behavior.
- A negative reinforcer (-) involves the removal of a stimulus following a behavior, which increases that behavior.

Positive Reinforcement: Example

- A: Teacher presents a task to the learner
- B: The learner completes the task quickly & independently
- C: The teacher gives the learner a preferred book to look at (addition of a stimulus).
- As a result, the learner is more likely to complete work quickly & independently in the future.

Negative Reinforcement: Example

- A: Teacher presents a task to the learner.
- B: The learner completes that task quickly & independently.
- C: The teacher allows the learner to “take a break” and leave the teaching situation (removal of a stimulus).
- As a result, the learner is more likely to complete work quickly & independently in the future.

Motivative Operations

- Motivative operations (MO) – an antecedent event or change in the environment that temporarily alters the effectiveness of a reinforcer and the rates of the responses that have produced that reinforcer previously.
 - As a result, what is an effective reinforcer at one point in time may not be a reinforcer at another point in time.

Deprivation & Satiation

- Deprivation – lack of access to a reinforcer
 - Increases the value of that reinforcer
- Satiation – opposite of deprivation, occurs when reinforcement is unrestricted
 - Decreases the value of that reinforcer

Verbal Behavior

- Skinner (1957) coined the term “Verbal Behavior.”
- He analyzed language according to function (the effect that the speaker’s language had on the environment).
- This is different from traditional conceptualization of language, that stressed topography (form of words, sentences, etc.).

The “Meanings” of a Word

- Skinner proposed that in order to truly understand the “concept” of a word, one must learn to use that word across the verbal operants

Mand

- Mand – The verbal response of requesting (i.e. saying or signing “candy” because you want candy).
- Mands are reinforcer specific
- The mand is the only operant which benefits the speaker, not the listener.

Types of Mands

- Mands for items
- Mands for actions
- Mands for assistance
- Mands for attention
- Mands for the removal of non-preferred items
- Mands for information

Tact

- Tact – The verbal response that is close to labeling (i.e. saying “candy” because you see candy)
- When a learner says or signs what he sees, hears, touches, tastes, smells, etc., he or she is tacting.
- The reinforcement for this response is not specific to what is said and is usually social reinforcement of some type such as acknowledgement of what is said or praise

Mimetic

- Mimetic – motor imitation: the ability to imitate what another person does (i.e. signing “candy” because someone else signed “candy”)

Echoic

- Echoic – vocal imitation; the ability to echo what another person says (i.e. saying “candy” because someone else said “candy”).

Intraverbal

- Intraverbal – the verbal response to someone else’s verbal behavior, where there is no point-to-point correspondence and the non-verbal stimulus is not present (i.e. when someone asks what you ate on Halloween, your response is “candy” is an intraverbal)
- This class includes answering “wh” questions and filling in the blanks (i.e. “Twinkle, twinkle little _____”).

Common Components of a Quality ABA/VB Program

- Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills (ABLBS or ABLBS – R).
- Application of relevant literature to develop teaching procedures.
- Strong emphasis on the development of functional communication.
- Combination of natural environment teaching and intensive teaching trials.

Objectives of ABA/VB Programs

- Create a willing learner.
- Teach the learner to make needs and wants known by requesting (manding).
- Teach other crucial skills necessary for success and independence with communication, socialization & academics.

Create a Willing Learner

- We need to identify what is motivating to each individual learner so that we are able to teach and reinforce behaviors.
- Pairing with reinforcement is a crucial first step in creating a willing learner.

Pairing

- Stimulus stimulus pairing is a process by which a neutral stimulus (person, place, activity, or object) becomes a conditioned reinforcer.
- Pairing is important because it teaches the child to associate his/her therapists, therapy area and therapy materials with good things.
- It is important for the child to want to be around his/her therapists in order to learn from them!

How to Pair

- Identify as many reinforcers as possible
 - » (Potential Reinforcer Profile)
- Have a large supply and wide variety of reinforcing items to give the child
- Approach the child and deliver reinforcement non-contingently. You should give the child things that he/she likes for “free.” The child does not need to request or “earn” the reinforcers in any way.

How to Pair

- Maximize the number of times that you provide reinforcement.
 - Break edible reinforcers into small pieces so you can hand them to the child more frequently.
 - Deliver multiple reinforcers at once (TV, food, toys, sensory stimulation, etc.)
 - Try to deliver reinforcers several times per minute.

How to Pair

- Talk to the child, but do not expect him or her to talk back.
- Follow the child's changing interests. If the child becomes bored with a reinforcer, find another reinforcer.

How to Pair

- Actively manipulate the environment and interact with the child so that you are required for maximum enjoyment of the activity.
 - Examples:
 - Child is on swing - therapist pushes
 - Child is thirsty – therapist fills cup with a tiny bit at a time
 - Child wants to go outside – therapist unlocks door

Pairing the Environment

- Pair across settings
- Pair across stimuli
- Pair across activities
- Pair across persons

Common Pairing Mistakes

- Placing demands on the child
 - Resist the urge to try to “teach” the child by asking questions or making the child “work” for reinforcers
 - It is necessary to first build rapport with the child before teaching
 - Pairing may feel slow, but you should not rush through it. Time spent pairing is well spent.

Common Pairing Mistakes

- Lack of active interaction with the child.
 - Pairing is an active process on the part of the therapist
 - The therapist must constantly be giving reinforcers to the child
 - Pairing will not be effective if the therapist just sits in the room while the child does his/her own thing
 - The therapist must continually act as the “giver” and the child should function as the taker.

Common Pairing Mistakes

- Infrequent or weak reinforcement.
 - If strong reinforcers are not given frequently, the pairing will be less effective
 - Find as many opportunities to reinforce the child as possible (several per minute)

Determining if Pairing Has Been Effective

- Questions to ask:
 - Does the child approach you readily?
 - Does the child follow you when you leave the room?
- Once the child is frequently and willingly approaching you to obtain reinforcement, you are ready to begin teaching verbal behavior in the natural environment.

For more Information...

- Visit www.poacofpa.net
- Visit www.abahelpinghands.com
- Visit www.verbalbehaviornetwork.com