

# **THE USE OF BEHAVIORAL COUNSELING WITH AN UNDERACHIEVER**

**BY**

**JUDITH LEWIS RHOADS**

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THE USE OF BEHAVIORAL COUNSELING  
WITH AN UNDERACHIEVER

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A Research Paper

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in Education

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by

Judith Lewis Rhoads

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Judith Lewis Rhoads entitled "The Use of Behavioral Counseling with an Underachiever." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Counseling and Guidance.

Elizabeth H. Stokes  
Major Professor

Accepted for the Council

Wayne E. Dempwolff  
Dean of the Graduate School

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Review of the Literature with Definitions of Terms

Behavioral Counseling is a revolutionary new counseling technique. It includes many different techniques all broadly related to the field of learning but learning with a particular intent. It modifies the methods to develop a simplified application that can be used in the classroom.

The basis for behavior modification is a body of experimental work dealing with the relationship between changes in the environment and changes in the subject's response. It can be described simply as the use of procedures that change the environment to alter the subject's response to stimuli. The subject is taught to make different responses in the same situation in which he had either made maladaptive or deficient responses.

Behavior modification focuses on behavior that may be defined as: "Those activities of an organism that can be observed by another organism or by an experimenter's instruments" (Ullmann and Krasner, 1965). Its goal is to alter maladaptive behavior. Maladaptive behavior is behavior that is considered inappropriate by those key people in a person's life who control reinforcers. Those behaviors have been learned and the development and maintenance of this behavior is no different from the development and maintenance of any other behavior. The person with maladaptive behavior does not fully live up to the expectations for one

in his role. He does not respond to stimuli present and has not obtained the typical or maximum forms of reinforcement available to one of his status. The behavior to be strengthened must be present to a minimal degree so it may be reinforced into a positive behavior pattern.

Probably the most distinctive feature of behavioral counseling is the use of reinforcement techniques. A positive reinforcer is anything that strengthens the association between stimuli and responses or that follows a response causing it to occur more frequently. Responses (behaviors) occur more often as a function of reinforcement. A negative reinforcer is aversive stimuli or anything a child would prefer to avoid. They usually cause a child to do something less often. A negative reinforcer, when it follows given behaviors, leads to a decrease in the frequency of occurrence of those behaviors (Singer and Singer, 1969). Behavioral counseling seeks to help a child develop more appropriate behavior by adjusting the reinforcement pattern.

The theoretical basis is taken from Skinner's operant conditioning and reinforcement methods. According to Skinner, an operant behavior "followed by a reinforcing stimulus is likely to be changed in frequency of emission" (Ullmann and Krasner, 1965). When one's behavior provokes positive reinforcement, that reinforcement prompts the repetition of that behavior; the probability of repeated behavior increases, given similar environmental conditions (Ullmann and Krasner, 1965).

The goals for behavioral counseling and the methods used are designed entirely to suit the subject and the environment in which he finds himself. Krumboltz states four major areas of problems for behavioral counseling: deficient decision making skills; ineffective academic skills; inappropriate social skills; and self-defeating fears and anxieties.

Behavioral counseling differs in several areas from therapies based on insight. The behavior therapist is interested in specific, immediate concrete results. To obtain them, the counselor takes responsibility for the process, and controls and manipulates the situation. The insight therapist is concerned about more general long range goals. He gives the client the responsibility for the direction and pace of the counseling process. His activity is that of empathising with and understanding the client and communicating that understanding. Both see man as reacting to forces or stimuli, in the one case from within, and the other from without.

The behavior modification approach in the counseling area is relatively new and is not as widely used as other counseling techniques. Krumboltz has been one of the leaders in the advocacy of the use of behavior modification in the counseling area. He has written a detailed text based on recent research developments in this field (Krumboltz and Thoresen, 1969). He included examples of techniques which failed, as well as those which seemed to succeed.

G. R. Patterson, in his book, Living With Children, contends that behavior modification techniques can be taught to parents and teachers for use with children of school age. It is one area of educational and psychological research that has offered practical suggestions for coping with students' problem behavior.

Kennedy notes that reported studies have been done on subjects from six years of age to college students who needed help with problems (Kennedy, 1967). Of the many studies read, only a few assisted the author in the formulation of a reinforcement pattern for her subject in an attempt to change his maladaptive behavior. Although based on principles proven in other studies, the reinforcement pattern used was predicated upon the particular circumstances present in the subject study.

Krumboltz and Thoresen report the use of behavior modification techniques with a seventh grade boy. His grades were improved by working with the teacher and mother in changing reinforcements (Krumboltz and Thoresen, 1969). Dwight L. Goodwin, in his treatment of a ninth grade boy, illustrated how a counselor could work with a classroom teacher in eliminating undesirable behavior and developing appropriate behaviors (Krumboltz and Thoresen, 1969). The treatment resulted in both social and academic progress.

In the Santa Clara (California) Unified School District, students who had long been deprived of much positive reinforcement became card carriers. It was a valuable experiment in showing how a child is

given the responsibility of controlling the reinforcers. Each time the child did something right, the card was initialed by the teacher and at the end of each day a reward was given to the student. This reward constituted positive reinforcement. The experiment demonstrated that a child can control and record the rewards to be given (Krumboltz and Thoresen, 1969).

#### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to test the effects of behavioral counseling on a public school child who was having difficulty in school and to record the results of the application of behavioral counseling. Specifically, the author sought to demonstrate that the application of behavioral counseling to the subject's poor school performance would affect the frequency of his homework and that his school work would improve with behavioral counseling.

#### Limitations of Study

Since human behavior is exceedingly complex, it is not easy to identify correctly all the factors that may elicit and maintain an inappropriate pattern of behavior. Therefore, it would be difficult to say that any one procedure made the difference. The difficulty comes when one attempts to identify the specific reinforcement that stimulated change, since a person may respond to any number of influences not programmed in the therapy plan. Therefore, techniques may not be presented as final answers.

Another limitation is that no long term observations were possible because only seven weeks remained in the school term when the present study was initiated. The limited amount of time prevented a continuing study of the long range effects of the behavioral counseling techniques on the behavior of the subject studied.

## Chapter II

### METHODS AND MATERIALS

The general outline for proceeding with behavioral counseling is to observe the behavior of the subject (behavior analysis) to determine the frequency of his maladaptive behavior. The next step is to instate a reinforcement program for change and to observe the subject for results.

In March, 1970, Elizabeth Martin, a teacher in an elementary school, consented to work with the author on a behavior modification project. Miss Martin had thirty-seven children in her fifth grade classroom. Several children were discussed but the child who seemed to need counseling the most was Earl. Earl's mother had informed Miss Martin of her willingness to cooperate in any manner to help her child.

Miss Martin described Earl as academically unmotivated and stated that he had turned in very few homework assignments. He was not willing to work and his marks were all D's and F's. He had been retained in the first grade and socially promoted thereafter. Miss Martin stated that he needed to be retained again, but that she was going to socially promote him because of his age.

Moreover, Miss Martin described Earl as a disruptive influence on her class. He was totally uncooperative and unresponsive to Miss Martin. When called upon by Miss Martin, he stalled and made show-off, cute remarks, which disturbed the other children. His classroom distractions included playing with toys and combing his hair. He was

generally resented by his peers.

The author proceeded to Earl's classroom to observe him to determine if he appeared to be a suitable subject. Furthermore, the author wanted to choose a particular behavioral problem, record the frequency of this behavior, and concentrate on this specific problem. Concentration on a specific problem means differentially strengthening behavior already learned and building new skills.

Earl was observed in a classroom with thirty-six other students with an IQ range of 72 through 130. He was placed on the back row by his teacher so he would not disturb the other students. The following observations were made and recorded during a one week, two-hour a day period: that he acted silly and very dramatic when called upon; that he moved frequently in his chair, combing his hair, wiggling, and playing with toys; that he was aggressive toward other children; that he paid attention in class by turning his head as each child was called upon and by keeping the right page number in each book; that he dressed in a mod and flamboyant, but sloppy manner; and that he failed to turn in any work.

The problem which the author chose was Earl's failure to accomplish and turn in his homework. The plan to improve this problem of Earl's required the maximum assistance and cooperation of Earl's mother. Therefore, a conference was arranged with his mother.

Earl's mother was suspicious at first, thinking that the counselor thought her son was mentally unbalanced. She felt that her son was

very smart and had been misguided by his first grade teacher. She found it difficult to understand Earl, as his older brother made good grades and was not a problem in any way. Earl frequently tore up the house and yelled at her when she made him do his homework. Earl's mother stated she had tried every method of discipline, from beating the child to leaving him alone in order to try to control him, but nothing seemed to work. Out of desperation, she consented to work with the counselor on the project.

Earl's father was retired from the Army and was a service station operator. The mother stated that Earl worshipped his father but it seemed that he paid little attention to him other than frequent beatings. The mother reported that she kept many of Earl's misdeeds from him, fearing the consequences.

It was necessary to check Earl's records to determine whether he was capable of learning. After consent was given by Earl's mother and his teacher, the counselor checked his records and they revealed that he made the ninety-seventh percentile on his reading readiness test at the time he entered the first grade. Other records were incomplete other than his retention in the first grade and social promotions thereafter. Two intelligence tests were administered to him by the examiner. On the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, he scored 89, and on the Slosson Intelligence Test, 92, which placed him on the borderline between the dull normal and normal range of intelligence. He is capable of

learning, but, by Krumboltz's definition, is an "underachiever."

Krumboltz defines an underachiever as a student whose grade point average was ten or more points below his scholastic ability score (Krumboltz and Thoresen, 1969).

A reinforcement plan was enacted that would change the reinforcements now in effect. There was to be no direct relationship between the counselor and the student. Rather, the plan was to be accomplished through specific instructions given by the counselor to the parent and teacher, each of whom would work directly with the student in carrying out these instructions. Six conferences (one per week) each were scheduled for Earl's mother and his teacher to ascertain whether these instructions were being implemented and to encourage and assist each in implementation.

Earl was asked by Miss Martin to carry an assignment book to school each day to record his assignments. At the end of each day, it was his responsibility to take his book to his teacher who checked whether he had recorded the correct assignment. She then assigned the amount of time Earl needed to complete his assignment. Earl was instructed to take his book home each day and show it to his mother, who was to supervise Earl in his studies and require him to work at least as long as the time allotted by the teacher for the assignment.

Miss Martin was instructed to review each homework assignment, to make personal comments, and to grade them, using the marks of

"superior, excellent, good, fair, or poor." The counselor emphasized to Miss Martin the importance of making an immediate response to any improvement by the student, while ignoring Earl's negative behavior in the classroom as much as possible. To be heavily weighed in Miss Martin's rating of Earl's assignments was any improvement he demonstrated. Miss Martin was to increase standards as Earl progressed.

In the second conference with Earl's mother, she was told that Miss Martin would give Earl an assignment book which would be explained to Earl. She was further asked to check the amount of time designated by the teacher for Earl to do his homework and to monitor Earl to see that he actually studied for that length of time. If he did not, she was not to react emotionally, but to see that his privilege of going outside was taken away for the day. If the book was not signed or forgotten, his privileges were also to be taken away. Earl's mother was instructed not to help him with his homework nor ask to see the results.

The theory was that if Earl was rewarded with a personal comment on each assignment, then the behavior of turning in homework would occur more often. This is an instance of a social reinforcer. The negative reinforcement of elimination of outside play would play an important role in the regulation of the behavior of homework assignments.

It is important that Earl can once again be in control of the reinforcement he gets at school. The responsibility for the book and the determining of the quality of the teacher's comments give Earl a reason

for modifying his behavior. It was felt to this point, his rewards and punishments had lost their reinforcing value.

### Chapter III

#### RESULTS OF APPLICATIONS OF BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION PROCEDURES

Earl accepted the responsibility of recording his assignments and having Miss Martin sign the paper. No other student in the room knew about the plan and Earl never used it to get attention. During the period of the seven weeks, he improved in his manner of copying his assignments. Additionally, he progressed in the performance of his homework, both as to quantity and quality.

During the first few days of the project, the teacher reported that Earl seemed more interested in the class and began participating, with a "minimum" of his usual show-off routine. School-wide testing interrupted the reinforcements and Earl resorted to his aggressive behavior.

At the beginning of the experiment, Earl had been seated at the back of the room so he would not disturb the other children. The last day of the second week, Earl was moved to the front of the room, which seemed to strengthen his good behavior. Up to that point, he was turning in most assignments, but with the move, he began to volunteer to do such things as read aloud in class and do board work. During the third and fourth weeks, he received his first comments of "excellent."

Earl recognized the fact that he could achieve in the areas of science and language. Since much of science was art, which Earl

enjoyed very much, he progressed nicely in science. Specifically, in one of the science units, the students were required to maintain and turn in a science notebook, which consisted mostly of drawings. He worked very hard, often working on his notebook at school in the morning before classes started.

In language, although his spelling and rules of grammar were very poor, he participated in creative writing and produced some good work. He often volunteered to read, whereas previously he did not volunteer and refused or misbehaved when called upon to read orally before the class. He wrote an excellent paragraph and short story entitled, "The Feelings of Spring Today," in which the teacher felt he showed much insight.

Report cards were given the last day of the fourth week and Earl received his first two C's of the year. At this point, the course of the classwork changed from individual work to group units. New programs were started in science, social studies, and language. The work was completed almost entirely during school time. Assignments were made but completed together in school.

As noted by the graph (Figure 1, page 16), in the fifth week, the percentage of homework completed dropped. This is attributed to his lack of work in math. In this area, he was hopelessly behind in understanding the basic concepts and gave up trying to turn in his work in this area. During the last two weeks, he began to make an effort and made his first D in math.

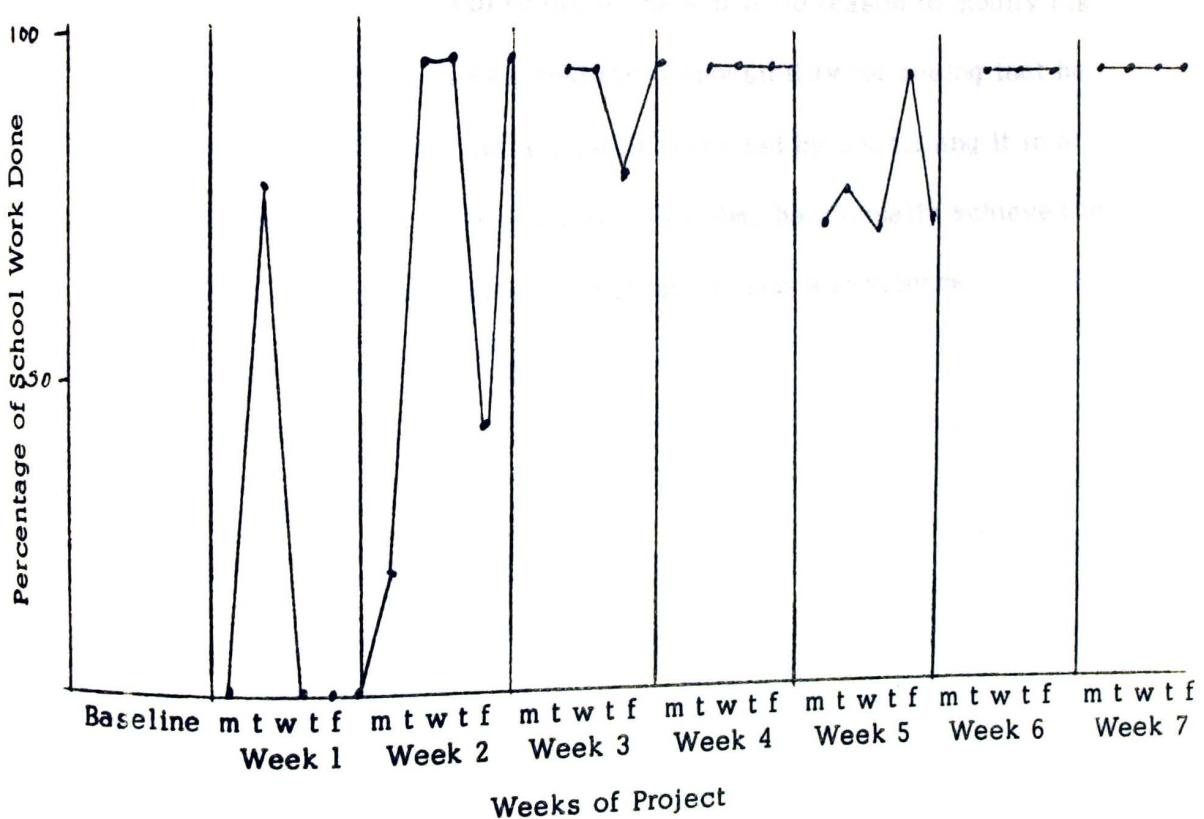
The teacher reported that his rebellious classroom behavior subsided, that he started responding in class, and that he also improved the quality of his work. His teacher, as well as his mother, reported an amazing change in him.

His mother reported that her son spent the exact time allotted each day on his homework. He did it without rebellion and she stated that not once during the seven-week period was it necessary to use the negative reinforcement of elimination of outside play. During this period, she noted that Earl's outbursts of rebellious behavior had subsided and that he cooperated with family activities.

Figure 1 (page 16) presents a graphic description of Earl's performance during the seven weeks the reinforcement was in effect. It represents a distinct, positive change in Earl's behavior before and after reinforcement. It shows a negative homework performance prior to the reinforcement, followed by sporadic performances and a one-hundred per cent completion of his work commencing the fourth week. The fifth week his percentage dropped to seventy-five per cent because of his failure to do his mathematics homework. It may be noted that he absolutely gave up in this subject, after having seriously attempting to perform his math assignments. His percentage rose again to one-hundred per cent for the sixth and seventh week.

Figure 1.

A Time Line Graph Representing  
Earl's Change in Behavior Before  
and After Reinforcement



## Chapter IV

### DISCUSSION

**Underachievement is a complicated psychological pattern and it would be hard to attribute one particular reinforcement to the change.**

**When the reinforcements changed, he did start to respond. The frequency of homework assignments did change from none, to one-hundred per cent each day.**

**Apparently, Earl's reinforcers had lost their value and he felt his rewards and punishments were out of his hands. Since he was not being reinforced properly at school or home, he had little reason to modify his behavior. His mother had assumed the responsibility for seeing that he completed his homework. He apparently rebelled by not turning it in at all. When the responsibility was given to him, he gradually achieved in the areas he knew best, which were language arts and science.**

## Chapter V

### SUMMARY

This study was conducted and research paper written to illustrate the application of behavioral counseling to an underachiever in the classroom environment.

The general problem was his failure to achieve in school, accompanied by his disruptive classroom behavior. The subject was an eleven-year old, with dull to average intelligence--a student who had been socially promoted out of the first grade and who was also academically failing to achieve in the fifth grade.

The method applied basic learning principles of positive and negative reinforcement. It involved the student, his mother, and his teacher and lasted seven weeks until the last week of school.

After observation of the subject, the specific problem chosen was his failure to accomplish and turn in his homework. A behavioral analysis was made which revealed that the subject did not turn in any homework. The purpose of this program then was to change this maladaptive behavior.

The plan to improve his problem was accomplished through instructions given to the subject's teacher and his mother, with no direct relationship between the counselor and the student. Weekly conferences were held with the teacher and mother to encourage and assist each in carrying out their instructions.

The program was designed to meet the needs of the subject as must be done in any case. The reinforcers of the child were manipulated so as to alter the subject's behavior so that he might live up to the expectations for one in his role. Concentration on one specific problem was important so as to strengthen a behavior already learned.

Specifically, the teacher daily rated the student's homework and made personal comments. At the end of each day, she checked whether he had recorded his assignment and noted the amount of time he would need to accomplish it. The student showed his book to his mother, who was responsible for monitoring her son and requiring that he expend the allotted time on his homework assignment. The use of negative reinforcement of elimination of outside play was to be used by the mother if Earl refused to spend the time allotted for homework. She was not to offer assistance nor ask to see the completed work.

The key to success was cooperation on the part of the mother and teacher which was needed to insure a united effort in changing the reinforcement patterns. Earl learned to control his reinforcement by his behavior, which was his responsibility.

Figure 1 (Page 16) graphically shows the distinct, positive change which occurred in the amount of homework Earl completed. Not only was there improvement in his homework performance, but also in his classroom work as evidenced by the change in grades. At the beginning of the study, Earl was receiving D's and F's and at the end of the last

reporting period, he received the mark of a C in Language, Reading, and Social Studies. The mark of a D in math was a considerable improvement over his record of straight F's in the subject.

The teacher reported a change in classroom behavior, including cooperation with classroom procedures, responding in class, and a willingness to do his homework. The overall quality of his work improved.

The mother also reported changes in behavior at home, specifically, the subsiding of the outbursts of rebellious behavior.

This study indicates that behavioral counseling is a technique that can be used by school counselors to modify unacceptable behavior.

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