Fact sheet 1.12 Behaviourist theories of social development

Learning aim F: Social development from birth up to eight years

Skinner's theory of operant conditioning

Session 1.14 explored Skinner's theories. In terms of how children acquire language, Skinner (1904–1990) also believed that all learning could be shaped by controlling the environment. His theory is therefore used to explain how children may learn aspects of social development, particularly in relation to wanted and unwanted behaviours.

His work was based originally on that of Edward Thorndike (1874–1949). Thorndike had shown that when cats were put in a maze they could learn the skills to escape and gain a reward. If they were put in a similar box again, they could then use the skills they had developed to escape once more.

Skinner's research developed Thorndike's work further. His behaviourist theory is known as operant conditioning. The basis of the operant conditioning theory is that learning occurs through behaviour being rewarded or punished. In other words, an association is made between a behaviour and a consequence of that behaviour. Consequences – known as reinforcers – can be either negative or positive, and primary or secondary. A reinforcer is anything that strengthens the behaviour it follows.

Positive reinforcers reinforce behaviours because they are pleasurable or meet a need of the child in a positive way. Positive reinforcers commonly used in early years include praise, stickers and attention.

Negative reinforcers are likely to make us repeat behaviour, but this is in order to stop something negative from happening to us. For example, we may continue to wear oven gloves to stop us from being burned or a child might tidy up to avoid being nagged by their parent.

There are some reinforcers that give us instant pleasure, satisfaction or meet a need. These are referred to as primary reinforcers. Chocolate is a primary reinforcer because most people find that once they put it into their mouth, they enjoy the taste.

Secondary reinforcers are different because they do not give us satisfaction in themselves, but we learn that they symbolise getting primary reinforcement. A good example of secondary reinforcement in our daily lives is money. Coins and notes in themselves do not reward us, but we learn that they can be used to buy things that will give us primary reinforcement, such as food. The learning used when making the association between money and being able to get something in return is classical conditioning.

Conditioning is a very powerful form of learning. It means that children can be encouraged to show wanted behaviour through positive reinforcement, i.e. through giving praise, attention and stickers. However, it also means that if you give positive reinforcement in response to unwanted behaviour, for example, giving a child a packet of sweets to stop them from whining, you may encourage the unwanted behaviour.

In some cases it might be better to ignore a child's behaviour if it is not dangerous. Giving children attention may lead to them being positively reinforced and in doing so help them to learn the unwanted behaviour.

Further reading: Direct students to explore Skinner's theory further with written and social media resources, e.g.
Videos: Operant Conditioning – Positive & Negative Reinforcement, Punishment or Skinner's Operant Conditioning: Rewards & Punishments

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