

From Pollastri, A.R, Epstein, L.D., Heath, G.H. & Ablon, J.S. (2013) The Collaborative Problem Solving Approach: Outcomes Across Settings. *Harvard Review of Psychology*. Volume 21, Number 4 at 189. (citations omitted)

## **CONVENTIONAL INTERVENTIONS FOR EXTERNALIZING BEHAVIORS: OPERANT APPROACHES**

The procedures and tools that are typically used to reduce oppositional behavior are based upon common beliefs about its causes. Behavioral theories suggest that children learn to behave disruptively because those behaviors effectively get them something (e.g., attention) or allow them to avoid something (e.g., work). This understanding assumes that children have control over whether they behave in compliance with, or in opposition to, adult expectations. This understanding also implies that these children will behave well if they believe that good behavior will result in a desired outcome. Consistent with this theory, many common interventions for disruptive behavior aim to motivate oppositional children to want to behave better. In sum, behavioral theories posit that children will do well if they want to, and corresponding interventions aim to increase children's motivation such that they will want to behave well.

Based on this understanding, many conventional behavioral interventions with externalizing children have sought to motivate compliant behavior through operant methods. Such methods date back to the famous behaviorist studies of B. F. Skinner (1904–90), who demonstrated that target behaviors could be elicited, and unwanted behaviors diminished, through an intensive and consistent menu of rewards and punishments. Behavioral approaches, including reward charts and time-outs, are now used worldwide and are applied in a wide range of settings. Indeed, considerable empirical research supports a number of treatment approaches that use operant behavioral methods to increase compliance with adult expectations.

Behavioral approaches typically achieve two primary objectives related to the management of behavior. First, they reinforce basic lessons, such as what the acceptable and unacceptable behaviors are in a given situation. Second, they facilitate extrinsic, or external, motivation. The motivation to receive a reward or avoid a punishment can tip the scales in favor of exhibiting a desired behavior, assuming one has the skills needed to perform that behavior. As an example, a recent meta-analysis suggests that conventional behavioral approaches can be moderately successful in decreasing externalizing behavior, though effect sizes are not as robust as once assumed, and positive effects may not be sustained in the long term.

While behavioral methods are useful in some cases, problems arise when attempting to use these operant approaches with children who know what is expected of them and who are motivated to do well, but who lack skills to do so due to deficits in impulse control, frustration tolerance, flexibility, problem solving, or other adaptive skills. For children who are aware of the consequences of their maladaptive behaviors but who lack the skills to inhibit these behaviors, the operant approach falls short. In fact, these approaches can sometimes do more harm than good: first, by increasing behavioral performance only in response to promise of reward; second, by negatively affecting the self-esteem of children who want to do well but lack the skills to do so, and who are told repeatedly that they are failing to meet expectations because they are not trying hard enough; and third, by increasing power struggles between adults and children that can be detrimental to the relationship. In sum, through increase of motivation, operant approaches can make the possible more probable, but they simply cannot make the impossible possible. In an attempt to rectify the shortcomings of traditional operant approaches, a new approach to understanding challenging children has emerged: Collaborative Problem Solving.