

Self Protective, Especially 'Challenging', Behaviours

At the heart of Waldon theory is the idea of two learning pathways, or types of learning: fundamental learning, a physiological process which gives rise to 'general understanding'; and associative learning, which is vitally important in the formation of 'cultural particular understanding' (i.e. coming to appreciate the rules and rituals of the society one is born into).

When a problem in fundamental learning occurs, in the first instance because of a disorder or anomaly that affects the processing of information through the central nervous system, behaviours may sometimes be produced by the learner that have an explicitly self-protective function: these are compensatory measures designed to cope with a state of perceived disadvantage, or handicap.

The attitudes of 'significant others' are the decisive element in this regard: well meaning attention directed towards the person with a difficulty may well have the opposite of the desired effect and cause an increase in feelings of vulnerability, with resultant anxiety that has somehow to be dealt with or assuaged by the person experiencing it. Hence the 'handicap' behaviours of rocking, head-banging, twiddling, picking, teasing, prancing, and so on.

Other behaviours which are learned as the result of an original difficulty are the *cul-de-sac* and *retardation* habits. The first are patterns of activity which, as their name implies, have become isolated, dead-end threads which have failed to develop into the normally proliferating, branching and mutually enriching tapestry characteristic of childhood play.

The 'retardation' habits are effort-conserving measures, short-cut and/or sluggish patterns of movement which result in an impoverished *spatial understanding* (the bare bones, as it were, of general understanding).

Can anything be done about these handicap, cul-de-sac and retardation behaviours?

Taking the example of "challenging" behaviours, some of which are seen as notoriously intractable, the best thing we have found to do is to

a) treat 'understanding' as, quite simply, *a behaviour-generating state*

b) view problematic behaviours as the result of an *inappropriate relationship between the individual and the environment*: any attempt to affect them needs to be preceded by a careful analysis of their origins, since they can only come about in the first instance through some lack of understanding on the part of 'significant others'. Quite often this is due to the application of simple 'common sense' to a situation which requires *uncommon* sense and insight.

We can then re-arrange the environment (including the expectations of carers, teachers etc.), and greatly increase the likelihood of the learner coming to acquire new, constructive patterns of behaviour that supplant some, maybe most, of the 'challenging' behaviours – which, in the best-case scenarios, may remain as vestiges only or disappear completely.

How do we go about this? There is a logical order of priority:

1 **Long term** Reduce as far as possible the chances of the learner feeling inadequate to cope with everyday contingencies by helping them to improve the *quality* - the all-round competence - of their general understanding.

This is done by enabling the learner to exercise their current abilities in all imaginable variations*; over time these are noticed, acted on occasionally, increasingly understood, acted upon more frequently, and eventually incorporated into the repertoire of spontaneously-produced behaviours so as to be available at any time in any form, under any ordinarily occurring conditions (i.e. all except the extremes of physical or emotional collapse).

2 Helping learners to improve the quality of their general understanding means that, as part of exactly the same process, they are strengthening their tolerance of emotional strain, so that unsatisfactory or obstructive conditions, 'overfacing' and other potentially frustrating circumstances, do not distract them so much from approaching and dealing with problems in an organised and adaptive manner.

3 Eliminate, so far as is possible, conditions that foster the production of defensive behaviours by arranging that the people who form the bulk of the learner's social environment understand the problem well enough to avoid making what the learner *interprets* as excessive demands on his or her understanding. This includes not responding inappropriately to the unwanted behaviours (see 4).

4 Ensure that nothing is done in response to an unwanted behaviour that would encourage or aggravate it. As far as is possible 'provocative' behaviours should be ignored, well thought out precautions being taken to minimise the vulnerability of carers or other students.

To summarise: We can help students to become less dependent on those actions that are identified as socially problematic or harmful by getting them to do those things* that help increase their repertoire of behaviours through enhancement of the behaviour-producing state (the fundamental, general understanding). New competencies gradually supplant (the need for) some, at least, of the old patterns.

An optimistic note

It makes sense to assume that ideal solutions can be instituted until this is shown not to be the case. Too often assumptions about lack of staff, time-opportunity, money, expertise, etc. are entertained, decisively, even before a rational remedy is sought. This tends to have such a discouraging effect that very little in the way of remedial action may be attempted.

* In the Waldon (asocial) lesson the emphasis is on the learner making clear, well-paced movements of hands and arms to reach, stretch, grasp and release; activities are frequently two-sided, with hands often crossing midline into the space of the other side of the body, to promote bodily integration, and typically include picking-up-and-putting-in, scraping, tapping, banging, raking, scooping, tipping out, scribbling, and so on. Outside of the lesson it is a good idea to encourage the child to put as much effort as possible into any 'constructive' activity they are willing to do, using both hands as extensively as can be managed.

This is an edited extract from Geoffrey Waldon's Challenging Behaviours essay that appeared in the March 1989 issue of *Koine*.

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