

Pittsburgh Partnership

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Behavior Plans

Some General Points

- A behavior plan makes a child more conscious of his behavior but he will still need lots of help to change it.
- A "star chart" is not a behavior plan; charts are one type of one component of behavior plans
- Virtually every behavior plan needs to be modified or "tweaked."
- When a behavior plan is not working it needs to be modified, not abandoned
- The work is not done by the behavior plan so much as the persons implementing the behavior plan.
- Starting a behavior plan is not as difficult as maintaining it.
- You know you have a good behavior plan when the child enjoys the plan and does not rebel against it.
- Behavior plans have fewer side effects than medications.
- If medication is needed, it will work better WITH a behavior plan.
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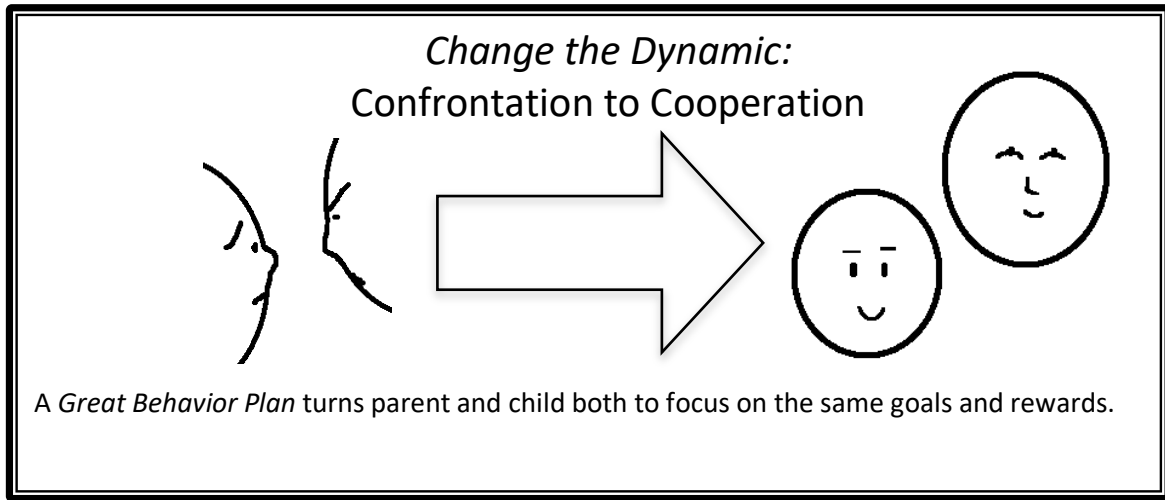
Most of us come to behavior management equipped with the same tools that our own parents used: **scolding** and **punishment**. Neither is especially effective in the hypersensitive child nor do they help the child with strong and problematic impulses.

Benefits of a Reward/Incentive Behavior Program:

One of the main benefits of an incentive behavior program is that it completely changes the dynamics between adult and child. Without an incentive plan, the parent/teacher becomes the punisher and scolder while the child becomes criminal and victim. They are working **against** each other. With an incentive plan, adult and child are working **together** toward the same goal. The child's effort is motivated by the incentives and rewards and the adult provides the necessary support for the child's success. The support may be considerable.

Don't Forget The Basics
Behavior plans are always best implemented using basic behavior management skills: low expressed emotion and low attention to undesirable behaviors. These skills are discussed in other chapters.

- All children (and adults) work better for rewards than to avoid punishment.
- Rewards and consequences are predetermined allowing parents to *avoid bribery and threats* which are counterproductive



Generally you will not bother with a behavior plan unless the problem behavior is a repeated behavior or a very serious behavior such as running away.

Components of the Behavior Plan

A Great Behavior Plan

Behavior plans are designed/built from the top down.



Behavior plans are repaired from the bottom up.

Remember, no matter how you build the plan, it ***MUST BE RIGGED*** to enable the child to succeed!

Goal



The goal is your desired behavior; it is stated in a positive format. This is done as a means of giving low attention to the problem behavior. Therefore, instead of “not fighting with your brother” as a goal, the goal will be stated as “playing nicely with your brother”.

The goal behavior must be something the child is able to do given enough support or help.

Examples:

PROBLEM BEHAVIOR	GOAL
Falling asleep at school	Paying Attention In School
Using rude or bad language	Being Respectful
Pushing, shoving, pinching	Good Hands To Self
Running away	Staying Safe
Destroying or stealing other's property	Respecting Others' Property
Screaming and yelling/tantrumming	Staying Calm
Toileting accidents	Using the toilet

Reward



The child will be focused on the reward associated with the behavior plan. Reward is different from an incentive in the scheme of behavior plans in that it is rewarding in and of itself while an incentive (See below) may be only a reminder of the child's progress toward the reward for which he is working. It is crucial that you give careful thought to choosing the reward prior to establishing the behavior plan. This usually requires consultation with members of the team/family and a considerable amount of foresight. Small rewards may be given daily and are usually necessary for younger children or children who are of a mental age less than first or

second grade. Older children who have *number concepts* can work for one to four weeks in order to obtain a particularly desirable reward but are likely to need daily incentives to support their effort. Whatever the reward, it must be something that can be repeated in another one to four weeks.

Do not conflate the reward of a behavior plan with a Christmas or Chanukah presents or birthday gifts as these are not repeatable. Gifts are not contingent on good behavior. But you may want keep your reward system in mind when planning these special occasion gifts. That is, the child may receive a special gift which he will then be allowed to use on a time limited schedule when he has earned the opportunity to use it through the behavior plan. He must understand this plan before the gift is given and should never be allowed to expect that he will have free access to the gift.

The child who "has everything" may be difficult to motivate. "Taking away everything" and making him earn it back is usually not necessary and puts the child into a foul mood. He feels he is being persecuted when favorite items he is used to having are no longer permitted. Rather, going forward, you prepare the child that a certain desired possessions that will be purchased but kept in the parents' custody and he will earn time with it using the behavior plan. Here it is very important to give him daily guaranteed time with the activity and then encourage him to work for BONUS time. This approach eliminates the ineffective and counter-productive "taking way" punitive approach often used by parents and some behavior therapists.

Keep the rewards associated with the behavior plan separate, small and in general try to avoid buying "stuff". Ideas for good rewards include frequent activities, which the child enjoys:

- an extra story
- an opportunity to choose a group activity
- a simple expedition from the classroom such as a special school errand (these are often contrived) to deliver "necessary papers" to to the principal or other person in another part of the building.
- One-to-one time with staff
- extra time on the computer or with a videogame
- time with a favorite craft; opportunity to buy *small* addition to crafting supplies
- an opportunity to make a long distance call to a favorite relative (these should be prescheduled)
- time with a therapeutic pet

CAUTION

- *Expensive toys, outings or privileges are not useful as they cannot be used on a continuous basis. Trips out of the building are not always repeatable.*
- *One time events (an opportunity to see a show that is in town for a limited period) are not good rewards because the loss of the reward is permanent and irreplaceable and creates too much anxiety or frustration in the child.*

Older Children/ Adolescents and Adults:

If the child enjoys computer or videogame time they will tend perseverate on it and overuse it. For this reason using these activities as a reward is not only desirable but necessary. It is best to give the child some guaranteed time and then design the behavior plan around his earning "bonus time" with a favorite activity. This diminishes the effect of "taking away" a desired activity and reduces anxiety over *losing* the reward. The maximum amount of time the child can earn should be no more than you want him doing anyway. E.g. 1 hour of computer time on the internet. For older children with fundamental number concepts, these rewards can be banked and saved for the weekend to be awarded by the parents.

Older children and adults can also earn the opportunity to go shopping or small amounts of money saved up for a shopping trip to the school store, which often exists for this very purpose. The amounts earned must be thought through very carefully to be assured that they are small enough to be used continuously by the behavior plan but large enough to be motivating.

Earning, Not Losing Rewards

As noted elsewhere, however, losing the reward is not instructive or motivating especially for the child with ASD. Rather, they are motivated by achieving the reward and are far less oppositional when they are working toward a reward. Behavior plans that emphasize losing the reward create increased anxiety and some form of rebellion such as tantrumming or declarations of "I don't care". For this reason, threats or warnings of losing the reward will destroy the effectiveness of a behavior plan. All of this is avoided by *designing* the behavior plan in a way to assure that the child is successful.

Incentives



In the behavior plan, INCENTIVES are reminders of the reward and therefore of the goal and the plan. They help keep *both the adult and the child* on track. Incentives include your praise, encouragement, reminders as well as visual evidence of success such as stars, sticker, poker chips, check marks or "points".

TOKENS are tangible objects given to the child or placed in a visible location. These can be cashed in for a reward. For younger children the token may also be the reward, such as a star or sticker. Even young children, however can often understand that they receive a token (a point or a chip) for each star or sticker earned and that these can accumulate up to a reward

activity at the end of the day. Their number concepts may go up to 3 when visible objects are used.

Points are incentives and can be used for children who can understand the numbers and the accumulation of points toward a goal. They should have to earn most but not all of their daily or weekly points to achieve a reward. Success promotes good behavior. Setting a child up for failure does not “teach him a lesson”. Children love to carry their own point card from class to class to be signed by each teacher or therapist.

For all ages, even adults, SOME visual demonstration of success is essential in the form of a chart and/or a jar or box of tokens.

Frequency

A key decision will be how frequently the child must experience an incentive to keep him on track. Frequent behaviors such as whining, tantrumming, not listening, arguing with classmates, which may occur multiple times per day will require incentives multiple times per day. The child's age is also a factor. Younger children will need tangible incentives, 3 or more times per day. Younger children will work for stickers or shiny stars as both their incentive and as the reward. Older children can keep track of tokens and work for a daily or even weekly reward. For a young child or a low functioning child with a frequent undesirable behavior, it is not unheard of to provide feedback every few minutes or even less for performing the goal behavior. This usually requires a structured behavioral team, if only to provide manpower.

Weekly Rewards:

Older children often need a longer-term reward in addition to daily feedback. Achieving the reward is based on points earned during the week. (e.g. points for each daily incentive earned). The arithmetic should be such that it is an almost certainty that the child will earn the reward by the end of the week and **if he does not, he is given a longer time to earn it, it is postponed, not lost.**

Effectiveness:

The effectiveness of the token economy depends on a number of factors. Many times behavior programs do not work only because they need to be adjusted slightly, not because they are completely wrong. Other times they are not implemented properly or consistently.

Effectiveness is enhanced greatly by the following:

- Frequent opportunities to earn recognition for desired behaviors (3 times a day for most children for frequent behaviors)
- Daily opportunity to “cash in” for a reward

- Weekly goal and opportunity to “Cash in”
- Opportunity to postpone, rather than cancel, unearned rewards in subsequent periods of time/days/weeks.

Support



Changing Your Own Expectations

Support is one of the most overlooked components of a behavior plan but in ASD, it is one of the most important components. Support comes in the form of two major adjustments:

1. Lowering the bar on expectations
2. Providing whatever help is needed to assure success



Support consists of all the things that you must do to help the child to do what is difficult for him to do (with or without a behavior plan).

As a teacher, you are already giving the child lots of support. So when introducing a behavior plan you will look for ways to give him extra support to meet his goal behavior. This will often include help to do things that he can already achieve at least some of the time on his own so that you can demonstrate to him how the goal behavior will result in reward. Not earning the reward teaches him nothing and sabotages your plan.

If the child becomes bored easily and starts whining then you must help him find ways to entertain himself even as you target the whining behavior with a plan.

Lower expectations: If you child does not do well with a certain activity, you can artificially modify the activity, shorten it and **redefine success**. If a child whines and complains instead of having a full meltdown, you can still praise him for “staying calm”.

Support therefore consists of recognizing the child’s limitations. If you know the child fatigues, gets bored after 10 minutes of an outing or activity you must plan for it and help him to succeed.

Supports include:

- Shorter time periods of difficult situations
- More supervision in difficult situations (unstructured time with classmates; be there before it deteriorates! Be quick to separate without assigning blame!)
- More diversions as needed
- More verbal encouragement (Praise, reminders of incentives and rewards)

Tips and Reminders For Using Behavior Plans

DO Discuss the plan with the most sage members of the team FIRST. Ask them to offer suggestions or if they foresee problems with implementing the plan. Adjust the plan according to everyone's input.

DO Introduce the plan to the child in upbeat tone and during time when he or she seems most receptive. Say something like "We have an idea for how you can earn _____." Older children can contribute ideas to what rewards they would like to work for. However, the PRICE/Cost (in tokens) of the incentive is not up to the child.

DO communicate frequently. Give the child frequent verbal and visual reminders of 1) what behavior you are looking for 2) the reward 3) what incentives or credits (tokens/points) toward the goal he has already earned

DO emphasize the behavior you are seeking, not the one you are trying to avoid. E.g. "You did a very good job playing nicely. You earned your star!" Not: "You get a star for not hitting."

DO give frequent encouragement and praise. If the child is not earning his points, *do not scold** but do tell him remind him of what you prefer for him to do. Remind him of the incentive and encourage him that he can earn it during the next time period.

DO NOT use the loss of incentives as a threat. Use the possibility of earning the incentive as encouragement. Avoid all negative statements. Do not announce the loss of a star or other incentive at the time of the behavior, never announce it in anger. ONLY mention

The first few times a child does not earn an incentive or a reward when he expects to, he will need a good deal of moral support.

In informing him of the delayed incentive or reward, do NOT use a tone that seeks to "teach him a lesson". Rather use an exaggerated sympathetic tone and follow up immediately with encouragement with the next opportunity to earn what he has not earned.

If the loss results in a meltdown or angry behavior, do not comment on the behavior and give it a pass. Otherwise the child will view the behavior plan as another way for him to fail.

the loss of an incentive when the child asks or at the end of the period when the incentive could be earned. State *matter of factly*: "You did not earn a star this morning but let's see if you can get one this afternoon."

DO NOT take away incentives or rewards once they are earned, regardless of the behavior. The consequence for the behavior is not earning the next incentive.

DO expect the angry or volatile child to become frustrated when he first loses an incentive. Expect him/her to say, "I don't care about..." Ignore this statement. Do not abandon the program. Wait until he or she is calm and speak encouragingly of the next opportunity to earn tokens. You can comfort him/her for the loss but do not give in or change your mind.

DO expect to use this plan or a variation of it for months or years. Do not expect to "fix" a behavior problem and then abandon the program.

DO NOT Abandon the plan if it does not seem to be working well. Adjust the plan based on your recent experience with it or seek help (from other family members or therapist who helped you to design the plan) ASAP to modify the plan. Usually more supports and lower expectations will help.