

CHANGING BEHAVIOUR

It is not very difficult to change behaviour, particularly in children. Manipulating the nature of the external reinforcers (positive are more effective than negative) is usually enough to create considerable change eg “no pool, no school”. However sustained behaviour change can be extremely difficult to achieve.

External reinforcement is sometimes useful as a first step in shaping behaviour eg tick charts, respect tree, whammies etc. The problem is that the power of external reinforcers tends to diminish over time requiring bigger and better reinforcers to maintain the behaviour change eg children can start to be very choosy over what is being offered “isn’t there anything else?”. Also if the external reinforcers are removed the behaviour tends to regress eg the pool closes so the children stop coming to school.

Another problem is that as the child grows older they become less emotionally and physically dependent on the adults around them who have been controlling the external reinforcements. What may work for small children in primary school is not going to work on an emerging adult (especially when they become physically bigger!) The lack of self sustaining responsible behaviour in adolescents and young adults is now a huge issue in the mainstream community and across all socioeconomic and cultural groups.

Sustainable, robust behaviour change only occurs when behaviour is **meaningful to the individual concerned** and can become **self reinforcing**: emotionally, socially, cognitively and **physiologically**. Eg when bullying and teasing are not tolerated, children **feel** safer, more respected and liked by other children and adults. Or when a child works hard and persists until they master a task they **feel** stronger. Constructive behaviour will become self reinforcing if it has **constructive meaning** for the child.

For most of us the easiest and most powerful way this happens is when we do things because “that is who we are” ie it is consistent with our identity, our internal perception of ourselves, our internal guide book of how we behave. The consistency alleviates self doubt, we feel comfortable with ourselves. Eg It is easier for smokers to give up smoking if they tell themselves and others that they are an “ex-smoker”. However if they continue to describe not smoking as “I’m trying to give up”, then they are still seeing themselves as “a smoker”. Their identity has not changed so their smoking behaviour is unlikely to change.

Many children are exposed to less than satisfactory and confusing messages about identity. However Indigenous children in Australia have an extraordinarily strong and powerful cultural identity to use as a guide for right behaviour: the underlying values of **Respect** and **Responsibility** to themselves, each other and country. Their belief in the **connectedness of everything** provides automatic meaning to their lives. Purpose comes from what they do to make the whole stronger.

Self reinforcement can sometimes emerge spontaneously from what are initially external reinforcers. Positive reinforcers are particularly powerful because when they are given they tend to be associated with warm social and emotional regard. This in turn causes positive thoughts and pleasant physiological responses **within** the child themselves. However negative reinforcers can cause extremely upsetting emotional, cognitive, social and especially physiological reactions even if they temporarily change the behaviour.

Achieving deliberate behaviour change that will be sustainable is not like throwing a switch. It is a process made up of five distinct stages that cannot be skipped or rushed. But there is much that we can do to allow and encourage the process to occur, especially in helping to identify and remove obstacles to constructive change. Even with children it is vital that the individuals concerned are not only consulted but feel in control of the process.

To Deliberately Change Behaviour

The Sustainable Change Process:

- **Pre-Contemplative** (haven't even considered there is a need for change).
- **Contemplative** (thinking perhaps change is necessary).
- **Planning** (this is a crucial step that must adequately assess what is maintaining the behaviour, and explore the how, what and why of making sustainable changes. The plan must identify and include the development of intrinsic self reinforcers although initially external reinforcers may be involved. Any fears or concerns about the consequences of change need to be raised and resolved).
- **Implementation of changed behaviour** (this stage needs continual monitoring to pick up any unrealised obstacles to constructive change eg hidden payoffs to maintaining the status quo, lack of the necessary skill set, erratic or inconsistent messages from others).
- **Maintenance of Behaviour** (there will be occasions where old undesired behaviour emerges. It is how the person themselves and those around them respond to these lapses that will determine whether they become opportunities to strengthen or weaken the changed behaviour. Lapses are part of the process of really sustainable change. They serve as opportunities to review why the change is being made and to reassure any fears and concerns about the consequences of change. They also act as a reminder that the change is a deliberate **choice they are making themselves** and of the **intrinsic rewards** the change creates.)

Strategies for making this work in Schools

- **Deciding Change is needed**

A discussion with the individual and/or others concerned (child, parents, community) that raises the present problems surrounding and created by current behaviour.

Express your concerns about what is happening now and the consequences eg attendance at school and the effect on educational progress compared to other Australian children

Pose open ended questions: Should we change this? **What will happen if we don't change this?** How would you/we like things to be? What is working, what stops things working? How could we help you to make this happen?

- **Give continual Positive Feedback to children whenever desired behaviour occurs**

To sustainably change behaviour it needs seven positive reinforcers to every one negative.

Initially this may involve “shaping” by recognising successive approximations to the desired behaviour (like training puppies!) and external reinforcers.

However as soon and as much as possible make the reinforcers social eg public recognition, pat on arm, smile (a simple smile of genuine warmth and liking has a profound physiological affect on both the giver and the receiver. Both parties’ brains receive a flood of oxytocin making them feel relaxed, happy, connected and closer).

- **Deliberately and constantly remind children of how the desired behaviour makes them FEEL (eg stronger, safer, good, kind) and the PHYSICAL sensations (relaxed, warm inside, comfortable).**
- **Relate desired behaviour back to the CONSEQUENCES for the whole class, school, family, community, tribe.**
- **Connect the desired behaviour back to “WHO THEY ARE”, the values of their cultural identity: Respect and Responsibility. (Explain with concrete examples of how and why that behaviour makes them and their people stronger eg caring and kindness to Elders, persistence and hard “yakka” makes successful hunters etc etc.**

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