

SELF-MONITORING AT HOME WITH YOUR CHILD

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES

CENTER FOR EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION AND PRACTICE

If your family's goal is to improve the behaviors displayed by a son or a daughter during family interactions, consider using a strategy called *self-monitoring*. Research suggests that self-monitoring is effective in improving positive behaviors for children and youth of all ages, with all types of disabilities, and in all settings.

Beneficial effects have been observed for the following behaviors:

- Positive peer relationships
- Appropriate verbalizations
- Compliance with difficult or less preferred tasks
- Academic achievement
- Time spent completing a task accurately
- Aggression

WHAT IS SELF-MONITORING?

Self-monitoring is a strategy that actively involves the child in the *instruction, management, evaluation, and reinforcement* of a newly taught appropriate behavior. It promotes the child's self-direction and independence by shifting behavioral control away from adults (mom and dad) to the child. For children with behavioral problems, self-monitoring can be a beneficial strategy to promote the use of a variety of appropriate behaviors within the home. Consider this family's situation:

Nightly during the family's dinner, Bill, the 10-year-old son, uses profanity to such an extent that he is often asked to leave the table without finishing his meal. The profanity at dinner began about a year ago and has continued to increase even though family members remind Bill to use appropriate language, model appropriate language use (they do not use profanity at the table), discuss why using profanity is not good, and dismiss him from the table. Bill is currently being asked to leave the table four nights a week and subsequently complains about being hungry the rest of the evening. His parents are willing to try a different approach and self-monitoring was suggested.

THE ELEMENTS OF SELF-MONITORING

Self-monitoring comprises four elements that can be used in different combinations. For more severe forms of inappropriate behavior, using all four elements may be necessary. In Bill's case, we will describe each element and provide an example of how Bill's parents can implement self-monitoring during dinner.

SELF-INSTRUCTION

The element of self-instruction encompasses several steps. First, the new behavior is modeled for the child. Second, the child displays the behavior when prompted to do so. These prompts can be given verbally or nonverbally, depending on the abilities of the child. Third, the child is taught statements that can he or she can use silently or aloud, depending on the situation.

Bill was taught to ask his parents and his siblings questions as a way to interact appropriately with his family during dinner. To teach Bill to not use profanity in these questions, his mom and dad wrote several questions on a card that was placed on the edge of Bill's placemat for easy reference. Some of the questions were "Mom, what did you do today?" "Dad, how about if we play ball after dinner?" and "Mary, how did you do on your spelling test?"

At first, in addition to modeling questions to ask, Bill's dad inquired whether Bill wanted to ask the family anything as a prompt. After several dinners, his dad no longer had to use prompts because Bill used the cards independently or made up his own appropriate questions.

SELF-MANAGEMENT

As part of self-monitoring, self-management refers to the child's ability to regain ownership over his or her behavior and goals for using appropriate behavior. The child is taught how to recognize problem behaviors and how to replace them with appropriate and positive behaviors. Bill's mom and dad explained to him that using profanity at dinner was unacceptable, but they wanted to hear his ideas and to include him in the family conversation. They told Bill that he was in charge of managing his new appropriate behavior learned through self-instruction. In addition, Bill was encouraged by his family to use the self-monitoring strategy.

SELF-EVALUATION

Another key element of self-monitoring is the child's evaluation of his or her own behavior. Most of the

time, the child records one or two behaviors, using a piece of paper and pencil. The child needs to be taught what specific behavior to evaluate, what constitutes a correct behavior versus an incorrect behavior, and where and when to evaluate. Self-evaluation is a powerful and lifelong skill that can be specifically taught.

In Bill's case, his mother taught him to evaluate his dinner conversations each night by recording the number of times he asked a question and when he used a profane word. Her goal was to increase his awareness of his behaviors and to see whether the profanity was decreasing.

Beside Bill's question list was a yellow piece of paper with two columns. In the first column, Bill placed a tick mark for each question he asked the family. His goal was to ask five questions at every meal. In the second column, he placed a + if he asked the question without using a profane word. If he did use a profane word, he marked a - in the second column. When the self-monitoring strategy began, his initial goal was to have three pluses and two or fewer minuses. As his behavior improved, his goal was changed to ask all five questions without any profanity.

SELF-REINFORCEMENT

To encourage the child to keep using the new, appropriate behaviors instead of the inappropriate behaviors, the child needs to receive some sort of reinforcement for the new behavior. With self-monitoring, the child is allowed to reinforce himself or herself through either verbal or tangible rewards. The research literature recommends a variety of reinforcers, such as positive verbal statements ("I did a great job"), nonverbal support (a high-five from the teacher or a peer), or tangibles (a piece of candy, access to the computer, free time).

In addition, the reinforcers change as the child reaches his or her goal of behavioral improvement or renegotiates with the family on the basis of reinforcer availability. Bill initially chose to give himself a Popsicle as a tangible reinforcement after each dinner in which he asked the family a question with minimal use of profanity. As Bill used profanity less and engaged the family in conversations by using the questions, he self-reinforced after each meal with a verbal statement or a high-five from his dad. After so many days he then self-reinforced with an ice cream sundae.

THE BENEFITS OF SELF-MONITORING

Several benefits are supported in the research literature when self-monitoring is used with children with behavioral problems in a variety of settings.

PERMANENT PRODUCT

The method the child uses to collect data on the target behavior serves as a record of past behavior. Busy families who live in the present often find it difficult to remember past child behavior. A record makes remembering the child's previous behavior easier. Parents or other family members may want to refer to these records to remind the child of his or her improvement and to offer motivation if the child slows down or stops making progress.

ACTIVE LEARNING

The premise of self-monitoring is to give the child an opportunity to increase control over his or her behavior. When a child does this, he or she becomes an active participant in his or her learning by regulating behavior.

LONGEVITY OF BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

With the child consciously using appropriate behavior, evaluating his or her behavior, and establishing a permanent product of positive behavior change, it is more likely that the effects will be long lasting. When the child knows how and when to assess a behavior and the reinforcement for the behavior, the new behavior will continue. Self-monitoring is unique in that it actively promotes the continuance of behavior as the child becomes more aware of how he or she should behave.

COST EFFECTIVENESS

Using self-monitoring in the home is inexpensive. Simple everyday household items, such as paper and markers, can be used to collect data. Rewards for behavioral change can be items easily available, such as the child's favorite dinner or extra television before bedtime. Some families may want to expand the data sheets by adding fancy stickers or may use a video recorder as a method to collect data; the complexity is up to each family. No research suggests that expanded systems are any more effective than a piece of paper with a + or a happy face, but feel free to use your creativity to develop fun recording systems.

WAYS THE FAMILY CAN SUPPORT A CHILD WHO IS USING SELF-MONITORING

When a child is using self-monitoring strategies, the family can use several ways to support the child in continuing to use the strategy while also using new and more appropriate behavior. The family can remind the child that using self-monitoring will result in more control over his or her behavior and consequently influence the reactions of others. In Bill's case, his family encouraged him to use his new behavior to interact with them at the dinner table, and the relationships among all family members improved.

The family may also reinforce self-monitoring and progress toward the child's goal. Simple encouraging statements, such as "I like how

you are trying this strategy" and "Wow, you are making such improvements," can keep the child focused not only on the strategy but also on the behavioral goals. These statements emphasize the positive changes, not the initial inappropriate behavior.

TWISTS ON SELF-MONITORING

Some research has also used self-monitoring as a strategy to help children who display problematic behavior focus on positive aspects of their environment. For example, Lassman and colleagues taught children with behavioral disorders who felt that their general education teachers did not want them in their classrooms to monitor the number of praise statements the teachers said to them. In this example, the children focused on the positive, not the negative, behaviors.

This shift from monitoring one's behavior to monitoring the behavior of others toward the self can be used at home. For example, sibling arguments are a common problem that many families encounter, especially if one sibling has a history of problematic behaviors.

Parents frequently find themselves attempting to settle disputes between their children, such as a brother and a sister arguing over sharing belongings. One positive way to effectively reduce the number of arguments as well as to decrease the need for parental intervention, is to teach both children to use self-monitoring as a means to evaluate the number of times the brother or the sister shares (see steps under *self-evaluation*). By counting each time a sibling shares something (e.g., toys, candy), the children become more focused on positive interactions. Eventually, monitoring their behavior will not be needed because the positive interactions will occur routinely.

Parents should monitor the evaluations and praise their children for using self-monitoring and the subsequent positive behavior changes. Goals (e.g., work toward sharing with each other five times a day) and rewards (e.g., a new family toy) may even be set.

WHAT TO DO IF SELF-MONITORING IS NOT EFFECTIVE

Just like teachers who use self-monitoring in the classroom, parents may encounter a few stumbling blocks in establishing a self-monitoring program at home. Below are the most common problems:

- A child does not record behavior when it occurs.
- A child records behavior when it does not occur.
- A child refuses to self-monitor.

If these things happen, do not give up. The family may want to try suggestions offered by Dr. Jenson and his colleagues. First, if your child is missing opportunities to record behavior or is recording behaviors that have not occurred, point out examples of the behavior and prompt accurate recording. Also, check with your child to make sure that he or she understands specifically what behavior will be counted. The definition and examples may need to be reviewed or clarified. In the beginning, you may even record the child's behavior at the same time the child does, compare counts, and reward your child if the two counts match.

If your child refuses to self-monitor, offer an extra reward for trying it. Sometimes children may need a little extra incentive to try something new. Above all, do not give up if you encounter a stumbling block. These problems are common and can be resolved with a little fine-tuning.

PROVIDING YOUR CHILD WITH NEW BEHAVIORS

Above all, self-monitoring gives families another effective strategy to use in the home when the goal is to teach and reinforce more appropriate behaviors. Self-monitoring not only improves a child's use of appropriate behaviors, but also focuses the child on positive aspects of his or her environment. This positive focus can be the stepping-stone for future displays of appropriate behavior.

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