

*CONTROL OF AN OBSCENE "VERBAL TIC" THROUGH
TIMEOUT IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM¹*

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A classroom teacher modified the behavior of a 10-yr-old student who had a high rate of obscene vocalizations accompanied by facial twitches. In the first phase, the subject was instructed to repeat rapidly the most frequent obscene word in four daily 15-min sessions. This procedure reduced the frequency of obscene vocalizations, but not to an acceptable level. Subsequently, the teacher was able effectively to control the target behavior using a timeout procedure.

Since the development of simple effective techniques of behavior modification there has been a trend toward the remediation of a variety of behavior problems in the classroom. Teachers have been trained to deal successfully with problems that would have previously required referral to outside agencies (*e.g.*, Hall, Fox, Willard, Goldsmith, Emerson, Owen, Davis, and Porcia, 1971; Becker, Madsen, Arnold, and Thomas, 1967; Reynolds and Riskey, 1968). This paper deals with a classroom teacher's use of a timeout procedure to control successfully an unusual and extremely disruptive behavior.

The child was a problem because he recurrently uttered obscene words and phrases (usually a four-letter euphemism for sexual intercourse) accompanied by facial twitches. This behavior had been a problem for 2 yr before the start of the study, in spite of treatment by a physician and a psychologist. It closely matched descriptions of previously studied behaviors referred to as "verbal tics" or "Gilles de la Tourette's Syndrome". (Clark, 1966; Feldman and Werry, 1966; Rafi, 1962; Yates, 1958) Although these terms have been the subject of a great deal of unsubstantiated speculation and

theory, several experimental reports that used these terms were reviewed for suggestions as to a possibly effective technique for controlling the behavior. This is not at all to say that the child "had" a "verbal tic", but that his behavior resembled other behaviors that had been so labelled.

Clark (1966) worked with three adults who repeatedly said obscenities accompanied by bizarre motor behaviors. He reported the complete elimination of these behaviors in two of the three subjects by instructing them continually to repeat the obscenities until they could no longer do so. This procedure, variously referred to as "massed practice", "negative practice", and "reactive extinction" (which is referred to simply as "instructed repetition" in this study), has also been successfully applied to high-frequency motor behaviors. Yates (1958) was able sharply to reduce the frequency of facial and stomach tics through instructed repetition, and Rafi (1962) had similar results with a head-jerking tic. Feldman and Werry (1966), however, found that instructed repetition increased the frequency of a head-jerking tic, as well as increasing the frequency of another untreated tic, while a third tic that had not bothered the subject for some time before therapy returned.

Instructed repetition was the first procedure used in the present study but, because it was not completely effective in this case, a timeout

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procedure was then used. Timeout was chosen because it is a simple technique, easy to carry out, and has been shown to be an effective method for reducing the frequency of problem behaviors in a large number of previous studies. For example, Bostow and Bailey (1969) reduced the frequency of the loud vocal behavior of a retarded adult and the aggressive behavior of a retarded child using timeout; Tyler and Brown (1967) controlled the misbehaviors of institutionalized delinquents; and Barton, Guess, Garcia, and Baer (1970) improved the eating behaviors of retarded children with this technique. Leitenberg (1965) reviewed most of the literature on this procedure.

METHOD

Subject and Target Behavior

The subject was a 10-yr-old male with a Stanford-Binet IQ of 76. At his parent's request, he was enrolled in an elementary level class of "educable mentally retarded" children due to his disruptive behavior. Usually, the subject said a single obscene word accompanied by a stutter, an eye-blink, and a vertical head-jerk. But, because there was considerable variation in the amplitude and intelligibility of the utterances, the target behavior was defined as any vocalization other than an intelligible non-obscene word. These vocalizations were almost always intelligible obscene words during baseline, but were rarely intelligible by the end of the study. Four interobserver reliability checks were taken, as indicated by arrows on Figure 1. A reliability coefficient was calculated by dividing the smaller frequency count for the hour-long data collection period by the larger. Reliability ranged between 0.86 and 1.00, with a mean of 0.91.

Procedure

All phases of the procedure were carried out in a classroom for "educable mentally retarded" children by the teacher. A second observer was present on four occasions for the purpose of establishing reliability.

Baseline

The frequency of the target behavior was recorded for four consecutive days. Data were recorded during baseline and throughout the study between the hours of 9 and 10 a.m., but all contingencies used in later phases were in effect throughout the school day.

Instructed Repetition

For eight consecutive school days, the subject was taken to a separate room by the teacher for four daily 15-min sessions and instructed to repeat rapidly the most frequent obscene word. Whenever he stopped, the instructions were repeated until the 15-min period was over with no rest periods. Often, these instructions had to be "emphatically" repeated several times before the subject would begin or continue; accordingly, the frequency of responses varied widely from session to session. Both pupil and teacher stated that they strongly disliked these sessions and the behavior of the other children changed during this phase as well. Although data were not recorded, the teacher reported an increase in the frequency of complaints about the subject's behavior and that on a number of occasions some students sympathized with the subject when he emerged from instructed repetition sessions, while others criticized him.

Timeout

On the thirteenth day, a timeout contingency was instituted. This was carried out during the entire school day for 14 school days. During this phase, the subject was immediately placed in a timeout room for a minimum of 5 min and until he was quiet for 1 min after every target behavior. The timeout room was a well lighted 4- by 10-ft room connected to the classroom, which had originally been used for typing instruction. The subject was told of the contingency at the beginning of the phase. In the beginning, the subject was escorted to the timeout room without any statement or eye-contact from the teacher, but later he went to the room

when told to do so. On a very few occasions he had to be pulled into the room. The room was stripped of all objects and locked to prevent further disruption while he was in timeout.

Probe Trials

During the timeout contingency, the subject spent a great amount of time in the timeout room. Although data were recorded while the subject was in the timeout room as well as when he was out, there was a possibility that the frequency of the target behavior was influenced in some way by the time spent in the timeout room. For this reason, probe trials were conducted on Days 17 and 22. The probe trials consisted of hour-long periods of data collection, during which the timeout contingency was not in effect. No comment was made to the subject as to this (or any succeeding) change in contingency. As stated before, this did not constitute a separate phase of the procedure, but the probe trials were interspersed during the timeout phase.

Baseline Two

Following the timeout phase, the conditions of baseline were reintroduced. No contingency of any sort was in effect throughout the entire school day. The results of the second baseline made it unnecessary to continue this phase for more than two consecutive school days.

Timeout Two

Following the second baseline, the conditions of the first timeout phase were reintroduced for eight days.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As can be seen in Figure 1, the subject's baseline rate of target behaviors was approximately twice per minute. During the instructed repetition phase of the procedure, there was an immediate drop in the frequency of target behaviors. On the average, the frequency during instructed repetition was approximately half

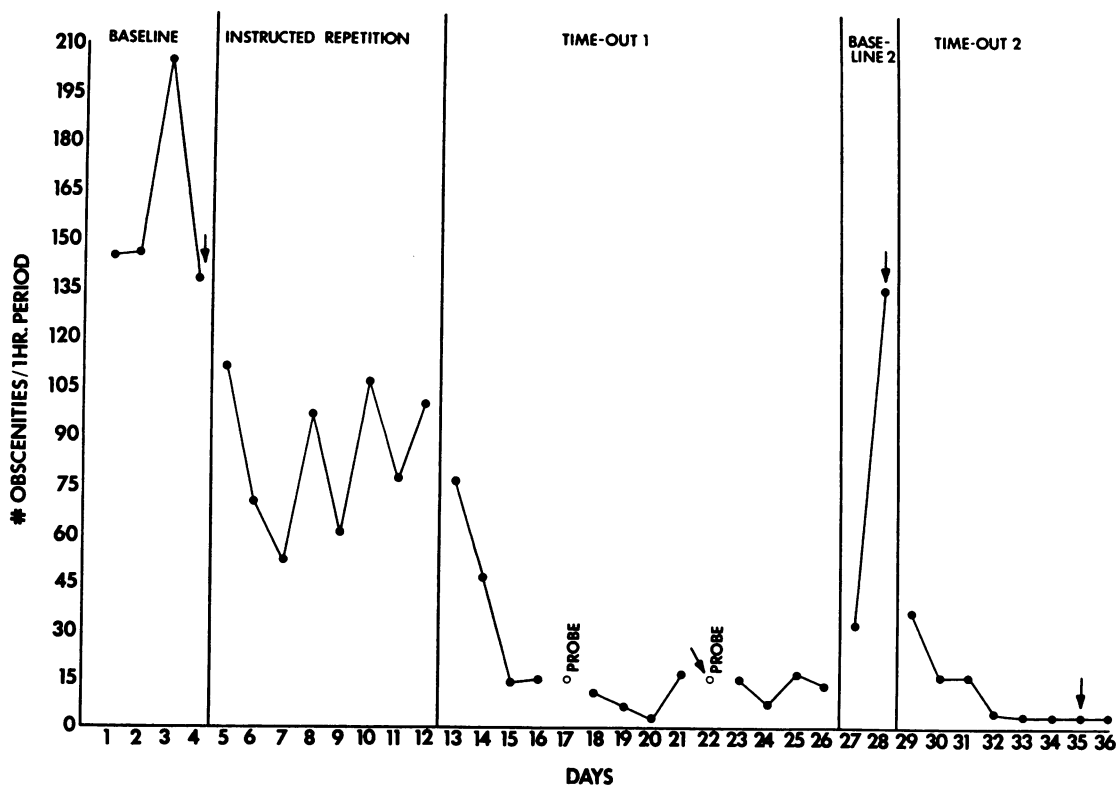


Fig. 1. Frequency of target behavior in each experimental condition.

that of the frequency during the baseline period. But, because the frequency was not reduced to an acceptable level and because the procedure was aversive to the teacher, the timeout procedure was introduced.

The timeout contingency reduced the frequency of target behavior to a level below that of the instructed repetition phase. Although they were not systematically recorded, the teacher reported that the amplitude and articulation of the target behaviors also decreased during timeout to the point that they were rarely intelligible. During this phase, the subject's parents reported that, for the first time in 2 yr, he had gone an entire weekend without saying an intelligible obscene word, and that they had taken him out into public for the first time in as many years.

Because the target behavior was not considered a problem at this level by the subject's parents and teacher, a second baseline was introduced that produced an immediate increase in the frequency of the target behavior. Following the second baseline, the lower frequency was quickly recovered in the second timeout phase.

The timeout contingency remained in effect for two weeks after the collection of data was discontinued and the teacher reported that the frequency of target behaviors remained at the same level. During the third and fourth weeks, the timeout room was used for another purpose for an hour each day. The teacher reported that the frequency of the target behavior returned to Baseline 1 levels, but only during that hour. School then ended for the summer.

These data should not be taken to mean that instructed repetition is a less effective technique than timeout for the modification of such behaviors. Before reaching such a conclusion, several aspects of instructed repetition would have to be systematically varied (e.g., frequency of sessions, length of sessions, method of instructing, etc.), and more subjects would have to be studied. It was concluded, however, that for several reasons timeout was the more desirable procedure in this case. These reasons included the fact that instructed repetition was aversive

to both the teacher and the subject, that timeout required less of the teacher's classroom time, and that a substitute teacher was required while the teacher was out of the classroom during instructed repetition. Most importantly, the technique was quickly effective in this case.

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