

KidNews Today

The Catholic School Edition

Holy Family Catholic
School

Visit us online at
www.holyfamily-school.com

Volume 4
Issue 8

March 2012
ISSN:
1936-7899

Practical Psychology

What use is psychology in "real" life? Besides the fact that experts are using psychology to influence what we buy, how we feel about everything from sports to aging to politics, does psychology do regular people any good at all? You may be surprised at how much you are using psychology on those around you, even if you don't call it psychology!

In the world of psychology, the field of behavioral psychology really got its start in the 1920s. In some ways, it was a beginning in scientifically demonstrating what people have known all along. Your grandmother's admonition that you, "Catch more flies with honey than with vinegar," evolved into positive reinforcement, which in psychology means, when someone does something you want them to do, something good happens that encourages them to repeat that behavior. Someone helps you carry the groceries and you smile and say, "Thank you!" You finish an unpleasant chore and reward yourself with a glass of iced tea. Positive reinforcement, a basic premise of behavioral psychology, is at work!

Negative reinforcement is part of our daily life, too. This term means that when a person does a desired behavior, something unpleasant stops. If you are nagging your child to do chores, and then stop nagging when the chore is done, that's negative reinforcement for the child: hurray! My parent finally stopped nagging me! Of course, by doing the chore because you nagged, the child has accidentally positively reinforced you for nagging. This means your child has rewarded your nagging behavior...not what she was intending to do! Other examples of negative reinforcement might be putting on a sweater when you feel cold, and then the unpleasant cold feeling stops; or having some fluid when you are dehydrated, and having the headache ease.

In both positive and negative reinforcement, something desired has been done, and so either something positive occurs, or something negative ceases. Either way, the behavior has been reinforced, or encouraged to be repeated. This makes both the reinforcements very different from punishment, which is a negative event that arises from either doing something one ought not to have done, or by failing to do what you ought to have done.

The trick to punishment, or consequences, is to design them in such a way that they don't have flaws built into the plan. A useful consequence helps the person understand what ought to have been done, not just that something was wrong. It should clearly separate the consequence from you, the authority figure. You don't want your child to hate you, you want him to dislike very much the consequence he's brought upon himself via his choices.

Often we are reinforcing behaviors we don't want repeated. We may pretend to listen to someone's unpleasant gossiping because we feel it would be rude to change the subject, express discomfort with the subject, or terminate the conversation. When that happens, we're positively reinforcing—rewarding—the gossiping behavior, increasing the likelihood that this person will repeat the action of coming to you with unsavory stories. Your polite discomfort with setting boundaries is misinterpreted as a reward, and you will be bombarded with more and more ugly words. In this issue of KidNews, we'll look at practical ways to make these simple psychological principles work for you.—Dr. Lori Puterbaugh, LMHC, LMFT

Inside:

<i>Resources</i>	2
<i>Health News</i>	2
<i>Relationship Corner</i>	3
<i>Something to Talk About...</i>	3
<i>Tip of the Month</i>	4

Faith-Friendly News
You Can Use

**Sister Flo Marino,
Principal**

**Holy Family Catholic
School**

727-526-8194



March

Holidays

St. Patrick's Day 3/17

St. Joseph's Day 3/19

The Annunciation 3/25

March resources for parents & professionals

To apply psychology to daily life, why not start with simple, straightforward information you can use right now? Some suggestions:

Positive Psychology for Dummies, by Averil Leiman * **What Happy People Know: How the New Positive Psychology Can Change Your Life for the Better**, by Dan Baker * **The Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles of Positive Psychology that Fuel Success and Performance at Work**, by Shawn Achor. * **Toddler 411: Clear Answers and Smart Advice for Your Toddler**, by Denise Fields * **Cool, Calm & Confident: A Workbook to Help Children Learn Assertiveness Skills**, by Lisa Schab, LCSW * **Don't Let Your Emotions Run Your Life for Teens**, by Sheri Van Dijk, MSW *

HEALTH NEWS: The American Psychiatric Association continues to work on the draft for the DSM-V, or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Ed. It has been postponed for release again, now expected in mid-2013. This book is the manual by which physicians and psychotherapists must diagnose mental disorders. A draft for public feedback is set for release later this year. One important point: the new edition may recategorize grief that includes depressive symptoms for over one month as the serious mental illness, major depressive disorder. Some psychiatrists and other mental health professionals are protesting this proposal, asserting that normal grief can look very much like depression and we run the risk of pathologizing normal human experience. What are your thoughts? * Behavioral psychology and good habits: we often want to replace unhealthy habits with healthy habits, but it is very difficult. Besides physical addiction to nicotine, caffeine, alcohol, or junk food (the latter via the dopamine rush from high-salt, high-fat food), often bad habits have been somehow positively or negatively reinforced. This means that the bad habit somehow rewards us, either by something positive happening, or by (at least temporarily) easing something unpleasant. So, a good use for psychology is to figure out how we are accidentally reinforcing those bad habits, and instead try to reinforce the incompatible behavior—the replacement, positive habits. For example, a smoker may want very badly to stop smoking. Besides the addiction, there are reinforcers: taking a break with coworkers and getting outside of the office for a few moments every few hours, the perceived “relaxation,” although, of course, nicotine increases blood pressure and heart rate, a distraction from hunger. A person who wants to stop smoking may increase the likelihood of success by figuring out how to make the alternative more reinforcing, immediately, not just in the long-term. Perhaps a more rewarding coffee break could be used, rather than an alternative of staying on the job or standing around watching other smokers indulge. You can apply this type of strategy to any negative habit that you'd like to replace; figure out how to reduce the reinforcers of the negative behaviors, and implement reinforcers for the replacements. Think of the so-called benefits of a particular bad habit, and then try to brainstorm ways to stop letting those benefits happen. Replace them with something rewarding but incompatible. Getting feedback from others may be helpful here! * What about children? How can you implement the idea of rewarding desired behaviors without resorting to bribery? If the bad habit affects health, find positive alternatives and begin implementing them and reinforcing them with praise as well as letting the positive experience speak for itself. As we've all learned the hard way, telling kids what they've learned sometimes backfires. They think we're nagging because we've latched onto what feels like a teaching moment.

Relationship Corner:

Of course, our most important relationships are full of overt, and covert, reinforcement and punishments. We nag, scold, go silent, stomp or sulk. We praise and encourage. However, all too often, we give in to stress and only give feedback—any feedback—when things go awry. Ignoring good behaviors increases the likelihood those actions will be undergo extinction, or finally disappear!

For every time you had laundry taken care of expertly and efficiently, have you had as much gratitude? Do you only hear about laundry when due to someone else neglecting to put something in the laundry, there's a crisis? Would it help to get a "thanks for always stay-

ing on top of the laundry," once in a while?

Unless you are in a relationship with a very depressed person or a person of ill will, modeling the behavior you would like in return usually will help. A seriously depressed person may be processing slowly or feel so sad or apathetic that it is hard to rally and respond, and a person of ill will doesn't care so much how you feel, as long as you don't create waves. That mean person may not respond in kind when you begin modeling what you want.

Modeling is another psychological concept in which we demonstrate through our actions what we want. Use words, to paraphrase St. Francis of Assisi, only when neces-

sary. As can be seen, this is not some new insight into human behavior, but 20th century psychologists began observing elements that worked, measuring effects, and finding ways to use this more deliberately.

Shaping is a related psychological term. In shaping, we reward closer and closer approximations to the behavior we want. For example, at some point, you praised a tiny child for even noticing that it was potty time—even though the incident was still a diaper-changing one.

Over time, your praise came for closer and closer approximations to success, until at last you were praising successfully getting to the potty. It may be necessary to praise what seems like partial success on the way to long-term success.—Dr. Lori Puterbaugh, LMHC, LMFT



We praise and encourage

Something to Talk About: Learning to Pay Attention

Paying attention can be hard. One trick to getting better at it is to start noticing what you are doing when you STOP paying attention. A grownup may be able to help you by observing. For example, are you doing great at school in paying attention until you put your hands absent-mindedly into your desk...and begin playing with whatever is there? Learning to

notice that first step and interrupt yourself can give you a lot more control over your attention! That would be really helpful, and you might also learn other techniques, such as: writing notes helps you concentrate; keeping your eyes on the speaker helps you pay attention; sitting up straight, rather than slouching, helps you feel more focused. Engage a grownup at home or at



school to help you with clues and figure out ways to teach yourself strategies to improve your attention! It's definitely something to talk about! - Dr. Lori

Vicarious Reinforcement

Much of what we learn is via social learning: observation and vicarious reinforcement. Someone else is rewarded for a behavior and we are encouraged to imitate it; someone is punished, and we decide to avoid that behavior. It's tempting to add lecture to the vicarious reinforcement process, but that can sometimes backfire. It draws attention away from the object lesson and puts the focus on what feels like a negative interaction with you. We have a lot of power to model the behavior we'd like to see in our kids, and by doing the right thing and reaping the rewards, and being honest about the rewards, we increase children's awareness of the types of choices we make and the implications of those choices. If you wake up a little out of sorts and decide to exercise anyway, and then feel energized and more positive, just say so in passing. If you lecture, "...and that's why you need to go to football practice whether you feel like it or not," you just interfere with reception of the message you passed to your child. Think about the many ways in which your choices are based on what you've observed in others' lives, and how that reinforcement took root. You're already participating in showing the people you love how you'd like to live, and by example, how they might want to live. Being aware of the psychology theories underlying those processes gives you more power to direct your efforts.—Dr. Lori Puterbaugh, LMHC, LMFT

Grownup Tip of the Month: Rescuing Your Resolutions



Whether you're recovering from a lapse in those New Year's Resolutions, or trying to stick with Lenten penances, psychology can once again come to the rescue!

One way to break bad habits is to begin rewarding behaviors that are incompatible with those habits. You are probably already being successful in your resolution at least some of the time. Try to notice what's happening when you are able to do the thing you'd like to do. Break it down into its smallest elements and see which of those elements you can manage to insert into your routine more often. Example: you'd really like to get some exercise every day. You notice what's going on the days you've been successful. What differences in time of day, meal plans, or outside activities were there between days when you succeeded versus days you meant to exercise but failed? By noticing some small things that happened on the days when you were able to carry out your plans, you have tactics to help increase the likelihood you'll succeed in the future. True changes can take a lot of time and patience because you have to build up entire new neural networks in your brain, replacing the superhighways of nerve connections that went with your auto-pilot bad habits. Being patient, consistent, investigative and creative as you push yourself towards lasting change will pay off with success.—Dr. Lori Puterbaugh, LMHC, LMFT