Chapter 5: Differential Reinforcement and Shaping

Chapter Overview:

When something the child does leads you to pay attention, get excited, or grant a request, the message the child gets is: “Please do more frequently whatever you did just now.” Similarly, when you take away attention and excitement and deny requests, the child gets the message: “Please do less frequently what you did just now.” Thus you can powerfully help your child by attending and getting excited and granting requests when the child does good things, and turning away attention and getting more serious and denying requests when the child does irritating things. I’m now talking not about the amount of your attention, but its timing. There are many times when you turn your attention toward your child, and many times when you turn your attention away. If you turn attention toward the child immediately after the child does a positive example, and away after a negative example, you are using “differential attention” in the right direction. If you want to use differential attention well in real life, you may have to do lots of practice in your imagination first. “Differential excitement” means that you get more excited about the child’s positive behaviors than the negative ones. This means you don’t yell when the child acts up; you speak firmly and seriously in a measured tone, or you don’t speak at all. On the other hand, you speak with great animation and energy when the child does good things. Differential response-granting is an important part of not raising a “spoiled” child. The “spoiled” person reasons like this: because I want something, someone else should give it to me. The spoiled person uses the following tactic: I will make my wants known to you in such an aversive way that you’ll be motivated to give me what I want, just to get me to leave you alone. You can avoid spoiling by granting your child only those requests that are (1) reasonable, (2) politely made, and (3) not preceded by aversive behavior. You make exceptions to this rule only when vital for the child’s health or safety. When you want to use differential reinforcement with children, you have to work as a team with other caretakers. It doesn’t do for one person to come and rescue the child when the other is trying to ignore.

If you play a cooperative game called the shaping game with your family, you can all practice the fine art of differential reinforcement.

I’ve emphasized timing rather than amount of attention in this chapter. However, to use differential attention with your child, first you need to have lots of attention to give. If you schedule one-on-one time between you and each of your children, you make it easiest to get going a pleasant, cooperative interaction. You’ll find that arranging time alone is worth the effort it takes.
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Many children have problems with finishing work. Sometimes the nagging that parents naturally do to try to keep children from dawdling actually reinforces the dawdling. I recommend a procedure in which the parent uses differential reinforcement to help the child finish work. A key sentence is “Please let me know when you’re finished with _____.” When the child does finish, the parent gives lots of positive attention. At the beginning of such a program, there can be lots of celebrations for finishing small fractions of the task. As time goes on, the amount of independent work the child is expected to do increases gradually.

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In the last chapter I mentioned types of behavior that contribute to an interpersonal environment:

1. Stability of time together.
2. The degree of challenge of the activity.
3. Approval versus disapproval.
4. Directiveness versus responsiveness.
5. Differential Reinforcement.
   5.1 Differential attention
   5.2 Differential excitement
   5.3 Differential request-granting
6. Positive models versus negative models.
7. Problem solving techniques.

In this chapter we’ll focus a great deal more on the fifth of these, differential reinforcement. Getting control of what you reinforce and do not reinforce is a very powerful way of helping your child.

The most powerful reinforcers for children are not gold stars on a chart, prizes from a grab bag, or other tangible objects. They are positive interactions. Among these are:

1. Getting attention from the other person,
2. Getting excitement from the other person,
3. Getting requests granted by the other person.

If you can make your attention, excitement, and request-granting follow positive behavior and not negative behavior as much of the time as possible, you will help your child tremendously.

**Ignoring and Differential Attention**

In the last chapter we considered the idea that adult attention and excitement, even when it is irritated or scolding, is often reinforcing to many children.

The converse of this principle is also true, powerful, and the main subject of this chapter. If it helps to turn your attention toward the child when the child does something desirable, it also helps to turn your attention away from the child, toward something else, when the child does something undesirable. Turning attention toward certain behaviors and away from others is called differential attention: you attend differ-
ently to the desirable and undesirable behaviors.

Suppose a child has a habit of getting whiny and argumentative about little, irrational things, attention-getting opportunities. The child gets together with an adult who can focus attention on the child, but who also has work to do. Suppose that every time the child gets whiny and argumentative, the adult politely excuses himself to do some work. When the child gets more straightforward and cooperative and pleasant, the adult turns attention back to the child, chatting with the child in an approving tone of voice, playing with the child, and doing things the child wants to do. If the adult does this like clockwork, consistently, it probably won’t take long for the whining and argumentativeness to reduce drastically.

The whining and arguing example is another situation where the natural response might be to pay attention to the negative and ignore the positive. Children usually choose to whine because of an unfavorable “reinforcement history”: people have done what the child wants to get the child to stop whining. If they pay attention to the whining and don’t pay attention to the more pleasant interactions, then differential attention is used, but in the wrong direction.

One interesting piece of research on differential attention took place in a classroom. The researchers went to a classroom during times when the children were supposed to be in their seats doing independent work. They asked the teachers to act in several different ways, and counted, for each condition, the number of times children got out of their seats. The first condition was baseline—whatever the teachers normally did. In the second condition, the researchers asked the teachers to say, without fail, whenever a child got out of his seat, “Sit down.” In the third condition, they asked the teachers to go back to what they had been doing before. Fourth, they asked the teachers again to immediately attend to out-of-seat behavior with a “sit down.” Fifth, they asked the teachers to ignore the children who were out of their seats, and pay attention to the ones doing their work as they were supposed to. What do you think happened? (Don’t read the following paragraph until you’ve thought about it and made a guess.)

The second and fourth conditions, (when teachers attended to out-of-seat behavior by saying “Sit down,”) had more children getting out of seat than in the first or third conditions (when teachers did what came naturally). In the fifth condition, (when the teachers ignored the children who were up and paid attention only to those who were sitting down) the children kept sitting more than ever before. The moral of the story is: paying attention to the good things and ignoring the bad things really works—sometimes. (Let’s ignore for the time being the issue of whether educational systems work harder to produce immobility and silence than real learning and competence-development.)
If you take the principle of ignoring to its illogical extreme, you conclude that all you have to do is to ignore all bad behavior and it will go away. Wouldn’t it be nice if that were true? In the above-mentioned classroom, if a student had gotten out of his seat, yelled at another student, punched him, and proceeded to rip up his books and papers, while the rest of the students egged on the victim to punch him back, I wouldn’t advise the teacher to silently ignore this behavior and attend to the work of the student who is most on-task with seat work. The obvious problem is that adult attention is not the only reinforcer that is out there in the world. Ignoring can be used with great effectiveness when (1) the behavior is not so dangerous or disruptive that it can’t be tolerated for the time being, and (2) when the main reinforcer for the behavior is adult attention. If the child is trying to get something from a peer, and not the adult, you have to get the peer to ignore; you can’t count on your own ignoring to do the whole job.

For this reason, ignoring is not the only response to negative behavior we will talk about in this book. But it should be the “first line of defense,” because the two conditions I just cited hold surprisingly often, especially with young children, and because ignoring is so much easier and less potentially harmful than many of the other methods of dealing with negative behavior.

What does it mean to ignore negative behavior? Here’s what effective ignoring isn’t:

- Sitting and staring at the child with a glum expression
- Sitting and obviously trying not to look at the child, with a glum expression, while the child tries to get you to look at him
- Saying “I’m not going to pay attention to you when you do that.”

What’s wrong with these? When you do them, you are totally focussing on the child’s behavior. What’s going on is the opposite of ignoring. Ignoring is best done by doing something else, particularly something you’ll have to or want to do sooner or later anyway. Doing a household chore is the best way to ignore, most of the time. Turning the attention to some other child who also wants it, but who is doing something neutral or desirable, is another good way to ignore.

Example: Johnny has a problem with argumentativeness and verbal hostility. Mrs. Smith and Johnny are talking. Mrs. Smith says, “I wonder if it will snow. I hope not.”

Johnny replies, “That’s stupid to hope that. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

At this moment Mrs. Smith says, “Excuse me a minute,” and gathers up some of the pieces of mail that are on the kitchen table and table in the front hall, and takes them up to the desk in the bedroom, and files them. She reappears a while later, and says, “Now,
those pieces of paper are where they won’t get lost.”

Now, if Johnny says something in a pleasant tone, she continues interacting with him pleasantly. For example, suppose he says: “I like it when it snows.”

She replies, “There are lots of fun things for you to do when it snows, aren’t there?”

**Exercise: Differential Attention**

The key issue in differential attention is timing. Every parent turns her attention toward the child many times, and away from the child many times. If you can just time it so that you are encouraging the positive patterns and discouraging the negative ones, you will help your child enormously.

As you read the following two vignettes, assume that the “shrieking toddler” has a habit of giving blood-curdling yells, with an angry facial expression, often, in a maneuver to get adult attention.

The Shrieking Toddler, First Episode
6:00:00 to 6:00:05 Toddler shrieks.
6:00:05 to 6:00:07 Parent says, “What’s the matter!”
6:00:07 to 6:01:00 Toddler plays with toy people and toy house. Parent puts a book back onto the bookshelf and rearranges a few books.
6:01:00 to 6:01:05 Toddler shrieks.
6:01:05 to 6:01:15 Parent tries “distraction” and says to toddler, “buh buh, buh!” while smiling and touching toddler on the belly.
6:01:15 to 6:01:18 Toddler laughs.
6:01:18 to 6:01:30 Parent responds to something that someone else says.

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I think most people will agree that the adult in this example was being very nice, well meaning, and acting in a way that is difficult to criticize too harshly. However, the adult did turn attention to the child twice in this minute and a half of interaction, immediately after the child shrieked, and turned attention away from the child twice, when the child was playing nicely and laughing pleasantly. Thus the child gets two reinforcers for shrieking and two punishments for pleasant play. If this seemingly reasonable and natural adult behavior is continued over a long period of time, the strength of the child’s bad habit can build up very high.

Now let’s replay this vignette with differential attention being used more favorably.

The Shrieking Toddler, Second Episode
6:00:00 to 6:00:05 Toddler shrieks.
6:00:05 to 6:00:20 Parent puts a book back on the bookshelf and rearranges a couple of books.
6:00:20 to 6:01:00 Toddler plays with toy people and toy house. Parent comes close and says, “Hey, there they go into the house. He’s getting into the bathtub!”
6:01:00 to 6:01:05 Toddler shrieks.
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6:01:05 to 6:01:15 Parent responds to something that someone else has said.
6:01:15 to 6:01:18 Toddler laughs at something the toddler himself did.
6:01:18 to 6:01:30 Parent laughs back, says “You did something funny!”; toddler laughs back.

The casual observer would not recognize how much better for the child the second episode was than the first. But the effect on the child’s habits, if this pattern is continued over a long time, can be major. In this second episode, again the adult turned attention away from the child twice and toward the child twice; this time, however, the attention came just after desirable behavior and the attention went away just after undesirable behavior.

Since this principle is so important, let’s look at another pair of episodes.

The Grumpy Preschooler: First Episode
A preschooler and the parent are playing in the family room.
6:30:00 to 6:30:03: Preschooler grabs a ball out of the parent’s hands.
6:30:04 to 6:30:30: Parent gets up, gets a couple of cups that are out, goes into kitchen, puts them into kitchen sink, comes back.
6:30:30 to 6:31:00 Preschooler rolls ball up an incline and watches it roll back down. Parent meanwhile responds: Hey, there it goes up, and back down it comes!

6:31:00 to 6:31:03: Preschooler gripes, in very whiny voice: This is so stupid, it’s just stupid!
6:31:04 to 6:35:00: Parent goes to restroom, then returns to the room.
6:35:00 to 6:35:08: Preschooler says, in a non-irritating voice, “Why won’t the ball stay up there?”
6:35:09 to 6:35:12: Parent says, “You want it to stay at the top of the plank, without rolling down?”

How many times did the adult turn the attention toward and away from the child? And were the “attention-towards” after positive and “attention-aways” after negative behavior, or vice versa? Contrast that with episode 2.

The Grumpy Preschooler, Second Episode
A preschooler and the parent are playing in the family room.
6:30:00 to 6:30:03: Preschooler grabs a ball out of the parent’s hands.
6:30:04: Parent responds: Hey! You grabbed that right out of my hand! You’re not supposed to do that!
6:30:10 to 6:31:00 Preschooler rolls ball up an incline and watches it roll back down. Parent is silent.
6:31:00 to 6:31:03: Preschooler gripes: This is so stupid. It’s just stupid!
6:31:04 to 6:31:07: Parent responds: I don’t see anything stupid about it; what’s wrong with it?
6:31:08 to 6:31:11: Child responds in whiny voice: It’s just stupid, it just is!
6:31:15 to 6:31:30: Child says, in a non-irritating voice, why won’t the ball stay up there?
6:31:30 to 6:35:00: Adult goes to rest room, then returns to room.

In a minute and a half, a child can get attention turned toward him and away from him over 5 or 6 times, with time to spare. How many times does attention get turned toward and away from the child when the parent and child are together for a couple of hours? Or a couple of years? The cumulative effect of the timing of giving and withdrawing of attention, as subtle as it may seem, over a course of months and years gradually accumulates. The more the “attention towards” follow more positive behavior and the the “attention aways” follow less positive behavior, the more positive is the influence upon the child.

**Exercise: Differential Attention**

Read this vignette, and stop each time the child does something. If the child has done something you like, I want you to think of some way to give attention and approval to the child. If the child is doing something you don’t like, imagine yourself ignoring what the child did, and imagine yourself getting interested in some specific other thing.

For this exercise let’s just practice ignoring each time the child does something undesirable. It’s usually a good thing to try ignoring first, and if it doesn’t work after a while, you can try something else.

This exercise will ask you to ignore some provocative behavior, deliberately designed by the child to get you mad. But that’s just the sort that is most easily eliminated by ignoring.

The point of the exercise is not just to decide whether to ignore or to approve: it’s to have a fantasy rehearsal of yourself doing one or the other. To review this concept: by a fantasy rehearsal I mean that you see in your mind a movie of yourself giving approving attention or ignoring, in the situation that is described. The more vivid you can make that movie, the better.

The vignette begins before breakfast, in the kitchen.

1. The child says, “When are we going over to Grandma’s??” You, the parent say, “It will be in a couple of hours, when the little hand of the clock gets over to right here. It won’t be long.” The child says, “No! I want to go right now!” and keeps screaming this out, loudly, having a tantrum. (Sample ignoring response to fantasy-rehearse: you get busy making breakfast, concentrating fully on that task.)
2. The child continues yelling, saying, “You don’t love me! You just treat me like dirt!” (Sample response to rehearse: you keep making breakfast, pausing momentarily to take the trash out.)
3. After a while the child stops yelling and screaming, and picks up a crayon and a piece of paper out of his toy box.
He starts drawing a picture of a man and a dog. (Sample response to re-hearse: You say, “Hey, look at that!” (in an approving tone))

4. The child says, “It’s not his dog, it belongs to someone else—it belongs to this person.” And the child starts drawing another person. (Sample response: “Oh, I see, that new person owns the dog.”)

5. The child after a while says, “I’m not going to let you see it any more. You can’t see my drawing.” (Sample response: You get up and get busy in the kitchen again.)

6. The child now runs up and gives the drawing to you and says, “Here, I’ll let you see it.” (Sample response: Adult looks, and says, “Oh, look at this!”)

7. It is getting to be time for breakfast. The child says, “Can I help you get breakfast ready?” (Sample response: Parent hands child some napkins, and says, “Thank you for offering! Yes, you can put these napkins on the table!”)

8. The child helps with breakfast by pouring some orange juice into glasses. After he gets through pouring, he says, to no one in particular, “I didn’t spill any! Not a drop!” (Sample response: Parent remarks, with tone of small approval, “You’re getting to be a really good pourer.” [And from here on, you’re on your own in making up attentive or ignoring responses.])

9. As the family is eating breakfast, the child says, about the oatmeal, “This is yucky!”

10. A couple of seconds later, the child says, “This tastes like vomit.”

11. A while later, the child very carefully spreads a reasonable amount of jelly on some toast.

12. The child says, “I like this toast.”

13. As breakfast ends, the child says to you, “That shirt you have on is dumb.”

14. After a few seconds the child picks up his plate and bowl and sets it on the counter near the sink.

15. After a while you come and say to the child, “It’s time to take your bath now. It’s time to put the toys away.” The child doesn’t say anything, but dumps the toys in the box and heads in the direction of the bathroom.

16. The child gets in the bathtub and gets some soap and a washcloth and washes his face, and his arms and body, and shoulders.

17. After his bath, the child says, “Now I’m going to brush my teeth.”

18. The child puts toothpaste on his toothbrush, and starts brushing his teeth.

19. As the child gets dressed, he says, “I’m never going to take a bath or brush my teeth again. No one can ever make me.”

20. The child bites his fingernails a little bit.

21. The child goes into another room, where his brother is. The child says to his brother, “Want to see that new little car that I got?”
22. As the two children play, you hear the following dialogue: “No it isn’t.” “It is too. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” “You’re the one who doesn’t know what you’re talking about.”

23. Later when the two are playing, you hear the following dialogue: the child we are talking about says, “Hey, you got it! That’s good going!” And his brother says “Thanks. That was the first time I ever did it.”

24. A little later the child comes up to you and says, “Is it time to go to Grandma’s yet?” and you say, “No, we’ve still got another couple of hours. It won’t be until the little hand of the clock gets over here.” The child says, “OK”, and walks off.

Did you really imagine yourself doing the ignoring or giving approving attention? If you didn’t vividly imagine yourself doing each thing, but instead just read the above exercise, please go back and make a vivid movie in your mind. Please imagine yourself doing specific other things when the child is provocative. If you didn’t get specific tasks accomplished immediately after the child was provocative, go back and make that movie again.

Another Exercise on Differential Attention

Differential attention is very, very important. In fact, one of the major jobs of a child psychiatrist or psychologist is to help parents and teachers figure out how to use differential attention in a direction that solves the problem rather than in a way that worsens the problem.

Sometimes parents or teachers naturally use differential attention in a way that turns out to worsen the problem. When the child does something undesirable, sometimes the natural thing to do is to pay attention to the child right away, or to keep paying attention to the child until the problem behavior goes away. But this often is like “paying” the child for acting badly or being unhappy. When the child starts getting more attention for acting good and being happy than he gets for acting bad or being unhappy, often his behavior and happiness rapidly improve.

The following exercise asks you to think about each of the situations, and to figure out whether differential attention is probably working in the right direction or in the wrong direction. Contemplate each situation until you fully understand how differential attention is working. Then, if it is working in the wrong direction, figure out a plan whereby it can work in the right direction.

Situation 1. Bedtime problems. The child is having trouble getting to sleep. On nights when the child can’t sleep, and comes and asks for the parents, the parent sits in the child’s room and rubs the child’s back or sings to the child or lies next to the child until the child can get to sleep. On nights when the child can get to sleep, the adult says a quick
good night and goes about his or her business.

Situation 2. Dressing problems. The child is having big troubles with getting dressed in the morning. The child gets dressed just before leaving for school, after eating breakfast and chatting with his or her parent for a while. On mornings when the child gets dressed quickly, off they go to school. On mornings when the child dawdles and refuses to get dressed, the parent spends a lot of time prodding and pleading and arguing with the child to get dressed before the child goes to school.

Situation 3. Arguing. A child is an unpleasant arguer. The child has a very tactless, whiny, and grating tone when arguing. When the child is argumentative, the adult will spend lots of time trying to show the child that the child is mistaken, and they will talk back and forth, sometimes with much excitement. When the child is not argumentative, they tend to have much less conversation, and much less animated conversation.

Situation 4. Sibling hostility. The brother and the sister fight with each other. When they start yelling at each other, the parent will come from the other room and say, “Hey, what’s going on here?” and try to intervene. When they are playing quietly together, the parent will leave them alone and take care of his or her own business.

Situation 5. Separation problems. A child has tantrums and acts scared when he has to say good-bye to his mother when school starts. When the child cries, the mother says, “Don’t worry, you’ll be all right. I’ll be back in just a while. OK?” And the mother hugs the child and wipes the child’s tears off. The mother plans to leave when the child settles down and quits crying. On days when the child doesn’t cry, the mother leaves quickly.

Situation 6. Hitting. A child at a preschool is in the habit of hitting other children. Whenever the child hits, the preschool teacher goes up to the child and says, “Johnny, we don’t hit. We must use our words. If you wanted something from Teddy you should tell him about it. What did you want? Can you tell Teddy in words?” When the child is not hitting, the teacher is involved in other activities, sometimes the same sort of routine with other children who have hit.

Situation 7. Screaming when he can’t get his way. A child is in the habit of screaming when he can’t get his way. When he screams, the adult walks away, gets some ear plugs and puts them in, and then goes on about his or her business. When the child stops screaming and has been doing something else for a minute or two, the adult takes the ear plugs out and starts a conversation with the child as though nothing has happened. But the child still isn’t given his way. When the child doesn’t get his way and doesn’t scream, the adult says, “Good for you! You put up with not getting your way!”
Situation 8. Soiling the pants. A child has frequently soils his pants with feces. When the child soils his pants, the parent gets very emotional and yells at the child. When the child defecates into the toilet, this goes unnoticed most of the time.

Situation 9. Homework. A child tends to procrastinate on his homework. When the child puts off doing the homework, the parent keeps reminding the child to do it, and finally does it with the child, going over each step in the homework. If the child should do the homework independently, the parent would leave the child alone and go on about his or her business.

Situation 10. Head banging. A child is in the habit of banging his head. When he bangs his head, his parent will run to him and pick him up and hold him and talk to him and see what is wrong, and will often wipe his forehead with a wet cloth. When he plays without banging his head, his parent goes on about his or her business.

Situation 11. Hard to please. The child asks for something, and then when she gets it, she changes her mind. For example, she asks for one type of cereal, and when she gets that cereal, she looks at it and says “No! I want the other type!” The parent says, in an animated tone of voice, “Why didn’t you say that in the first place then?” The child just repeats, “I don’t want it!” The adult has a few more verbal interchanges with her and then usually gets what she wants. When she likes the cereal that she gets the first time, she just eats it while her parent goes on about his business, preparing for them both to leave.

Sample answers to these situations:
Differential attention is working in the wrong direction for all situations except situation 7. Here are sample plans for making differential attention work in the right direction:

Situation 1. New plan for bedtime problems: The parents work out a routine of doing the nightly review and reading stories each night before bed. Then once it is “Good night and lights out,” if the child gets out of bed the only attention the child gets is to be directed or led back to the bedroom and the bed. If the child does not get out of bed after “Good night and lights out,” the parents hold a little celebration in the morning for the child.

Situation 2. New plan for dressing problems: The parent invites the child to get dressed first thing in the morning after washing, before breakfast and before chatting with the parent. If the child starts getting dressed, the parent stays and chats with the child in a pleasant way. If the child refuses to get dressed, the parent gets busy with something else. The parent forms a custom that when the child is all dressed and ready to go, the parent will spend twenty minutes in dramatic play with the child. The parent starts the dressing soon enough that there will be time for this play if the child does not dawdle
too long over dressing. If all else fails, the parent physically dresses the child with as little conversation and excitement as possible.

Situation 3. New plan for arguing. When the child argues in an unpleasant way about whether somebody did something or not, or what makes night and day, or other issues not having to do with compliance, the parent does not respond. If the child has anything close to a pleasant discussion or conversation with the adult, without arguing, the adult responds in a very animated way. If the child argues about something the child is asked to do, the adult refuses to argue, but either physically makes the child comply or imposes a punishment for noncompliance, doing either with a minimum of interchange between adult and child. If the child complies, the adult is very animatedly grateful.

Situation 4. New plan for sibling hostility. When the two children are playing nicely with each other, the parent goes over and sits down with them and watches, and makes an occasional comment without being too intrusive or interrupting the activity. When they start getting angry at each other, the adult leaves the scene and takes care of some business. If they actually hit one another, the adult uses a “time out” with very little talk about the incident. The parent talks about the nice things they did for each other in the nightly review.

Situation 5. New plan for separation problems. When the child starts whining and crying near separation time, the mother leads him very quickly to the substitute caregiver, says good-bye, gives the child’s hand to the caregiver, and walks away without looking back. If the child acts cheerful and confident, then the mother takes her time in leaving. If the child acts cheerful and confident the parent talks about this behavior later during the day and at the nightly review. (This plan assumes that the child has had a chance to already gain confidence in the alternate caregiver, and the parent is sure that the alternate caregiver is trustworthy and kind. See the chapter on separation problems.)

Situation 6. New plan for hitting. When the child hits, the child is immediately taken to a rest room where the child must stay by himself for two minutes. There is minimal talk about the hitting at the time. When the child is nice to other children, the adult comes around and says things such as, “I like how you and Jack are cooperating on building your tower,” (i.e. praise) or “Hey, that tower is getting pretty tall,” (i.e. enthusiastic attention).

Situation 7. Screaming when he can’t get his way. The situation as presented illustrates differential attention used in the right direction. If the parent paid attention to the screaming and said, “OK, you can have it, just quit that screaming,” the child would be reinforced for screaming and differential attention would work in the wrong direction.

Situation 8. New plan about soiling of pants. When the child does soil, the parent helps the child through a very
routine procedure for cleaning the feces out of his underwear and cleaning himself up and changing clothes; during this procedure there is little emotion at all. When the child has a bowel movement into the toilet, the child is to show the parent, who will show some excited pleasure and congratulate the child. (Parents should know, however, that a large fraction of children who soil with feces after achieving the age of 4 or 5 are actually constipated, and the fact that the rectum stays stretched all the time keeps the child from perceiving the stretching that usually signals to the body the urge to have a bowel movement. So the differential attention may not help until the constipation is treated, with guidance from a doctor. Please see the chapter on fecal soiling in this book.)

Situation 9. New plan for homework. The parent fashions a quiet place for the child to do homework. The parent says, “I have some work of my own to do. I’ll leave you alone for a while. When you’re ready to do your homework, call me, and I’ll come down and sit with you and do some reading and writing while you do your work.” If the child has a question, the parent attends to it. Every so often the parent takes a look at the child’s work, and celebrates progress. The parent pays particular attention to the problems the child got right, going through the thought processes, and letting the child proudly say what his thought processes were. The parent doesn’t spend much time on the incorrect problems. The parent explains any principle that the child isn’t understanding. When the child is finished with all his homework and has done it well, the parent and child play a game together.

Situation 10. New plan for head banging. The parents start watching very carefully for any positive examples of using language to communicate, doing nice things, being gleeful, and sustaining attention to an activity. They turn their attention to the child whenever the child is doing these things. If the child bangs a little, they ignore. If the child bangs to the point where he needs physical protection, they get him in a hold where he is facing away from them, with his arms crossed in front of him, and hold him for two minutes without speaking to him in any way. They act as if they are paying attention to something else during that time. If this proves too reinforcing they put a helmet on the child and leave it on for 10 minutes each time he bangs, and they ignore him whenever the helmet is on. If he takes frustration in a positive way without head banging, they respond in a very animated way.

Situation 11. New plan for hard to please. The parent explains to the child, at a time other than mealtime, that the child will get one chance to choose what she wants. If she changes her mind after the parent gets it, her only choice is that she can eat it or she can throw it away. If she takes what she chooses and eats it, the parent sits with her and has a pleasant conversation. If she gripes and
complains that she doesn’t want it, the parent reminds her once and only once that her choice is to eat it or throw it away, and does not respond to griping and complaining after that, but speaks with someone else or does chores.

**Differential Excitement**

In the previous chapter we stressed that excitement and energy are reinforcing for children. What about the adult’s excited and energetic displays of negative emotion, when the child has done something bad? One of the most important realizations I’ve come to is that for many, many children, such excitement is reinforcing of negative behavior, in the long run. This can be true even if the adult’s utterance is meant to, and does, stop the child’s behavior in the short run.

Please do an experiment. Imagine yourself yelling out to a child with great irritation and exasperation, “Hey, I thought I told you not to do that! Cut it out” As you do it, listen to the melody of what you’re saying. How does the inflection of your voice go? Can you sing the same melody without words, and say, “DAH, da DAH da da-da-da-da DAH dah! DAH da DAH!” Now imagine that you are extremely pleased with the child, and you say, in a tone of large approval, with great excitement and enthusiasm, “Hey, I didn’t think you could do that! Way to go!” Now sing that melody without words. Can you hear how close they are? And can you imagine how a child who is reinforced by the second might also be reinforced by the first? Wouldn’t it be very difficult to hard-wire a brain that would be greatly reinforced by the first, and not at all reinforced by the second? Either way, the message that comes to the child is, “For these few seconds at least, you’re famous, and you’re a very big deal.”

Many, perhaps most, children tend to do things more often that get people excited, even if the excitement is negative. If you can’t make this principle untrue, why not use it? It is an extremely useful principle! All you have to do is to get excited about the good things, but not get excited about the bad things, and by doing so you can help your child act better.

I use the phrase “All you have to do” with some sense of irony, because doing this is much more easily said than done. There’s a natural tendency —isn’t there?— for parents to do just the opposite of what I’m suggesting. Isn’t it more natural to get excited and yell about the negative things, and speak quietly about the positive things? For this reason I recommend that any adults who work with children monitor exactly what causes them to raise their voices and speak quickly in a high pitch. For many adults it comes naturally to do this when the child does something they don’t like. This may be reinforcing the undesirable behavior. It has been extremely helpful for many parents to stop yelling about the bad behavior and start yelling about the good behavior. They have found that their children want to
get the adult excited, and if they can do that by doing good things, and if they can’t do it by doing bad things, they will start doing good things much more often.

**Exercise: Get Excited About the Positive and Give Disapproval Quietly**

Here is another exercise. The idea is to practice saying reprimands, or disapproving things to the child, in a very unexcited way, and giving approval to the child in a more excited way. You will see below a list of things to practice saying. Each will be either a reprimand or something approving. Practice saying each of the reprimands slowly and quietly, in an unexcited way. Practice saying the approving statements more quickly and with higher tones, with more excitement.

Don’t just read this exercise silently, but say each sentence aloud, with high excitement if it’s approval, and low excitement if it’s a reprimand.

“**You’re too smart a boy to be doing things like that.**”

“**I really like it when you share with other children.**”

“**You listened to a long story.**”

“**I don’t like to hear that kind of word from you.**”

“**Thank you, you did what I asked you to.**”

“**You know better than to run away like that.**”

“**That’s really an interesting idea.**”

“**You’re not allowed to throw food. People don’t like to eat with people who make messes.**”

“**I like the way the two of you decided to take turns.**”

“**Good for you, you put up with not getting your way.**”

We’ve already said in this chapter that if you can ignore negative behavior altogether, that’s often better than using low-excitement disapproval. But if you must turn attention to negative behavior, do so with low excitement.

**Differential Request-Granting**

This section is a very important one in the art of “how not to raise a spoiled brat.” Children as a rule frequently ask adults to do things for them. Which requests get granted have a lot to do with whether the child is “spoiled” or not.

What is the definition of a “spoiled” individual? (Adults can be spoiled also.) A “spoiled” person has a feeling of entitlement, that other people should grant their requests simply because she makes them, that others somehow have a moral responsibility to do what she wants them to do. The thought pattern is along the lines of, “I want this; therefore it follows logically that the other person should do it.” This thought pattern ignores or weights as relatively unimportant what the other person’s wishes or needs are. Thus the spoiled individual tends to

1. request things that are not reasonable to expect from others,
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2. get upset, indignant, and/or pouty when those requests are not granted, until they are granted, and
3. make requests in an obnoxious, tyrannical, or irritating way.

The spoiled person is usually deficient in the skills of toleration and non-bossiness, of frustration-tolerance, of negotiation skills, and of recognizing just solutions to conflict. For the spoiled person, it seems very meet and right to boss the other person. Frustration-intolerance in the form of whining, crying, complaining, being angry, pouting, or having a tantrum has been rewarded by the other person’s request-granting so much that frustration-tolerance seems a foolish strategy. If I am a spoiled person, a just solution to the problem of my wanting something from someone else is that they give it to me, period. I have not gotten an objective sense of what is just and reasonable to expect from another person in return for whatever I am prepared to give; I confuse the question of what is just with the question of what meets my immediate wishes.

How does someone get to be spoiled? Consider the following vignette.

Child: (In a relatively quiet voice) I want a cookie.
Adult: (Is tired, wants to relax, continues to read the newspaper.)
Child: (In a louder, more strident, demanding, whiny voice) I want a cookie! Get me one!
Adult: It’s almost supper time.

Child: (Still louder, crying, demanding)
I want it! I want it! Get it for me! Get it!
Adult: (Thinks: “I don’t need this. Getting the cookie is a small price for stopping this.”) Oh all right. Here, take your cookie and be quiet.
Child: (Eats the cookie and turns off the negative behavior, for now. Next episode soon to follow, however.)

By turning off the negative behavior when the adult grants the request, the child is using what’s called negative reinforcement to reward the adult for complying. The main point, however, is that the adult’s request-granting is selectively reinforcing the child’s demandingness, negative emotion, and loud anger. The child is getting the message loud and clear that “the obnoxious wheel gets the grease.” The adult is teaching the child, by differential request-granting, to be demanding and unhappy. Eventually the child may learn to go directly to the whiny, crying, demanding request, without passing through the relatively more pleasant stage.

Once the child has learned to scream and loudly demand things in order to get requests granted, breaking the child of this habit will entail some ignoring of tantrums. You will have to deny requests and stay the course through the ensuing tantrum, sometimes many times, before the child learns that a “new deal” is in place and that the conditions of differential reinforcement have changed. You can speed things up by explaining the new deal to the child,
at a time when no conflict is “hot.” It’s helpful to let the child know that you are interested in being a good parent, and part of what that means is reinforcing pleasant behavior and not reinforcing unpleasant behavior. Thus you’re obligated not to give the child what he wants when he practices a bad habit, even if you would otherwise like to. Even with such an explanation, often there is no substitute for the child’s directly finding out that obnoxious behavior is no longer reinforced.

A more subtle way to produce a spoiled child is to grant too many unreasonable requests, even when they are made in a pleasant and polite tone of voice. Suppose that the child requests that the adult give her constant attention, doing one thing after another that the child requests. If these requests require a great deal of effort and some discomfort from the adult, and the adult goes along with everything the child wants, the child may come to expect that whatever she wants will be given. If the overly-entitled child asks the adult to do a somersault and the adult does not feel like it, it does the child good for the adult to decline, politely. If the overly-entitled child asks the adult to buy something at the store, and the adult knows that the object will not get much productive use or is too expensive, it will do the child good not to get that object. With so much unkindness and stinginess in the world, it is tragic to see a child being spoiled by the mist-

iming of and wrong type of kindness and generosity.

Another way of producing a spoiled child is to grant too many requests too soon after the child has acted badly. For example: a child refuses to leave a play- ground, and the parent has to create a major scene to get the child to go home. On the way home, the child asks to stop at the toy store. If the parent does stop there and buy the child something, the parent is giving the child the message that request-granting has nothing to do with how nice the child has been.

Thus to avoid producing a spoiled child, as a general rule the adult should grant children’s requests only when they are politely expressed, reasonable, and not too closely following negative behavior. Of course, you can’t be rigid; if the toddler’s request is to get her leg unstuck from between the slats of her crib, you grant it no matter what the tone of voice or prior behavior. Here the reasonableness of the request overrides the other considerations.

What about polite requests that immediately follow requests of the “spoiled” variety? Consider the following scenario.

Child: (In bossy tone) Get me a popsicle! I want it now!
Adult: You must ask nicely.
Child: Oh, all right. May I have a popsicle, please?
Adult: That’s much better. Here’s your popsicle.

What’s the problem with this? The problem is that the bossy, spoiled-style
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request set off a chain of events that resulted in request-granting. Furthermore, the bossy request was reinforced by attention. A popsicle is hardly ever a necessity for life. (We’ll ignore the times when you and your child are dying of thirst on the desert and you come across a large package of popsicles.) Thus I would recommend the following response.

Child: (In a bossy tone) Get me a popsicle! I want it now!
Adult: No popsicles now.
Child: Please, may I please have a popsicle?
Adult: I’m going out to get the mail now. Want to walk with me?

In this example, once the spoiled-type request is issued, the adult resolves to deny it, no matter what follows. If a half hour later, when there has been lots of intervening activity, the child makes a pleasant and polite request, the parent’s granting it will be helpful to the child.

When the child does politely make reasonable requests that follow positive behavior, the adult’s granting them is a wonderful way of reinforcing the positive behavior and modeling the skill of compliance.

Caretakers Need to Be a Team

Consider this vignette.

Little Tricia has in a tyrannical tone of voice ordered her father, “Get me some juice, now!”

Father says, “I don’t like that way of asking, Tricia. You know how to ask politely.”

Tricia begins to scream very loudly, “I want it! You get it for me!” She cries and stamps her feet and screams louder.

Father ignores this response, and starts taking dishes from the sink and putting them in the dishwasher.

At this moment, grandmother walks in, and says to Tricia, “What’s the matter, sweetie pie,” and picks her up and hugs her.

Tricia whimpers, “I wanted some juice.”

The grandmother says, “Well, is that all it is.” Getting juice for Tricia, who has now stopped crying, grandmother says to father, “See daddy, how easy that was, all she needed was a little juice.”

The moral is clear, I hope. The adults need to communicate with each other and work out a set of common understandings, so that they won’t be working at cross-purposes with one another and risk inciting themselves to violent retribution against one another!

Motivation Systems in Families

Let’s make a very brief classification of the ways family members are motivated to do what other family members want them to do.

Level 1: Threats and punishments. At this level, I do something you want out of fear that you will hit me, yell at
me, put me in time out, or otherwise do something I find aversive.

Level 2: Bargains, prizes, and tangible goods. At this level, I do something you want in order to get points, a trip to someplace I like, a sticker, a toy, money, or the use of the car.

Level 3: Rational reciprocity. Here I do nice things for you and act pleasant, not for any specific reward. I’m motivated just by knowing that the more pleasant I act toward you, the more likely you are to act pleasant toward me. I reason that if I want the family atmosphere to be pleasant, I’d better do my part.

Level 4: Pleasure from the other’s pleasure. Here I do nice things for you and act pleasant because I feel happy when I see you happy. I take direct pleasure from your pleasure.

In the real world, few families and few relationships operate only at levels 3 and 4. For many families, moving up from level 1 to level 2 represents a major positive step. Even the best families occasionally use level 1 motivation. A chapter of this book discusses humane punishments for children. Nonetheless, the more your family members are motivated by levels 3 and 4, the better. The more people can be kind to each other just because it makes them happier to do so, or just because they want to contribute to a positive emotional climate in the family, the more the motivation level of the family will be elevated above threats and tangible rewards.

How do you strengthen level 3 and 4 motivation? One way is by appealing to it, invoking it, calling upon it. Like a magician in a primitive tribe invoking spirits to come out and visit the tribe, you can invoke the spirit of generosity and kindness. Consider this dialogue:

Parent: Would you help me carry the groceries in?
Child: Will you pay me?
Parent: No; but the more we help each other in this family, the more we feel good about each other, and that’s much more important than money.

I’m not guaranteeing that the child won’t respond to this by saying, “Forget it!” especially if the child is steeped in the models of flippant behavior from television sitcoms. But at least the child had encountered a direct appeal to his level 3 motivation; at least he’s gotten the suggestion that sometimes people do things for each other for this reason.

The Shaping Game

The “Shaping Game” is a teaching tool that is designed to give you practice in giving attention when someone does something positive, making that attention mention concretely what you like about the positive example, and withholding attention from behavior that is off the desired track, without being punitive about that behavior. In other words, it gives practice in applying a good number of the principles we’ve talked about so far. It provides practice in two very important skills: celebrating and reinforcing the positive behavior of
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others, and celebrating your own positive behavior. These skills are the opposites of many problems in relationships and in mood. To be a little more grandiose, let’s say that if everyone on Earth became an expert player of the shaping game and generalized the shaping habits to real life, we would have a much better world.

To further sell the shaping game: this book will suggest many exercises and activities for you and your child to do together. When parents and children try these activities, problems sometimes come up that keep the activities from being positive and productive. If you can become an expert player of the shaping game, and generalize its principles to the activities that are suggested, they have much higher chance of going right.

Before talking about the shaping game, let’s talk about shaping. What is shaping? It's helping someone learn to do something by reinforcing “successive approximations” to the goal. In other words, you celebrate the baby steps. You give attention and approval as the person does something just a little better than before, or something just a little closer to the goal. When the person gets out of line, you don’t disapprove, but you just withhold comment, watchfully waiting for a move in the right direction so that you can reinforce again.

For example, let’s say that a young child is not able to pay attention to books at all, and someone wants to stretch the child’s ability to sustain attention to books. Is this person well advised to break out a copy of *War and Peace* and go to it with the child? And then if the child’s attention wanders, give the tyke a slap? That’s the opposite of shaping. To use shaping, the adult might sit and look at a very simple picture book, and when the child looks at it too, for even one second, the adult pats him on the back, and says, “Here’s a book,” in an approving way. Then the child goes and looks out the window, and the adult just sits there. Then the child comes back and looks at the book, and the adult looks at the child in a positive way, and says, “The book’s called Timmy and Matthew Take ‘Turns.” The child this time looks at it for three seconds before he turns away. Perhaps the next time the child returns, the adult even gets to read half a line of text. If the adult continues to be patient and to reinforce attending and to avoid punishing the child for anything, the child will probably eventually enjoy hearing books read.

The shaping game is a simulation, a way of getting concentrated practice at the skill of reinforcing successive approximations to a goal behavior.

Here are the rules of the shaping game:

1. There are two people. The “shaper” thinks of some behavior for the “shapee” to do, and writes it down, without showing the shapee.
2. The object of the game for the shaper is to give clues so that the shapee can do that behavior.

3. The object of the game for the shapee is to do that behavior. (Thus they both have the same goal, and the game is a cooperative one.)

4. The shapee begins the game by doing things like walking around, touching things, saying things, and so forth.

5. The shaper can give clues only by approving of things that the shapee has already done. For example, the shaper can say things like, “I like it that you turned that direction,” or “That’s good that you are touching that thing,” or “Thank you for lifting your arm like that.”

6. Criticism or suggestions or commands are against the rules; positive reinforcement only is permitted.

These are the rules. If you have children that are seven years old or more, they will probably enjoy playing the shaping game. I would recommend it. It’s a little too difficult for a preschooler. But if you’re an adult with a preschool child, what is really helpful is to do this game with another adult or an older child, to practice the skill of shaping. (Being an adult doesn’t mean you can’t play games with other adults.) And if you do it with each other in the child’s presence, the child will catch on how to do it a lot earlier.

The things that people find hard in this game are just the things that are hard for them in working with children. Sometimes in the game, it’s hard for the shaper not to criticize the shapee, just as in real life, it’s hard for parents to ignore a child when he does something negative. Some shaping game players stump their shapees by withholding approval, waiting for the goal behavior to be done perfectly. Likewise, in real life, it’s often hard to give a child approval for the baby steps toward the goal.

Sometimes in the game, the shaper will give praise indiscriminately, without waiting for improvement; in real life, when parents hear that praise is good they often give it for things that aren’t praiseworthy enough, so that the child gets more feedback about how the parent is feeling at the moment than about the wisdom of the child’s own behavior. Some shapers seem to get pleasure out of the shapee’s not knowing what to do, rather than taking responsibility for giving the shapee as good clues as he can give. Some shapers can’t let their tone of voice communicate degrees of approval that give the person more clues than the words themselves. Some shapers forget that they can say very specifically what they person did that they liked, and just say “That was good” without saying things like “I like it that you lifted your right leg quickly.” Some shapers can’t resist the urge to criticize or disapprove, or else waste all their energy resisting this urge.

Do you ever make any of the above-mentioned errors in working with children, or other people? (If not, I want to hire you! Or maybe for you to hire me!)
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If you’re like most of us and occasionally make some of the above errors, you can practice reducing them by playing the shaping game.

In a very common vicious cycle, someone fears failure so much that he doesn’t try. Not trying leads to further failure. If a parent can acquire a “shaping attitude” toward the child, and the child can get habits of using this shaping attitude toward himself, this vicious cycle is less likely to start and is fixable once it does start. When you are subject to reward for closer approximations to success and no punishments for failure, there is everything to gain and nothing to lose by trying things.

One-on-one Time, Differential Attention, and Positive Behavior

I spent a year seeing children who had been referred for special education classes in the schools because of behavior problems. I would read teachers’ reports of horrendously disruptive behavior that the child had exhibited in the classroom. Then the child would come into my office, talk and play, and sometimes take an individually-administered test. The child most often behaved pleasantly and courteously. I was struck by the difference between the Mr. Hyde reported in the classroom and the Dr. Jekyll who acted so reasonably in my office.

What accounted for the difference? Did I have magical powers? Were the teachers’ reports falsified? I concluded that the magic was primarily in one-on-one interaction between an adult and a child. In this situation, gone are the conditions where the child must compete for an adult’s attention and where bad behavior reliably gets attention. In their place are conditions where the child has the adult’s attention, and the adult can very easily give more or less enthusiasm contingent upon the child’s behavior. In addition to this, the adult has the opportunity to sense what types of activity the child might enjoy, get immediate feedback from the child on whether the child is enjoying the activity. The adult can sense when the child is getting bored with one activity and needs a switch to another one.

What if you have more than one child? It seems difficult to spend any time with any of them alone. However, I think that one-on-one time is so good that before giving up on it, I would make a very concerted attempt to engineer the logistics so that you can use it. If you are in a two-parent family, try having one parent go into a room alone with one of the children, while the other parent spends time with the rest of them. Each child knows ahead of time that he or she will eventually get a turn with your individual time.

Another option is to hire a babysitter to come and stay with the rest of the children, while you take one child after the next into a room by yourself.

Or, work out an arrangement with another parent, to get together and let
the other parent watch the rest of the children, while you have a series of one-on-ones with each of yours. Then you reciprocate for the other parent. Or if your children are old enough to tolerate some aloneness, you can spend individual time with one of them while the other spends time by herself.

It takes a lot of discipline and planning and motivation to do this. That’s why people don’t do it very often. But if you can do it, you’ll find that having relaxed, gentle, upbeat times with each child, and relieving them of the competition for your attention will have positive effects.

This doesn’t mean that all adults will have successful and useful interactions with all children, if you can just get them in a one-on-one situation. That’s why I go into such detail in this book about how to interact well with a child.

**Using Differential Reinforcement to Help Children Get Work Done**

For some parents, the advice in the following section has changed their lives. For some children, it has solved problems that otherwise would have resulted in a prescription of medication for attention problems. If your child has trouble completing tasks, take it seriously!

How much time do all the parents in the world spend in prompting, reminding, urging, and nagging children to get their homework and chores done? My guess is that the total time devoted to this is huge. This would not be so sad if prompting, urging, reminding, and nagging worked very well. It would be time well spent. But much of the time, it turns out that these behaviors only seem to reinforce the child’s dawdling. Furthermore, the parent and child get into a sequence of behaviors where the parent gets reinforced for getting into a bad mood. The emotional climate of the family declines as a result. The child’s dawdling and the parent’s crabbiness get increased according to very familiar and well-known principles of learning.

This section will explain how this takes place, and will outline an alternative. In this alternative – namely using “differential reinforcement of task completion” – the time and effort and energy that the parent puts into helping the child work can actually pay off and bear fruit. In this paradigm, the child is reinforced for getting things finished, and the parent is reinforced for being pleasant and in good spirits.

Remember, if something that you do increases the behavior that comes just before it, what you do is a *reinforcer* for that behavior. If, accidentally or purposely, you reinforce some behavior and do not reinforce other behavior, you are using differential reinforcement to increase the first and decrease the second.

As I’ve emphasized, a parent’s attention is very often reinforcing to a child, even when the parent isn’t intending to reinforce the behavior that leads to the
attention. Sometimes by paying attention to one behavior and ignoring another, parents use differential reinforcement in the wrong direction, without even realizing it.

**The Problem: The Dawdling – Nagging Paradigm**

Now let’s consider dawdling behavior. Suppose a parent asks a child to get dressed, take out the trash, do some homework, or clean up a room. The child gets started doing it, and the parent leaves the child alone to do it. At the moment the child completes it, the parent is involved in something else. There is no immediate reinforcement for working. Let’s suppose that a child who finds the parent’s attention very reinforcing experiments with dawdling. Instead of getting started, the child gets distracted onto something else. The parent reminds the child again, “Come on, remember you need to get going on this.”

When the parent makes this utterance, she is delivering attention to the child – a cherished reinforcer. And what behavior does the attention follow? It follows the dawdling. Now the child has found that when he completes the task without dawdling, he gets no attention, but when he dawdles, he does get the parent’s attention.

The child dawdles more and more and more. Finally the parent realizes that if the job is going to get done, the parent has to stand over the child and guide the child every step of the way. The child now has snared a big reinforcer, and again the behavior that the parent’s attention follows, and reinforces, is dawdling.

So differential reinforcement is working to make the child keep dawdling. But now let’s think about what’s going on with the parent’s behavior. The parent starts to get a little exasperated. “Come on! I said, get going! Now!” When the parent comes forth with this very attentive negative emotion, the child starts working some. The parent relaxes, and soon the child stops working. “No, it’s not time for that! Back to work!” the parent utters, with irritation. The child starts working again, for a little while. The child’s working is reinforcement for the parent. And what does this reinforcement follow? It follows the parent’s negative emotion – anger, irritation, exasperation. The child’s work follows this negative emotion more than it follows the parent’s relaxation. So the child is accidentally using differential reinforcement with the parent! The child is differentially reinforcing the parent’s negative emotion.

The parent differentially reinforces the child’s dawdling, and the child differentially reinforces the parent’s crabiness! This is a sorry state of affairs, yet it is an extremely prevalent one. It can get repeated over literally thousands of trials, until dawdling and crabiness are so thoroughly ingrained in child and
parent that both of them are stuck. I believe that this pattern is responsible for a huge amount of human misery.

How can you get out of this unfortunate paradigm if you find yourself getting into it?

**The Solution: Differential Reinforcement for Task Completion**

Now let’s envision a different paradigm. Suppose the parent says, “I see you have some math homework to do here. Here’s the page to work on, and here are your pencil and paper. Your job is to get started now. I’m going to be doing some work, but what I want you to do is to call me when you finish the very first problem. That way I can inspect it.”

The parent then goes about her business. If the child dawdles, and the parent ignores the child and does her own thing, joyously. If there is another sibling who is getting some work done, the parent attends to that sibling. But when the child calls out, “I finished the first problem,” the parent drops what she is doing and runs to inspect it.

“Hey,” says the parent, “you did it! All right! How did you figure out how to do this? Did you learn it in class, or from the book?” The parent’s emotion is enthusiastic and positive. It’s important that there be some emotion and energy in the parent’s response, particularly for children who find the parent’s emotion reinforcing.

“How about doing the next two problems, and call me when you’ve finished them, OK? I’m going to be reading the newspaper some.”

Again, the parent happily does her own thing, with no attention to the child, until the child calls out, “I’m done!” Again the parent drops the newspaper immediately and attends to the child in an enthusiastic way.

What is going on now? Now the parent’s differential reinforcement is for task completion. If the child does more work immediately after the parent’s enthusiastic positive response, the parent is now being reinforced by the child for enthusiastic positive emotion instead of crabbiness.

This is the essence of the new paradigm. There are lots of variations upon it. It’s a challenge to pick the variation that fits best with the child’s present capacity to work independently.

**Variations**

Over time, very gradually, the parent increases the amount of work that the child is supposed to do before calling the parent to check. This is called going on an intermittent schedule of reinforcement. If the child is supposed to call the parent after two problems, then three, then four, the child is gradually getting used to a “leaner” schedule of reinforcement. The parent is gradually shaping
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the child’s behavior toward more independent work.

In a very important variation, the parent doesn’t actually leave the room and come back in order to carry out differential reinforcement. The parent stays in the room, but just shifts attention. For example, the parent has a book to read. When the parent is not attending, she reads her book, and when she is attending, she looks at the child and speaks to the child. This variation is an important way that you might want to do it at the beginning of the program or with a very young learner, whose independent work skills are not highly developed.

Another very important variation is one in which the parent gives attention not only at the completion of the task, but all through the time that the child is working productively on it. The child starts the math problem, and the parent stands looking over the child’s shoulder, saying “Yes. You’re getting it. That’s good. OK, you did it!” Or, the parent just stands and looks with a hand on the child’s shoulder. But as soon as the child gets off task, the parent withdraws attention from the child. This variation is also useful for young learners or those with very much undeveloped independent work skills, or at the beginning of the use of this paradigm.

How does the general paradigm work for chores? Imagine that the parent says, “I’d like for you to take the trash out, please. Please let me know when you’ve done it, and I’ll inspect.

The inspection will be that I will walk around and make sure the trash cans inside are empty, and see if the trash is put at the right place outside. Until then, I’ll be doing some work on cleaning up my own room. Please give a holler when you’re done.” If the child does not do the task, the parent spends a long time away from the child, cleaning up her own room. If the child does do the task, the parent drops what she is doing and runs to the child. “Wow, that was quick. Are you sure these indoor trash cans are empty? I’ll bet they’re full. No! Empty! What do you know! Let’s see if that trash is at the right place outside. I’ll bet not. Wow! They’re at the exact right place! Congratulations!”

At the beginning, you may find that using this paradigm is more work than doing the chore yourself! But the work you spend training your child to do chores is a great cause. Through this means your child can learn to do more and more independent work.

How do you make the schedule of reinforcement more intermittent, with chores? After a time, you make a list of chores. You have the child call you for inspection after each one of them is completed. After some time of operating like this, you ask the child to call you after two of them have been completed, or after three of them have been completed. You gradually work your way to the point where the inspection occurs after the whole list has been finished.
Another variation involves keeping track of the time that it takes to do various tasks. The parent starts a timer going (for example the stopwatch function of an electronic watch) when the child begins a certain task. When the child signals that the task is done, the parent stops the timer. (Or the child starts and stops the timer.) Part of the positive feedback the child gets can be on how little time it took to do the certain task. You can start to get a feeling for what amount of time is top flight efficiency, versus what amount of time is average or below average efficiency, for various tasks. If the child himself starts to get a feeling for these, then the child is getting some fairly accurate feedback on his concentration performance for each task.

Another important variation is for the child for whom your attention is not a powerful enough reinforcer in and of itself. You may wish to then use tangible reinforcers, such as junk food. A little bit of junk food, and some positive attention, reinforce task completion. Or each little task is reinforced by the click of a counter. The attainment of a certain number gets the payoff of a little bit of junk food. You want not to fill the child up on junk food, because then this reinforcer is no longer reinforcing, and the child won’t want nutritious food at the next meal. But using tiny bits to reinforce task completion will often work well. If you use this option, it’s a good idea to withhold junk food at most other times.

In any variation of this program, you want to try to give more attention to correct, accurate, and high-quality performance than to sloppy, inaccurate, and low-quality performance. Sometimes it is easy to use differential reinforcement in the wrong direction, to reinforce incompetent performance: for example when the child does the math problem right, all the parent says is “That’s good,” whereas when the child does the math problem wrong, the parent takes five minutes to explain where the error was and how to do it correctly. Or when the child does the chore right, the parent just says a quick word of praise, whereas when the child does not do the chore right, the parent gets involved in correcting it. The antidote to this problem is to dwell loud and long over the correct and accurate performances, and to give explanations and corrections for the inaccurate performances in a more crisp and efficient way. It’s always helpful to think about shaping. Shaping means at first reinforcing performances that haven’t made it to the final standard, then gradually raising the standard. Sometimes at first you want to reinforce time spent on the task, whether the performance is perfect or not. As the child gets better at logging in time on the task, you gradually start using differential reinforcement for higher and higher quality work.

The key concepts to keep in mind, for any of the variations, are that 1) your attention and excitement are usually reinforcing, 2) you want to think in
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terms of giving reinforcement AFTER a bit of work rather than after some dawdling, and 3) you want to get into that happy state where the child’s work is reinforcing you for giving positive attention rather than reinforcing you for nagging at the child.