



Extinction



Definition

Extinction is the nonreinforcement of a previously reinforced behavior. This procedure involves ignoring a behavior that is withholding reinforcing attention for a previously reinforced response. In all cases, when an inappropriate behavior is ignored, another behavior, which is appropriate, must be reinforced.

Things to Do

- ✓ Select extinction and replacement behaviors.
- ✓ Ignore misbehavior/
reinforce replacement behaviors.
- ✓ Monitor student performance.

✓ Select extinction and replacement behaviors.

Extinction procedures work well with students who whine, complain, cling, throw tantrums, or call out. Often adults fail to recognize that they encourage these behaviors by giving students attention when they do them. The attention can be as simple as eye contact, sighing, or scolding the student.

Extinction is **NOT** effective when students want to be ignored. For instance, students who fail to follow your directions would like you to overlook their inappropriate behavior.

When selecting behaviors to extinguish, also choose appropriate alternative or replacement behaviors. These are desirable behaviors you want to increase by giving students positive attention when performing them. For example, an instructor ignores Amanda when she shouts out answers during math instruction (extinction), but praises her when she raises her hand and waits to be called on (replacement).

Finally, be sure to define the extinction and replacement behaviors using observable and measurable terms. For instance, this is too vague . . .



Observable & Measurable

- Easily observed
- Countable
- Beginning/end
- Repeatable

Instead . . .



. . . is a behavior that you can see and measure.

Likewise . . .



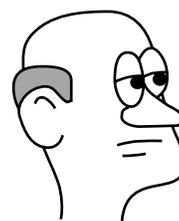
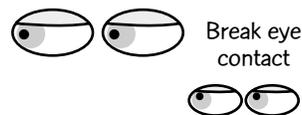
. . . is better stated . . .



✓ Ignore misbehavior/reinforce replacement behaviors.

Ignoring can be the most difficult part of the extinction process. To ignore misbehavior:

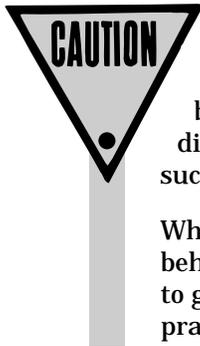
- ☞ Break eye contact.
- ☞ Use stony silence (do not interact or talk with the student).
- ☞ Then move away.



Ignore
Don't pay attention!



In other words, don't pay any attention to the student.



But be forewarned. When you first ignore, the student's inappropriate behavior often escalates and becomes worse. This is called an "extinction burst." The student will try hard to get the previously earned attention. So before using an extinction process, decide whether your class can tolerate the disruption. If not, consider using another strategy or combination of strategies, such as extinction plus a behavior contract.

When the student performs a desired replacement behavior, remember to follow the I-FEED-V rule to get the most out of your praise. This means praise the student "immediately" after the target behavior occurs. Praise "frequently" and "enthusiastically"—especially when working on a new behavior. Also, be sure to use "eye contact" and specifically "describe" the target behavior. Finally, use a "variety" of praise statements.

REMEMBER: *This strategy only works when ignoring and praising are done consistently and correctly.*

PRAISE

I mmediately
F requently
E nthusiastically
E ye contact
D escribe behavior
V ariety



Monitor student performance.

It's important to monitor the student's performance over time to determine if the extinction process is working. Before using the process, collect data on the student's behavior for at least 3 days. Use a simple tally count to record how often the inappropriate behavior occurs. Once the procedure begins, note the frequency of misbehaviors, extinction bursts, and the ensuing reactions from classmates. Regularly review the data to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Then make adjustments as needed.

Examples

Example 1

Danny is a student who constantly clings to the teacher and complains that he is afraid to play with the other students. In the past, other adults gave Danny attention for his reluctance, which resulted in his refusal to go out for recess. Now when Danny complains, his teacher simply breaks eye contact and walks away. At first, Danny threw tantrums. Gradually he stopped complaining. Then his teacher paid more and more attention to him when he played with the other students.

Example 2

Barbara is a flirtatious high school student who makes inappropriate remarks to her teacher. These remarks are disturbing. When asked not to make them, she agrees to stop, but then increases the frequency of the inappropriate remarks. The teacher has decided that the remarks are not done to get other students' attention, since often other students are not present. When she makes the remarks, the teacher breaks eye contact, makes no facial expression, and walks away. When Barbara asked if there was something wrong, the teacher again ignored this question. When Barbara was appropriate in her interactions with the teacher, he commented on how much he enjoyed talking with her as an adult.

Variations of the Technique

- 👉 **Proximity praise.** This works well with extinction. When a student misbehaves, praise a nearby student who is demonstrating the appropriate behavior. Remember to describe the desirable behavior (e.g., “Tony, I like the way you’re sitting at your desk while you work. Way to go!”).
- 👉 **Differential reinforcement** (see *LRBI Checklists—Level I*). This uses the extinction technique. Again, the inappropriate behavior is ignored. Instead, a more specific replacement behavior that is incompatible or occurs at a lower rate than the target behavior is systematically rewarded.

Potential Problems and Solutions

The Misbehavior Becomes Worse With Extinction

An extinction burst is fairly common in which the behavior that is being ignored actually gets worse. The student is trying harder to earn the old reward through more intense efforts. When this happens, it’s critical to stick with the extinction procedure as much as possible. If the student receives attention, the inappropriate behavior is reinforced and may become more resistant to change. Prepare a backup strategy higher in the level system for extreme cases of aggression, throwing tantrums, or self-injuring behavior and deliver it with the least amount of attention.

The Misbehavior Spontaneously Increases

After the target behavior decreases due to successful extinction procedures, it’s common for the misbehavior to spontaneously increase. Simply continue the usual extinction procedure until the behavior again decreases.

An Instructor Fails to Continue Reinforcing Appropriate Behavior

When the problem behavior finally decreases, it’s easy to forget to reinforce the student’s appropriate behavior. However, it is critical to reward good behavior or the student will likely return to the old misbehavior.

Negative Attention From the Instructor is Positive Reinforcement

When using extinction procedures, it’s easy to fall back on negative attention to stop the inappropriate behavior—especially during an extinction burst. Reprimands, yelling, or giving the student a “talking to” about how they should act can actually reinforce the misbehavior. Avoid using negative attention. Instead, continue with extinction procedures and give no attention at all.

**Classmates' Attention Rewards
Student's Misbehavior**

When misbehavior is rewarded by other students' attention, comments, or laughter, do NOT use an extinction procedure. Under these conditions, another technique, such as group reinforcement, may be necessary (see *LRBI Checklists—Level I*).

Getting Ready

- ☞ Practice ignoring skills, such as breaking eye contact, not talking to the student, and walking away. Ignoring is a difficult skill.
- ☞ Prepare for an extinction burst where the behavior gets worse before it gets better.

Materials and Supplies

No materials or supplies are needed to implement extinction procedures.