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**PBA wishes to express appreciation to Dr. Snipes for contributing this helpful column for the benefit of our members.**

# *A Public Service Column for Members:* **A Look At Wellness**

## **Behavior Modification**

**"M**y spouse does not cook." "My spouse does not workout." "My children are slob." "My dogs are out of control." Do any of these sound familiar? Well stop complaining and pay attention. The first thing to realize is that all of our behaviors are driven by rewards and punishments. When you have a dog who jumps, barks or bites, you do not think twice about taking him to obedience to modify his behavior. Somewhere along the way, we humans got the idea that we are above being controlled by primitive reinforcements. Okay, yes, I am going to be offended if I do something that you want me to do and you pat me on the head and say in that sickening voice "Good girl!" That is not rewarding for me, but it is for a dog. What is my point? Everything we do (or do not do) is motivated by our desire to receive a reward or avoid a punishment. When working with humans, it is not as easy as it may sound.

The first thing you must do is identify an observable, measurable behavior that you want to change in yourself or someone else. "My children are slob" is not measurable even if it is observable. An observable measurable behavior is, "There are clothes strewn about my children's rooms every single day." Okay, now we know the goal is for "My children to keep their clothes put away in their closets and dressers every day." Now you have identified both ends of a continuum. If we believe that people only do things that are rewarding and avoid things that are punishing, then something must be rewarding about leaving their clothes out or punishing about putting them away. Most likely it is the latter. They just do not like to hang their clothes up. There is no inherent reward in it for most children (and many adults). They really just do not mind the mess. We need to figure out what reward we can provide that makes it worth their while. This is called a contingency. Getting the reward is contingent upon them putting away their clothes. The reward needs to be rewarding to the child and provided frequently enough that it makes it worth their while. For children under 10 (and adults who act like kids), daily rewards tend to work best. Children older than 10 can hold off for a bigger reward once a week. Some kids are not motivated by television, computer time or even money. Watch your child and see what it is that he or she loves. That is the reward. We foster rabbits, dogs and any injured wildlife that happens our way. (You know there has to be some contingency for my husband to tolerate my idiosyncrasies.) My son does not get critter privileges until he has done his chores and finished his lessons for the day. For some kids, it may mean no phone or television until the clothes are put away.

With adults, it is much more beneficial (less insulting) to provide something like back massages or free time as opposed to taking something away. Think about how much more likely you are to do something if someone offers to "give" you something for it versus if someone threatens to take away a "privilege." It is also important that whatever you are "giving" makes the transaction seem equitable. If you promise a back massage in exchange for dinner, and I spend 45 minutes cooking dinner, you better be breaking out the massage oils, and pulling up a chair, because you are gonna be there for a while. The traditional backrub during the commercial break is not gonna cut it.

Once you have identified the behavior you want to change, what you want to change it to, and the rewards you are going to provide for doing the behavior, you need to identify the incremental steps to the goal. In the example above with the children, they are currently at a "1." Their clothes are always strewn about their rooms. You want them to be at a "4." A "4" would be that their clothes are put away in their closets and drawers every day. So how do you move from a "1" to a "4"? There are several ways (Of course I could not make this easy).

**Phase 1:** In order to earn their reward, they need to clean up their clothes each night after being reminded by you.

**Phase 2:** In order to earn their reward, they need to clean up their clothes each night WITHOUT being reminded by you.

**Phase 3:** In order to earn their reward, they need to clean up their clothes each night WITHOUT being reminded by you, AND they need to pick up their clothes in the morning before school with a reminder from you

**Phase 4:** In order to earn their reward, they need to clean up their clothes each night WITHOUT being reminded by you, AND they need to pick up their clothes in the morning before school WITHOUT a reminder from you.

You have succeeded. With younger children, what they deem rewarding seems to change with their underwear. If you see that the reward is losing its power (that is, your child does not care if he earns it or not), then you need to change the reward. Let the child know of the change. "I see that you have started to leave your clothes out again. Instead of earning \_\_\_\_\_ for picking up your clothes, you will now earn \_\_\_\_\_." Some behaviors become rewarding in and of themselves. I hate doing dishes, but I love a clean kitchen. Initially, I did dishes because it was one of my chores. Eventually, I got to the point I just could not stand a dirty kitchen.

Kids are easier than our spouses. Again, our spouses might be insulted if we told them that they were not getting to watch television until they cooked dinner. Nevertheless... everyone has a price. What motivates your spouses? What is keeping them from cooking or working out? For many of us, after a long day at work, we don't have the motivation to cook or exercise. If you have small children, they generally start to melt down right about 4:30. Therefore, by eliminating some of the other demands on their time, they will have more time to exercise, cook whatever. For example, if you want her to exercise, you might offer to cook dinner and give the kids a bath so she can go on a run to "de-stress." Then give her a back rub after the kids go to bed to relax her sore muscles. Yes, this requires effort on your part, but her improved mood, stress reduction and endorphins will work to your advantage.

If she does not cook enough, maybe start out by taking the kids outside in the back yard, grilling the meat and having her make the cornbread or biscuits and vegetables. Make sure to provide some contingency for cooking: "If you will cook dinner/help me cook dinner, I will..." Once she is regularly cooking with you, then she is used to spending that time cooking. The next phase is to start suggesting meals and alternating who cooks and who cleans. (It is also helpful to know what you want to eat—and to want something easy). I do not mind cooking, but I can't ever think of what to cook. Start with easy things like spaghetti, Hamburger Helper, Manwich, chicken noodle casserole etc. It is not a 5-star meal, but at least it is home cooked and a lot cheaper than eating out. When I was working full-time, I would often prepare the whole week's meals on Sunday. Then I only had to clean the kitchen once. Some meals are even better after they have sat for a day or so (chili for example). If you cook noodles, rice, a couple pounds of ground beef, and a couple pounds of chicken on Sunday, it does not take long to put a sauce, seasoning or a glaze on it, warm up some frozen vegetables and throw out some bread and butter. On a side note, a few sure fire deal breakers: Always call if you are going to be late. If she went to the trouble of cooking and you are an hour late, all bets are off. Never criticize a meal. Instead of saying, "This is awful," just do not suggest it again. Finally, do not "surprise her" by bringing home dinner if she already cooked something.

Ultimately, it is a manipulation game. How much are you willing to give to get what you want. My husband always knows when I have found a stray puppy or something because I turn on the charm. He is not even fooled anymore. He just asks "Where and what is it?"