CHILD BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

to Katherine and John

CHILD BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

AN EMPIRICAL APPROACH TO MANAGEMENT

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Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
1 Introduction	I
Part I Assessment	11
2 The Case History	13
3 Introduction to Observation	28
4 Methods of Recording Behaviour	35
5 The Therapist as Observer	44
6 The Parent and Child as Observers	56
Part II Planning	63
7 The Decision to Intervene: Some General and Specific Considerations	65
8 Theoretical Considerations in Planning	82
Part III Intervention	95
9 Simple Contingency Management	97
10 Points Systems	114
11 Bargaining and Contracting	136
12 Delinquency and Non-Accidental Injury: Some Aspects of Aetiology and Management	150
13 School-Refusal, Enuresis and Encopresis: Some Aspects of Aetiology and Management	172
14 Failure: Some Theoretical and Practical Considerations	195
<i>Appendix A: Selected Textbooks</i>	215
<i>Appendix B: Selected Journal Articles</i>	219
<i>Glossary of Selected Behavioural Terms</i>	223
<i>References</i>	227
<i>Index</i>	235

Foreword

Efforts to help psychologically troubled children have changed drastically over the past 20 years. The prevailing tendency to bring these children into direct contact with highly trained professionals has shifted to an alternative focus on the children's natural caretakers. In this latter strategy the caretakers are viewed as therapists, rather than having this role fulfilled by professionals. The professional's role has changed from therapist to consultant—one who 're-educates' the parents and school-teachers of troubled children. This re-education notion is based on the assumption that caretaker and child are locked into problem relationships with one another. By teaching the caretakers some new ways of responding to their children, it is reasonable to expect that the children's deviant behaviours should change. In essence, the problem relationships should disappear; both caretaker and child should develop mutually supporting therapeutic behaviours.

This new trend in child therapy has been given the popular label *applied behaviour analysis* (ABA). The ABA strategy argues that deviant behaviour is developed and maintained by its short term stimulus associations. The discovery of these associations, usually dispensed by parents and teachers of the troubled child, should permit a systematic shifting in how the stimuli operate. Given that the caretakers can be convinced to alter their stimulus output for the child, it should be possible to develop new and desirable child behaviours.

Like any therapeutic strategy, ABA has a theoretical model connected with its application. Most ABA consultants rely on reinforcement theory to guide their assessment and intervention work. 'Learning' in an operant sense makes up the bulwark of the ABA consultant's view of how stimulus contingencies produce and maintain a child's problem behaviour. The theory also guides the consultant's teaching efforts to modify these contingencies.

The happy marriage between applied behaviour analysis and reinforcement theory has prospered, but there have also been recent episodes of domestic strife. Therapeutic changes in child behaviour

have not always been sustained: the application of reinforcement prescribed treatment techniques does not always work; there is increasing evidence that successful intervention may be accompanied by side effects not understood on the basis of reinforcement principles. The overall implications of these difficulties must be considered by any proponent of applied behaviour analysis.

The McAuleys present a text responsive to these new developments in applied behaviour analysis. While prior texts have given readers a standard, rather simplistic view of the ABA helping process, these authors give us an updated version of complexities inherent in this strategy. Their version of how one intervenes with the troubled child is by no means a panacea for the field. They present the problems of assessment and treatment honestly, and they outline a most reasonable way of dealing with these constraints.

ROBERT G. WAHLER

University of Tennessee, Knoxville, October 1976

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Geraldine Duffy and Gertrude Heron typed preliminary versions of the manuscript and Twy Miller typed a remarkably rapid final draft. We would also like to thank John Morrow for arranging photocopying facilities for the reproduction of the final draft.

The main contributors to the book are, however, the parents and children. We have preserved their anonymity by altering names and other details of identification.

Although this book is a collaborative effort, the contribution of each author was clearly defined. The first author contributed his clinical experience in child psychiatry and a thorough working knowledge of the practice of behaviour modification with children, and its associated literature. The second author helped in the formulation and writing of the text, and viewed the venture as a professional helper who had hitherto been uninitiated in the mysteries of behaviour modification.