Ask the Experts

Behavioral Momentum

Categories: ASD and DD, Child-focused

Question

What is behavioral momentum and how does it work?

Answer

By Teka J. Harris, M.A., BCaBA

How can you teach a skill to someone who will not comply with instructions? How can you motivate someone to do something they don't want to do? Motivation and compliance are challenges that parents and teachers of children with autism and other special needs must deal with daily, as their requests and instructions are often met with resistance.

An individual may refuse to complete a task for a variety of reasons: the task may be too complex; a physical limitation may hinder completion of the task; or he or she may lack confidence. Regardless of the reason for non-compliant behavior, behavior analysts have a strategy to deal with it – behavioral momentum.

Behavioral momentum is often used in classrooms or vocational settings to improve task-completion and increase compliance, thus creating opportunities for success. It involves making a series of easy, or "high-probability," requests followed by a difficult or "low-probability" request. The goal of behavioral momentum is to get the individual accustomed to responding to easy requests, thereby increasing the likelihood that he or she will comply with the more difficult ones.

Recall the childhood game "Simon Says." The object of the game is to catch players off guard and get them to comply with an instruction that would eliminate them from the round. The leader of the game, "Simon," begins by firing off simple commands such as: "Simon says, 'Jump;'" "Simon says, 'Clap your hands;'" or "Simon says, 'Turn around.'" Players comply with each of these commands as long as the leader says, "Simon says…" before stating the action. If the leader gives a command without first saying "Simon says," and a player completes the action anyway, that player is eliminated. This is behavioral momentum. Simon gets players to comply with difficult/ low-probability instructions, by building momentum through easy/high-probability instructions. It is a strategy that parents and teachers, as well as behavior analysts, can use with individuals who have behavioral challenges and other special needs.

Designing a program using behavioral momentum is simple. It is also easy to implement, and can be used to motivate individuals of all ages. First, analysts, teachers, or parents identify easy and difficult tasks. Then they decide in what order they will present these tasks. The number of easy tasks they will present depends on the amount of momentum needed to motivate the individual to complete the difficult task. Making two or three easy task requests before the difficult task request is typically a good way to start. Easy task requests should be simple and brief. They should also be familiar requests that have been successfully completed in the past.

It is important to reward the successful completion of each easy task immediately. Once enough momentum has been created, the difficult task should be presented and rewarded in the same manner. After the individual gets used to being rewarded for completing easy tasks, the number of difficult tasks completed should begin to increase. Before long, the difficult tasks will become easy, and newer tasks can be added to the program.

Motivation and compliance are crucial components of skill-building; when they are lacking, learning may be impeded. Using behavioral momentum not only boosts motivation and compliance, but also gives the learner the confidence he or she needs to complete tasks, and shapes his or her overall success.