



"LIVING IN NEW KINDS OF SITUATIONS"

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TRAINING FOR TODAY

Universal Enhancement: Strategies for Promoting Relationships

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As discussed in the introductory article on Universal Enhancement (September 1992, LINKS), the power of Universal Enhancement is found in its strategies that enable individuals with mental retardation to develop meaningful relationships with individuals who are not disabled and who are not paid for the relationship. It is now recognized that the formation of valued relationships serves as a primary and significant deterrent to the development and continuance of inappropriate behavior.

The deterrent effect of an individual's valued relationships on the presence of inappropriate behavior is promoted by the recognition that inappropriate behavior will likely result in the loss of the relationships as a function of natural consequences. That is, people will keep their distance from individuals they find unpleasant. Further, Universal Enhancement, by necessitating the individual's active participation in life's activities, provides an ideal avenue for

the development and exercise of competencies that enhance the quality of the individual's life.

Following stabilization of the individual's inappropriate behavior (October LINKS), the second step in the process of supporting appropriate behaviors to achieve meaningful relationships is desensitization. For many individuals who have spent a life time in either maligned or pathological relationships, it is essential that we provide opportunities through normative interactions to desensitize the individual to the anxiety or even panic they may feel when staff or other individuals without impairments are near. Staff training for TODAY must emphasize that importance of desensitization, if we are to facilitate and support opportunities for persons with mental retardation to develop valued relationships. The items provided below are essential tools that should be incorporated into our staff training efforts.

- Strongly encourage an affect of happiness - an affect of happiness attracts and draws others closer to us. An affect of happiness sends a signal that we have "something" to share with others that is pleasant and positive. Probably, the most effective way to teach an affect of happiness is for staff to demonstrate the behavior, role model.

As a staff trainer we must prompt and reinforce staff to show an open face (Arch Lustberg) during their day to day interactions with individuals being served. A frown, furrowed brow, and squinted eyes communicate an affect of sadness. A smile, relaxed brow and open eyes impart a sense of joy and happiness that is attractive to others, regardless of one's intellectual competence. In addition to demonstrating an affect of happiness throughout the course of their interactions, staff should prompt and compliment individuals served when they reveal their happiness through their facial postures.

MOTTO: INTERDEPENDENCE FOSTERS INDEPENDENCE

Another positive outcome of this training as implemented by staff is that people just tend to feel better when they present a positive affect. Behaviors of happiness, not unlike behaviors of anger or sadness, can become internalized.

Yes, I recognize that staff should not be expected to show an affect of happiness continually, for in fact, no individual is always happy. As a staff trainer, however, it is my expectation that happiness be the prevailing affect, if staff are to serve as effective "role models" in supporting individuals served in attaining valued relationships.

• Encourage the individual to give and do for others. The majority of individuals with mental retardation have historically been on the receiving end of the giving process. If meaningful relationships are to develop, giving must be a bilateral process. Train staff on the techniques of reciprocal giving by providing opportunities for discussions with respect to the positive impact of reciprocal tasks on their own lives. Doing for others proclaims I care about you.

Have staff list all the tasks in which they have recently engaged to help others. Acts of giving listed by staff frequently include: sending birthday cards to friends, giving tithes at church, asking a friend over for dinner, bringing homemade cookies to work to share with colleagues, visiting a sick friend at their home, etc.

Following that exercise, have the staff discuss the possible acts of giving in which they can encourage and support an individual served in giving to others. It may be difficult for some staff to see the commonality between their life and that of an individual who may have extremely limited cognitive and/or physical ability. Training for TODAY must emphasize that an individual's competence or intellect is not the determinant of the type or extent of the individual's giving activities. Rather, competence determines the nature and degree of support that staff must provide to assure the individual's full participation in "reciprocal giving." The

challenge of our staff training effort is to inspire the creativity essential in identifying areas in which individuals served can give and do for others and provide supports required to enable the giving behavior.

• Teach kindness. How can we possibly expect the individuals we serve to show kindness to others when they have received so little of it? Consequently, our staff training effort must focus on staff demonstrating exemplary behavior, by showing kindness. Saying please and thank you take on a new importance. They are now more than just common courtesies, they are words that help draw people together and promote relationships. Staff who model directive language and impugn others, i.e., put that down! come here! leave that alone! are modeling behavior that is "unkind" and thus will further impair the individual's ability in developing those behaviors that are seen as kind.

We must, as trainers, give kindness an empirical definition to effectively communicate to staff our expectation of the behaviors they must role model for individuals served. Kindness is providing choices, extending options, withholding blame, sharing in the responsibility, listening, giving praise, etc.

• Provide non-contingent reinforcement. Many individuals residing in highly regulated environments (regulation imposed by OSHA standards, ICF/MR requirements, the demands of state licensure, etc.) have been the subject of numerous behavior management programs; programs that were designed to manage the individual's behavior with contingent reinforcement and/or aversive consequences—a TO DO paradigm. The impact of social contracting, fixed and variable ratios of reinforcements, token economies, etc. all take their toll upon the individual's ability to develop valued relationships. Thus, it is important that staff provide individuals with non-contingent social reinforcement. That is, staff must give

individuals served their time and attention, not just in response to the individual's achievement of targeted behaviors, but because the individual is a good person whose company staff enjoy and whose presence is valued.

By providing non-contingent social reinforcement, staff communicate to the individual that they are a valued and good person—a person who has much to offer others.

Conclusion

These are but a few of the many strategies that staff can utilize in supporting individuals in developing behaviors that can be used to form relationships. As trainers who work with staff of varied backgrounds, we must be sensitive to the unfortunate reality that far too many staff, not unlike the general population, have themselves suffered from the effects of poor parenting. Consequently, many staff come to the classroom and work place ill prepared to receive the training designed to encourage them to demonstrate exemplary behaviors of kindness, happiness and caring. Training these staff is a particularly difficult challenge, one which must be met if we are to provide the individuals whom we serve with opportunities for full participation in the community.