National Association of Special Education Teachers (NASET)

THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Week's Topic:

Response Effort

Introduction

The amount of effort that a person must put forth to successfully complete a specific behavior has a direct impact on the frequency that the person will engage in that behavior. As the 'response effort' required to carry out a behavior increases, a person is generally less likely to show that behavior; conversely, as the response effort decreases, a person will be more likely to engage in that behavior. To use one example, a student will probably read more frequently if a book is stored in his or her school desk than if the child must walk to a different floor of the school building and get access to a locked cabinet whenever the student wants to read a book.

As a behavior-management tool, response effort seems like simple common sense: We engage less in behaviors that we find hard to accomplish. Teachers often forget, however, that response effort can be a useful part of a larger intervention plan. To put it simply, teachers can boost the chances that a student will take part in desired behaviors (e.g., completing homework or interacting appropriately with peers) by making these behaviors easy and convenient to take part in. However, if teachers want to reduce the frequency of a behavior (e.g., a child's running from the classroom), they can accomplish this by making the behavior more difficult to achieve (e.g., seating the child at the rear of the room, far from the classroom door).

Steps in Implementing This Intervention

The teacher selects either an undesirable behavior to decrease or a desirable behavior to increase. By varying response effort required to complete a behavior, the teacher can influence the frequency of a child's targeted behavior, making it likely to appear more often or less often. First, however, the teacher must select a behavioral target to increase or decrease.

(***Optional)*** **If necessary, the teacher breaks the behavioral target into more manageable sub-steps.** Some school behavioral goals are global and consist of many sub-steps. For instance, a goal that "the student will complete all school assignments during seatwork time" could be further sub-divided into: (1) The student will organized her work materials prior to starting seatwork, (2) If she encounters a work item that she does not understand, the student will use independent problem-solving skills prior to approaching the teacher for help; and several other key sub-steps. Breaking larger behavior goals into smaller steps will make it easier for the teacher to decide how to manipulate the response effort required to carry out each sub-step.

The teacher chooses ways to alter the response effort required to complete each selected behavior or behavior sub-step. This final step is best demonstrated through examples:

- *Increasing response effort to reduce the rate of an undesirable behavior.* Putting a physical barrier between a student and an activity, imposing a wait-time before a student can take part in an activity are examples of an increase in response effort.

Example: A teacher finds that one of her students sits down at a computer in her room whenever he can find an opportunity to use a spelling-word program that presents lessons in a game-like format. While the teacher is happy to see that the student enjoys using the academic software, she finds that his frequent use of the computer interferes with his completion of other important school work. She has already broken down the student's behavior, "using the computer", into two sub-steps, "sitting down at the computer" and "starting the spelling software program". While observing the student, though, the teacher notes that the computer is left on in the classroom during the entire school day, making it very convenient for the student to use it at inappropriate times. The teacher decides to increase the response effort needed to use the computer by leaving it turned off when not in use. The student must now switch on the computer and wait for it to boot up before he can use it, a procedure that takes about 2 minutes. Several days later, the teacher notes that the student's rate of unauthorized computer use has dropped significantly because the 'effort' (increased wait-time) to use the computer has increased.

- *Reducing response effort to increase the rate of a desirable behavior.* Putting instructional supplies within convenient reach and having an older peer help a child to organize study materials are examples of a decrease in response effort.

Example: The instructor wants to encourage children in his classroom to read more. After analyzing the current opportunities that children have for getting and reading books in school, the instructor realizes both that students do not have comfortable places to read in the classroom and that, with the current schedule they can get the school library only once per week. The teacher creates a reading corner in his room, with an old but serviceable couch, reading lamps, and a shelf with paperback titles popular with his class. The teacher also arranges with the school's library media specialist to allow his students to drop by daily to check out books. By creating both a more comfortable reading location and easier access to books, the teacher is able to lower the threshold of effort needed to read. As a result, his students read more in the classroom.

Troubleshooting: How to Deal With Common Problems in Using Response Effort

Q: *I like the concept of response effort as a behavior management approach, but I am not sure just how it would fit into my classroom routine. Is response effort only used alone or can it be combined with other intervention ideas?*

Creative teachers will probably find many uses for response effort, both alone and in combination with other interventions. Here is one idea: A teacher might identify an activity that she wants to reduce (e.g., student playing with small toys stored in his desk). If the teacher already has a token/reward system in place for this student, she may forbid the student from playing with toys during the school day but allow the student to redeem a certain number of points or tokens to buy opportunities to play with his toys during free periods. By redefining the undesirable activity to the status of a reward that must be purchased, the teacher has increased the response effort needed for the student to access the activity. It is likely that the student's frequency of playing with toys will drop as a result.
