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FUNCTIONAL EQUIVALENCE

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One of the most effective ways to reduce/eliminate a problem (challenging) behavior is to teach a 'functionally equivalent' alternative (i.e., a substitute behavior that serves the same purpose - a replacement skill).

In a previous article we talked about "Functional Analysis" and the importance of assessing the purpose of a challenging behavior. Many times what a person is trying to get is itself okay, the real problem is how the person is going about getting it.

I still remember some of those team meetings from ten years ago. We would decide that a problem behavior was 'attention seeking' and then try to get rid of it by cutting off all the attention for it. What we were trying to do was make the problem behavior 'ineffective' and therefore useless to the person. If that did not work, we would try to get the person to just stop wanting attention altogether. Psychotropic medications in high doses were often helpful - they could get someone to stop wanting just about anything (and everything).

But what's wrong with wanting attention anyway? Seems like a good sign to me - it means the person is socialized, enjoys and seeks human interaction, etc. The problem really is not that the person wants attention, it's how the person is going about getting it. As such, the appropriate treatment would seem to be to teach alternative, more acceptable ways of getting attention and thereby making the old challenging behaviors 'unnecessary'.

Functional Equivalence refers to this whole concept of teaching replacement skills (i.e., teaching new ways of getting the same things). If aggression is used to get attention, then teach the person how to say "Can we have a talk?"; if the problem is stealing coffee, maybe we should teach the person how to make his own cup of coffee.

Failure to teach these functionally equivalent skills is arguably the primary reason Behavior Management/Support Plans have limited effect. Either we fail to provide opportunity for the development or occurrence of any alternative/replacement skill or the skills we teach are just not quite as effective.

Often we try to use artificial reinforcers (M&M's, tokens, etc.) to reward 'not engaging in a problem behavior' without regard to the behavior's function or payoff. In this case, all we are doing is pitting the artificial reinforcer against the payoff (e.g., if you choose attention, you can't have an M&M, which is it going to be?). Instead of setting up a competition, how much better it would seem to work with the person to help them get what they really want.

When we do try to teach a replacement skill do we make it just as effective as the problem behavior? Sure we try to pay more attention and reinforce appropriate behaviors, but boy do we ever jump when that problem behavior occurs. Somehow that replacement skill has to get the person as much, if not more, of what he wants.

Are the replacement skills just as available as the problem behavior? Often, the problem behaviors are the only source of control the person has; in a life that is structured and scheduled by others, the problem behaviors may be the only events that occur on the person's own schedule. The replacement skills need to be just as available.

There is a reason for the repeated occurrence of challenging behaviors. In many cases, it is for lack of an alternative. Teaching functionally equivalent replacement skills would seem a logical and effective way of decreasing challenging behaviors.

In many cases, challenging behaviors serve a communicative function. As such, the replacement skill should be an alternative way of communicating with others. "Functional Communication Training" is the subject of another article.

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