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Case Study #1

Seven Chips: Case Study Review

Jefferson, a third grade boy, had a variety of experiences with conditioning, reinforcement schedules and punishment during the school year. His teacher, Ms. Stanton, attempted to use *operant conditioning* to curb his disruptive behavior into being more respectful by giving out consequences. In order to achieve this, the *token economy strategy* was used with seven poker chips. Being entrusted with a new set of seven poker chips every day, the guidelines were that Jefferson could leave his seat only seven times a day. Each time he would leave his seat his actions would be *reinforced continuously* by requiring him to return a poker chip until there were none left. At this point, he would be required to stay seated for the remainder of the day. As the *punishment* strategy requires, there were repercussions for each time he left his seat after he was out of poker chips. These *punishments* included missing lunch and recess time by instead having to sit in solitary-confinement by the main office. At the same time, Ms. Stanton had a *fixed-ratio reinforcement schedule* in which she would reward Jefferson with a new pencil each time he’d save twenty-five chips from use.

Though this strategy led to a temporary improvement in Jefferson’s behavior, it is unlikely to have long-term effects because after a period of time the *continuous reinforcement* of his actions stopped occurring. Also, when the contingency contract was first drawn up, Ms. Stanton made one fatal flaw. She *told* Jefferson what he needed to do, but *telling someone* and *agreeing with someone* are two very different forms of communication.

If I were to improve on Ms. Stanton’s chip strategy, I would most likely include the *Premack principle*. This principle would change the *fixed-ratio reinforcement schedule* into a *fixed-interval reinforcement schedule.* Instead of restricting his movement to seven times a day, I would have him stay in his seat for specific periods of time (instruction) and then allow his body to move as it needed to at other specified periods of time (free time/if he listened well during instruction). I believe by using both of these strategies together, he will come to appreciate his time out of his chair more because he’ll be able to learn how to sit still when it is required of him. To give *positive reinforcement*, I would use the *token* system and give him a green poker chip (25 points) for each lesson he sat through. In order to make sure his behavior when he is out of his chair is appropriate, I would re-implement the *fixed-ratio reinforcement schedule* where he would earn a black poker chips (100 points) for every time he was out of his seat and did not show disruptive behavior. Instead of taking his poker chips away when he did show disruptive behavior, I would give a *punishment* and have him miss out on five minutes of free time for each disruption he caused. I would then use *token economy* to allow him to pick from a variety of prizes at the end of each day worth a certain number of points. If he gained 25 points, he could have a small prize and the more points he had acquired the more precious the rewards might become (lunch with a friend/teacher, bigger toys, a one-time only free pass for behavior; etc.).

According to Woolfolk punishment can only be effective if it used with other methods, such as reinforcements and group consequences. Punishment, no matter what form, is only effective when the potential punisher is around. Because of this, the minute a substitute steps into the room, all efforts to change a behavior could very well fall completely apart. In that way, punishments are best as a last minute result, not as an expectation. That is how I plan to use it. If Ms. Stanton had viewed the punishments that way, her strategy might have had more success.