ESE Wars Episode III
The Return of Darth (task) Evader

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A long long time ago in a classroom far away….

- Ok, actually it was only last Tuesday in West Palm Beach…
- We will look at some critical variables and some “neat tricks” for working with children who have extreme escape behaviors when it comes to tasks
- Some of the things we will look at:
Overview

• Using reinforcers effectively, including:
  • Finding them
  • Rate
  • Reinforcer Interruption
  • Differential Reinforcement
  • Increasing tolerance to reinforcer removal/termination and delay
Overview

• Analysis of WHY the child wants to escape
• How to alter “educational discriminative stimuli”
• What to do with Task Avoidance Juggernauts
• How to neutralize aversive stimuli through counter-conditioning
Why do people escape/avoid?

When there is no balance in THE FORCE!
Why do people escape/avoid?

- If the task difficulty outweighs the reinforcement available for task completion, you get ESCAPE!
Why do people escape/avoid?

- The other important issue is....
- What are they escaping to?

People do not escape to a reinforcement “black hole”
What are the easiest things to change?

• Up the reinforcement across all dimensions
• Up the magnitude
• Up the rate
• Up the immediacy
What are the easiest things to change?

- Decrease task difficulty:
- Either by changing the task
- Or by increasing the level of assistance (more types of prompts and less delay between the instruction and the prompt)
Do they hate THIS task?

• It is also important to note if they hate a particular task, (writing their name) a class of tasks (all drawing activities) or something about the *method* of instruction or *when* the instruction is given
Reinforcers

• Every child you work with is copping some reinforcers, the question is, are you controlling them?
• The first issue is finding effective reinforcers for the child
• They must be powerful enough to get the child to attend to them with no prompting
Reinforcer test...

- Take the “alleged” reinforcer and if possible bring it to the child. If the child does not look at it or better yet try to take it, MOVE ON
- How upset are they when you stop it? If they bite you, that’s a good one!
- Of course, whether or not something will function as a reinforcer for the task at hand cannot be known ahead of time, but a big reaction from the child is a good sign
Reinforcer problems

• Can the child tolerate the delay to the reinforcer if given after task completion?

• Can the child “break-clean” from the reinforcer when it is time to give it up (if it is a preferred object or activity)

• If the reinforcer is given during the task, is it “consumed” quickly?
Reinforcer Problems

- Does delivery of the reinforcer kill all motivation to complete the task?
- Is the rate of reinforcement sufficient to maintain their attention during the task?
- Is there ANY differential reinforcement?
Differential Reinforcement

• So many times, the reinforcer magnitude does not increase with task difficulty…
• “Touch red” = goldfish cracker
• “Give me truck” = goldfish cracker
• “Write least common multiples of 54,562” = goldfish cracker = tantrum
Differential Reinforcement

- The reinforcer should be significantly larger than what was previously given for the behavior that needed more prompting.
- As the quality/independence of the measure improves, the level of reinforcement comes back down again once the behavior has stabilized at that level.
- Then there is differential reinforcement for the next improvement.
Task completion in the parallel universe

• In a parallel universe everything is reversed…

• Unlike our own universe, reinforcers are punctuated by brief periods of tasks…

• This procedure is for “hard-core” task avoiders
Reinforcer Interruption

• For the most difficult children, start off with some sort of activity that will maintain their attention for at least several minutes (computer, video, toys, whatever)

• Bring a piece of some educational materials with you but don’t let the child see it
Reinforcer Interruption

• You can even just ask academic questions or anything that requires compliance from the child
• Let them “get into” the activity
• Briefly interrupt the activity by getting between them and the activity or, if it is electronic in nature, turn it off or pause it briefly
Reinforcer Interruption

• Give the instruction, ask the question, whatever, but don’t announce that it’s coming
• Prompt as much as necessary to get a response
• Immediately let them resume the activity and back away a little bit
Reinforcer Interruption

- This technique also addresses the issue of being able to “break” from a reinforcer without having a fit.

- Even very difficult children will only have a fit the first few trials. Once they realize they aren’t having to “give up” the reinforcer for some indefinite period of time, they gradually habituate to the termination of the SR+.
Reinforcer Interruption

- You can couple this procedure with teaching them how to appropriately get access to the activity again...
- Pause video:
  - “Show me green” (they do)
  - What do you want?
  - “Video” hit play
- This can be done in like 5 seconds.
Reinforcer Interruption

• In so doing they are able to:
  • Habituate to reinforcer removal
  • Learn that they will get it back soon
  • Learn how to get it back appropriately
  • Become accustomed to the “do work” then “ask for SR+” sequence
The Case of the “Sd Voice”

- In the ESE quadrant of the WPB school sector there lives a child who was very sensitive to the “Sd Voice”
- It didn’t matter what was said when speaking with the Sd Voice, as long as it sounded like the Sd Voice.
- Upon hearing the Sd Voice this child immediately turned to the dark side.
The Case of the “Sd Voice”

• The “Sd Voice” is the tone used when the child is supposed to begin to make some sort of discrimination and it is the “instructional tone” of voice

• It was a misnomer for this child because it was really the S- voice…signaling the unavailability of reinforcement
The Case of the “Sd Voice”

- This child could sense subtle disturbances in the force that signaled impending task demands
- These changes included:
  - Bringing him to a desk/table
  - Putting out instructional materials
  - Using the “Sd Voice”
The Case of the “Sd Voice”

- This child hated no particular tasks
- Instead he hated anything that smelled, looked, sounded, or felt like work
- He did enjoy playful interactions with adults however…
- How do we get this child to do even the simplest task???
The Case of the “Sd Voice”

• What do we do about the problem with the “Sd Voice?”
• Use that voice during all sorts of interactions and not just during tasks
• Vary the tone of voice during instructions so that it approximates a “play-time” voice
• Tell them about the bowl of bows…
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

• For this child, according to staff, his reinforcers changed rapidly and they were “elusive”

• We categorized potential reinforcers according to the type, and duration that they held his interest.

• Remember first we have to determine if they even want them enough to follow-them, look for them, take them from you etc...
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

• We categorized his “reinforcers” according to…
• Tangible: some things he just liked to hold onto and did very little with
• Activity based: walking around the carpet, playing with toys, drawing/painting
• Social: hugs, praise, clapping, “play”
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

- Reinforcers were categorized according to how long they were likely to maintain his interest.
- Functionally, we don’t know if they are reinforcers until we “see them in action,” but if they don’t hold the person’s interest, there is no reason to go any further.
We categorized reinforcers into brief, moderate and extended in terms of the duration that they could maintain his interest:

- **Brief**: last only a few minutes at best
- **Moderate**: at least 30 minutes to an hour
- **Extended**: interested all day long
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

• Yes! The categories are fairly arbitrary, but we were doing it to see where most of his reinforcers fell.

• Why do we want to know how long the reinforcers are good for?

• We can’t do very much “reinforcer interruption” training with brief reinforcers, but they may be good to help with transitional periods.
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

- Brief reinforcers can also be used to avoid satiation with the moderate and extended reinforcers.
- Eventually it would be helpful to categorize reinforcers according to the types of tasks that they will actually reinforce!
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

• With phantom reinforcers, sometimes we just need to step back, stop all task demands and just watch the person to see how they spend their time (a non-contrived reinforcer sampling)
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

• With this particular individual we also categorized tasks according to the probability that he would readily complete them.
• High probability: he was very familiar with, can finish easily, and will finish them on his own once he gets started
• Medium probability: Tasks he tried to escape from about half of the time and always require prompting to finish
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

• Low probability: Those tasks that he is capable of doing parts of, but that he almost never complies with, or only does so with numerous prompts, with great difficulty and many errors (comprehension based tasks for him)
The Case of the Phantom Reinforcer

- Categorizing tasks this way can help to determine the type and magnitude of reinforcer to be used after its completion.
- Also it was much easier to implement “behavioral momentum” by having the tasks all laid out, by category, ahead of time.
The Case of the “cloaked” child

• This child kept her face hidden most of the time by pulling her shirt collar up to cover it and had terrible eye contact.

• When it was discovered that she liked Disney’s “Aladdin” the reinforcer interruption procedure was used.

• While watching the video, both arms came down, and her face was clearly visible.
The Case of the “cloaked” child

• When the video was paused and she was asked “what color is the genie” she was able to be prompted to say “blue” and to say it while making excellent eye contact

• Video was then resumed.

• Interrupting a reinforcer is a HUGE MO manipulation
The Case of the “cloaked” child

• For many of us, we want something more when it is interrupted than we originally did before we got it…

• Nothing is worse than that last piece of your fudgesicle falling off the stick before you can finish it.
Systematic Desensitization

- Children that avoid particular tasks/areas/activities can be taught to tolerate using reinforcement plus brief exposure with no demands (fading and counter-conditioning)
- Let’s say they are doing flashcards
- Sit at table with the child doing a preferred task
Systematic Desensitization

- Have the flashcards nearby but hidden
- Have a powerful reinforcer ready (let’s say food item)
- Put the flashcards on the table (off to the side) simultaneously with a skittle, but don’t look at the flash cards
- When the child is done consuming the skittle, remove the flashcards again and continue the preferred task
Systematic Desensitization

- Continue same, moving cards closer to center of table
- Leave the cards there
- Continue giving intermittent skittles
- YOU start doing the flashcards yourself intermittently and putting each one aside
- On the last card ask the student a question about the card
Systematic Desensitization

- This process could go very slowly or very quickly, even within session, depending on the child
- Remember, after desensitizing the child through fading and counter-conditioning you have to keep:
  - Errors **Low**
  - Duration **Short**
  - Prompting **High**
  - Reinforcement **BIG!**
In summary....

• You must understand, young Jedi, not only THAT someone wants to escape, but WHY they wish to do so

• Bringing the task to the reinforcer can be much more productive than bringing the reinforcer to the task

• A child may not be avoiding tasks, but avoiding the “Task Conditions” that are in effect.
In summary....

- May the Rein-**FORCE**-er be with you!

B.F. Yoda