



Irresistible Church Training

For Disability Ministry

Presented by



Behavior Modification

What is Behavior Modification?

The concept of behavior modification can seem very complex, but in reality these tactics can be intentionally applied to many situations in very simple ways. Working with such a wonderful variety of kids can often lead to many different, potentially nerve-racking situations. In order to run a successful and healthy special needs program, a basic understanding of behavior modification is critical. If we truly believe that the time spent with our special kids on a Sunday morning serves a bigger purpose than childcare, namely that we can and should present the Gospel, we have to be able to do so with excellence. According to the developmental pyramid, for learning to occur, basic needs must be met. Hunger, thirst, comfort, and sensory balance must be addressed in order for the Gospel message to be fully received. Along with that comes behavior modification in order for a healthy learning environment to exist.

Behavior modification simply means implementing a system to determine causes of behaviors and introduce reinforcements, both positive and negative, in order to promote more appropriate behaviors. On a Sunday morning, leaders won't be attempting behavior therapy or aiming to change behaviors in the long run. However, basic techniques can and should be implemented so that behaviors are most appropriate for learning to occur.

There are several general considerations when it comes to behavior modification that can increase the learning capacity and overall experience for both the children you serve and the volunteers. First and foremost, every behavior is a reaction to a stimulus. There is always a cause for the effect. When looking to modify a behavior such as kicking, hitting, biting, etc. look first for the trigger. Is it too loud? Are the lights too bright? Was the morning routine interrupted? Talking with the parents each morning they bring a child into your classroom will prove incredibly helpful in determining a child's trigger. Often, there are patterns. If you spend time speaking with the parents you can quickly learn what the most common triggers are and be able to temper them when a child is exhibiting an undesirable behavior.

Another effective practice in behavior modification is the use of reinforcement schedules. A reinforcement schedule is essentially a reward system. The reward will vary person to person but should always be determined together with the child and should be adhered to for the entire morning. For example, perhaps Johnny loves to go outside. His reward schedule will revolve around outdoor time. Perhaps there is a countdown clock for Johnny until outside time. Perhaps for every minute he sits for the Bible story, he has an increased minute of outdoor play. Or perhaps it is that he is allowed to hold a picture of playing outside when he is frustrated or over stimulated in

order to calm him. The trick is to be patient in finding a reward schedule that serves a purpose. One Sunday may differ from the next. Flexibility is a key in creating reward schedules. However, once one is determined, it is most beneficial to stick to it for the remainder of the morning.

General considerations for easing overstimulation include, but are not limited to:

- Keeping options for playtime limited to 2-3 choices
- Keeping general noise levels to a lower volume
- Setting firm boundaries and sticking to them
- Allowing sensory “breaks” with quiet areas
- Providing sensory fidget toys such as prickly balls or play dough during high concentration times (like story time), etc.

There are a whole host of other ideas on this subject, so we highly recommend researching more ideas online.

One final basic guideline would be to help a child clarify his or her message to you. In other words, provide language when a child is unable to do so him or herself. For example, “Suzy, I see that you are frustrated. Let me help you here.” Providing these language cues can alleviate a great deal of stress from a child and will often modify behaviors relatively quickly.

Please note, behavior modification is a specialized area of expertise with vast amounts of research. We encourage you to do more research, contact a child’s teacher or parent for more advise when needed, and don’t hesitate to ask for help. In order to do our jobs as disability ministry leaders, we must value the clinical expertise of those trained specifically in these rolls. Don’t be afraid to unite the clinical world to our Sunday mission.

And don’t forget, this is supposed to be fun! You will have days that are incredibly challenging – a day you are quite certain you won’t ever unlock the key to success with a child. Don’t quit. Look to find joy in each child for who they are. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you and He will.

Situational Examples

Some of the most frequent situations include: meltdowns, runners, and a lack of active participation.

Meltdown:

What should happen when a child in the classroom starts kicking, screaming, biting, etc.? In this scenario, the child is most likely a danger to others as well as themselves. The first, immediate step is to make sure that there is distance between the child having the meltdown and their peers. Either remove the other kids from the situation, or distance the child having the meltdown. The next step is to seek help from another leader. In order to help the child regain control, the mystery of the meltdown must be solved. Using the techniques of behavior modification, find the trigger of the problem. Sometimes there is a quick fix to the problem, but sometimes it may be more complicated. If the child’s need is a quick fix, provide whatever that need may be. If the trigger is something more complex, take some steps that systemically calm the child.

Remember that notifying the parent for help should always be the last resort. Remind the child of a reward that is coming. Help the child move into a more sensory calming area with diminished lighting and noise level. Consider applying weighted blankets. When it comes to violence, a first instinct may be to use physical restraints, but these should be used as a last resort and only used by a trained leader. Always remain calm in these situations. A tense response would most likely be more agitating to the child.

Runners:

Children who are considered “runners” are a very regular participant in self-contained classrooms. We encourage you to look for ways to structure the classroom or future settings to best keep the kids from running. If a child does escape the classroom, go after them and make sure you have help with you. A second person is incredibly helpful to retrieve the child and return them to safety. Students exhibiting this behavior are likely running from or to something, so unlocking the trigger is key. Likely, a child who is a runner could use help with transitions. Consider using a reinforcement system to help the child transition well to different activities throughout the day. One-to-one pairing is always ideal in minimizing running. Implementing hand holding between volunteers and children, especially with runners, will help reduce the chances of that child breaking away from the group.

Lack of participation:

What if a child refuses to sit down and attend to the scheduled activity? Remember to stay calm in situations where there is a lack of cooperation. A simple explanation of expectations may be needed especially if the directions previously given were complex and had multiple steps. To help with a transition, use first/then language. Tell the child “first _____, then _____,” so that the child is aware of the following activity. If the child is verbal, having them repeat the first/then phrase can help the child better understand the transition. The child may need help letting go of one activity and moving on to the next, so a countdown can be useful. Remember, the child may have sensory needs that hinders them from transitioning to the next activity. In some cases, it may be meeting their needs to bring the next activity to where they are.

In most cases, finding the trigger issue can solve the problem. Meeting immediate needs and giving thoughtful transitional cues can help prevent stressful situations. Another way to prevent these situations is to stay calm and use positive reinforcements. In all cases, stay empathetic and attempt to meet each individual need.

Authors

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