DELINEQUENCY

3. ALTERING SCHOOL TRUANCY AND PETTY THEFT

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The case discussed here was treated at Webster Center, a nonprofit community
mental-health center specializing in adolescent and family counseling and
serving as resource consultant to the Santa Clara Unified School District and
other community agencies: police, probation, social services, and county
health nurses. In the majority of cases referred to the Center, the adolescent
is labeled by the referral source as the “identified problem.” The counse-
lores at the Center, however, attempt
to consult with many significant people
(like family and school personnel) about each case and to avoid identifying
any one “client.” In this way, the
adolescent is not merely seen at a dis-
tant clinic office to talk about his con-
cerns and then returned to the home,
school, or community environment in
which the problem originally occurred.
Rather, clinical strategies involve teaching
the adolescent self-management, decision-making, and coping skills that
can be generalized to the natural envi-
ronment. And, equally important, an
attempt is made to modify, as much as
possible, the maladaptive aspects of the
adolescent’s environment. The case
presented here illustrates this two-pronged
approach.

This case was referred by the police
department. Jack, a white male aged
fifteen years, had been caught jimmying
open a pinball machine to take the
change inside. He was not booked and
was given probation on condition that
he receive counseling. The mother, Mrs.
Jameson, and her son Jack attended the
first session. Mrs. Jameson explained the
problem briefly, saying that her son had
been truant from school for the previous
two weeks (since the beginning of the
new quarter); that he had lied to her,
saying that he had been attending
school; and that, during that time, he
had been arrested by the police for
petty theft. Therefore, the problem, as
she saw it, was her son’s lying, truancy,
and petty theft.

While Mrs. Jameson explained this
history, Jack sat staring at the floor, say-
ing nothing. When asked how he saw
the situation, he did not respond and
continued to stare at the floor.

“That’s just the way he is at home
when we ask him a question,” Mrs.
Jameson stated. “He just hangs his head
and mopes and won’t say anything.”

METHOD OF ELICITING VERBAL
BEHAVIOR FROM AN
UNCOOPERATIVE CLIENT

For me, one of the most difficult times
in counseling adolescents is when they
refuse to respond and instead “stare at
the floor,” remaining silent. The tack
that I took here was to try to make Jack
trust me by encouraging him to feel
free to speak and also by asking him very specific questions, to which there were factual, concrete answers. These "factual" questions were then followed by questions that involved Jack's feelings and might, I thought, be more difficult for him to answer.

COUNSELOR (CO): Jack, I'm not part of the school, nor am I part of the police; and I want you to know that you can feel free to say anything you want here. It will stay just between us. Were you in school today?

JACK (J): (Shakes his head no)

CO: How long has it been since you were in school?

J: About two weeks.

CO: Do you know why you decided not to go?

J: No.

CO: Do you like school? It's okay to be honest with me.

J: No.

CO: Tell me, Jack, what's the worst, the very worst class you have in school?

J: Wood shop.

CO: And, what's the best, given, of course that you don't like school?

J: Well, I like Spanish pretty well . . .

CO: What's next best?

J: Well, P.E. and math aren't bad.

As it turned out, Jack enjoyed all his classes, to some extent, except wood shop. He explained that he did not like wood shop because the teacher treated him as a child; he criticized him frequently and made him feel incompetent and stupid. "like a little kid."

CO: That must be frustrating, to be fifteen years old, almost six feet tall, and to be treated like a little child.

J: (Looking up for the first time) Yeah, it is.

CO: It seems as though you want to be treated like the adult man you almost are.

J: (Nods his head yes)

CO: I don't blame you. I'd be pretty frustrated, too, if I were fifteen, had lots of questions about what it was going to be like to be a man soon, about what I wanted to do with my life, and someone treated me like a kid. That would make me pretty angry.

J: Yeah, he is always standing over my shoulder and saying, "No, you did that wrong; that's not right; boy, are you clumsy." Sometimes I want to hit him.

This dialogue represents a series of successive approximations toward the goal of increasing trust between client and counselor—and also toward increasing the client's verbal self-exploration and disclosure of his feelings. By means of certain cues, it was possible to elicit and to increase Jack's verbal behavior within a relatively short time. Furthermore, it was possible to pinpoint the problem of "not liking school" to the more specific "not liking the way he was treated by the wood-shop teacher."

USE OF IMAGERY IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Once Jack seemed able to talk more freely with me, I asked him to close his eyes and tell me where he would like

1 Editors' note: The counselor is expressing what he imagines Jack's feelings must be for Jack's unresponsiveness gives few cues. If the counselor has guessed correctly, Jack will be more likely to discuss his problem openly.
to be in five years. He immediately said, “A pilot.”

CO: Do you know what is necessary to become a pilot?

J: Yeah, I’ve checked into pilot training school and have talked with some of the pilots down at the airport.

MRS J: Yes, he loves planes. He spends most of his weekends at the airport and has model planes all over the house.

CO: Do you need to go to school to become a pilot, Jack?

J: Yeah, I guess so.

CO: You guess?

J: Yeah, I know I have to have my diploma from high school.

I then asked Jack to close his eyes again and to imagine where he would be in five years if he did not go back to school.

J: I’m on a street corner ... leaning against some kind of post ... looking down ... a gutter ... raining ... and I’m bored ... confused.

CO: Jack, it’s your ball game. If you choose the path of not going back to school, you see what’s going to happen. If you choose the path of going back to school, you see what can happen. It’s your choice. I’m not going to make you go back to school. I really can’t. Nor can your mother or the police. You really have to decide if you want to.

J: (Long pause) Yeah, I guess I want to.

SELF-SABOTAGE: BEHAVIORAL REHEARSAL OF THE “TWO SELVES”

Thus, through the use of imagery, Jack seemed to see pretty clearly that, if he went back to school, in five years there would be a good chance that he could obtain his pilot’s license, and that, if he didn’t go back to school, there would be a good chance that he would end up on a street corner, feeling confused.

However, even though one can clearly perceive himself in the future and can clearly see the connection between present behaviors and future consequences, it is often difficult to adopt proper present behaviors, especially if they are somewhat aversive. Therefore, I asked Jack to sit back in his chair and to tell me all the reasons he wanted to go back to school:

J: So I can become a pilot; so I won’t have a boring life and be ... confused, and not know what I want to do. Yeah (thinking hard), I really do want to go back to school.

I then asked him to switch chairs and to tell me again some of the reasons that he did not want to go back to school—all the things he might say to trick himself into not going back. He closed his eyes and said:

J: It’s morning, and I’m tired. I don’t want to get out of bed. It’s pretty comfortable here ... school’s such a

This question was asked both as a shaping device—to make Jack think about what is necessary to become a pilot—and also to determine whether he in fact wanted to be a pilot or was merely saying what he thought I would want to hear.

Editors’ note: Switching chairs, derived from a Gestalt technique, is an effective way of dramatizing the conflicting reinforcers and punishments involved in major decisions.
bummer . . . and that wood-shop teacher. I don't want to see him.

CO: Switch chairs again.

J: Get out of bed, bum. You're lazy.

We discussed how there seemed to be two selves within each of us, one self that tries to make us do what we really want to do and another self that seems to sabotage us, play tricks on us, and keep us from doing what we want to do.

As the counseling session took place two days before vacation and as Jack had not been to school since the start of the semester, I asked him whether or not he thought it would be a good idea to spend the next two days going back to his new classes and trying to become reoriented.

J: But I don't know where to get my class list.

CO: (Confrontive) Jack, you said that one of the things you didn't like about school was that other people treated you like a child. As an adult, tell me where you think you might get your class list.

J: At the office.

CO: Um huh.

J: But there are two offices.

CO: Which seat are you talking from now?

J: (Smiling) I guess from that one there! (pointing to the sabotage seat)

CO: Tell me, how will you be able to find out which office?

J: I could ask.

CO: That's fine. Listen, it's a very mature thing you're doing, taking your life into your own hands. That's not an easy thing to do, and it's kind of scary. It's okay to feel nervous about it . . . and also to feel proud.

We then rehearsed, by means of covert images, what it might feel like to go back to school the next day: Some kids would tease him for being out, some teachers might give him a hard time for being behind in his work, he might feel like an outsider walking into strange classrooms.

SELF-MONITORING AND SELF-REINFORCEMENT

I then made a self-monitoring sheet for Jack, suggesting that he monitor all the times during the next five days when he had the urge not to go to school:

Whenever you hear yourself talking from that sabotage chair, mark it down on the sheet here. Then, if you are able to overcome the sabotage urge, write down a note of praise in the second column, like "Way to go man" or "This is helping me be the person I want to become" or "This takes a lot of courage; be proud of yourself."

Jack smiled and said that praising himself like that seemed a little childish. I responded:

Look, it's going to be a hard day for you tomorrow and for the next few days after that. You're going to need all the support you can give yourself. It's not at all childish to give yourself support and encouragement. I admire what you've chosen to do. I think you should admire it, too, and tell yourself so.
FAMILY CONTRACTING: ALTERING REINFORCEMENT STRATEGY IN FAMILY

At that point, I turned to the mother and, for the first time in the counseling session, brought up the issue of jimmying open the pinball machine. I asked Mrs. Jameson whether or not Jack received some sort of allowance.

MRS. J: No, but he knows that all he has to do is ask us for money and we would give it to him.

CO: Jack, did you jimmy open the machine for kicks, boredom, or because you felt like you needed the money inside?

J: I needed some money. But I don’t like to ask my folks all the time for money.

CO: Are there other ways of getting money besides jimmying open a pinball machine or asking your parents?

J: I’ve tried to get a job, but I’m too young and the neighbors say they don’t have any yard or garden work for me to do.

MRS. J: I have to say that Jack really has tried to get a job. I’ve seen him go around and ask the neighbors, but he’s had no luck.

My initial tack in this line of questioning was to show Jack that, if the goal is money, then there are several ways of obtaining it: the pinball machine, looking for a job, and so on. I was going to point out that both ways take him to the same goal but that the first way has some aversive consequences—the police—whereas the second method could also bring him money but without the aversive consequences. However, when I learned that he had in fact tried to find a job, without success, I changed tacks:

CO: Mrs. Jameson, does Jack do any chores around the house?

MRS. J: Yes, in fact he really does help a lot around the house, probably better than any of the other children.

CO: How would you feel about giving him an allowance for the chores he’s already doing around the house? I feel that would show him that there are certain privileges that go along with acting responsible and adult-like.

MRS. J: I guess we could do that. Except that since he’s been cutting school, and leaving campus, we told him no more money. We also told him that, if he did go to school, he wasn’t to leave campus during lunch hour.

CO: Perhaps we could look at the allowance as a preventive strategy. By giving Jack an allowance, he is learning that for doing certain adult-like behaviors—chores around the house—he gets certain privileges, like money, and the right to leave the campus during lunch. It would also be a source of money for him and probably prevent his needing to jimmy open the pinball machine again. After all, he did try hard to get a job, as you yourself pointed out.

MRS. J: I’d go along with that.

CO: Jack, your mother is willing to treat you like an adult, giving you an allowance and allowing you to leave campus during lunch. What can you do, on your part, to show her that you are in fact an adult?

Editors’ note: There may be some advantage in labeling this money “pay” or “wages” for work performed. An “allowance” is a noncontingent grant to a dependent, and the term may prolong Jack’s view of himself as a child.
J: Well, I can do the chores around the house like I always do.
CO: Umm, anything else?
J: Go to school, like I said.
CO: Good. Now, what do you think should happen if you don't go to school? (Allowing Jack to choose his own consequences)
J: Well, then I shouldn't get my allowance and should be grounded from leaving campus the next day.
CO: Does that seem fair to you, Mrs. Jameson?
MRS. J: Very fair.
CO: Does that seem fair to you, Jack?
J: (Nods in agreement) 

It is important to note that Jack was actively involved in the formation of the contract. He chose the behaviors he was to exhibit in order to obtain the contingent allowance; he also chose what his punishment would be if he did not keep his side of the contract. These choices reinforced his role as active agent and decision maker in his own life,

The session terminated with the understanding that Jack was going to come by the next day after school to tell me how things had gone.

He did not show up the next day at my office (Thursday), and I felt pretty helpless and ineffectual. I called his mother the following morning (Friday), and she said that Jack had in fact gone to school but had forgotten to come by my office. She said that Mr. Franklin, the high-school counselor, had told her that Jack had only attended five out of six classes on Thursday, cutting his wood-shop class.

MRS. J: The counselor told me that Jack had made some excuse about not being able to find the class. But Mr. Franklin said he didn't believe Jack because last quarter Jack had had metal shop, and that's right next door to wood shop.

I told Mrs. Jameson how pleased I was to hear that Jack had attended five classes and suggested that she try to give him all the encouragement she could.

MRS. J: But Mr. Franklin called because Jack cut class and sounded pretty angry. I guess I feel responsible. It's hard to encourage Jack when the counselor complains to me.

I let Mrs. Jameson know that I appreciated her feelings of responsibility and concern toward Jack and that I understood the feelings of helplessness that she must have had when the school counselor called to complain about Jack. I then asked her to listen to a story:

Imagine, Mrs. Jameson, that there is a task that you don't want to do, that you are afraid you won't do well, and that the task will make you look incompetent and ineffectual. Let's say the task consists of six parts. Finally, one day, you gather together all your courage, and tackle the task. And, lo, you find that you accomplished five of the six parts perfectly but hadn't performed the sixth. Now, imagine two different people. Person number one comes to you and says, "I'm, you didn't do all six. That's not good enough; I'm

*Editors' note: It may seem fair to Jack now, but will it later when he actually has to forfeit his money and privilege? The money is a reward for working. Perhaps other contingencies could be arranged for attending or not attending school.
going to report you as inefficient, and you deserve to be punished.”

CO: How would you feel after talking to this person?
MRS. J: Pretty discouraged, like what’s the use...you can’t win.
CO: Umm. Now, here’s the second person:

Hey, I’m really impressed with you. That takes a lot of guts to try what you did; and, look, five parts done just right. That’s not perfect; there’s still room for improvement, but I’m proud of what you did; it shows a lot of courage and responsibility. Good for you.7

CO: And now, how would you feel?
MRS. J: I’d feel really good. Yes, I see your point. I’d feel much more like trying the sixth part.
CO: Good. So, tonight, when Jack comes home, give him all the encouragement you can. I’ll call the counselor now and have a talk with him.

MRS. J: That Mr. Franklin, he doesn’t seem to like Jack very much; he seems to always be trying to get him in trouble.

CO: (Ignoring the provocative remark about the high-school counselor) I’m glad to see that you are going to encourage Jack tonight.

MR. F: Oh, that kid; what a confused mixed-up kid he is. You know, he needs to be led around by the hand to get to class.

CO: I understand he came to school yesterday and attended five out of six classes. Isn’t that the first time he’s been to school in two weeks?

MR. F: Can you imagine that he couldn’t find his wood-shop class? I can’t believe that. It is right next door to metal shop, and he had that class last quarter. Can you believe that he couldn’t find it?

CO: You’re probably right, Mr. Franklin; he probably did know where that class was. Why do you imagine he didn’t go?

MR. F: I don’t know, but that just shows that he needs to be led around to class by the hand. Can’t trust him.

CO: I wonder if he were as aware of his feelings as people like you and I are, if he wouldn’t say to us, “Gee, I missed that class because I was scared to walk in there; I was feeling really insecure and didn’t have much confidence in myself.”

MR. F: Yes, that makes sense to me. He sure is a confused kid.

CO: You’re in a tough position as middle man, aren’t you, having...8

MR. F: (Cutting in) Yes sir...I’m right there in the middle. People blame me when the kids aren’t in school, and yet sometimes those teachers aren’t the most cooperative or experienced.

CO: That sure puts a lot of pressure on you, doesn’t it?

MR. F: Umm. (In agreement)
CO: I’d like to see if I couldn’t be of some help to you in this case. Do

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7 Note the use of the sandwiching technique: a positive reinforcer, a criticism, then a positive reinforcer (after L. Homme, personal communication, July 1972).

8 Editor’s note: The counselor now communicates that he sees how it must feels to handle the problems faced by the high-school counselor.
you think it would be a good idea for us to work cooperatively on a strategy.

**MR. F:** Sure, I'd like all the help I can get.

**CO:** Terrific.

I then outlined briefly the strategy that I was trying to use with Jack, noting particularly the fear that Jack must be feeling in returning to school after a two-week absence. I suggested that it was going to be very scary for Jack and that we should try to give him all the encouragement we could. I went through the same two-person story I had told Mrs. Jameson, in order to show the importance of reinforcing successive approximations, and I concluded by trying to involve the counselor actively in the role of helper:

**CO:** Maybe you could even go to the wood-shop teacher, and try to encourage him to be more positive with Jack. You could explain to the teacher how scared Jack must be and how we're all trying to give him as much encouragement as possible.

**MR. F:** That sounds like a good idea. Those teachers could sure learn a thing or two about being more positive with kids.

**CO:** That would be extremely helpful to Jack. And, by the way, since Jack is interested in airplanes, you might even see if the wood-shop teacher could suggest that Jack make a model plane in class.

The following week Jack came to my office voluntarily. He said that some of his friends had been talking about cutting school again and that he had felt himself tempted to cut with them. He pointed to the sabotage chair and said, "It sounds much more fun to cut with them than to be in school."

I asked him which he wanted to do. "Well," he said, "I want to stay in school, but I need something to give me more power to do it."

**CO:** Do you have any ideas?

**J:** Well, I was thinking I could have all the teachers sign me in when I go to class each day.

**CO:** That sounds like a great idea. Then maybe you could give that sheet to your mother in the evening, and she could give you the next day's allowance.

Jack and I then drew up a form on which teachers could certify that Jack had attended class. We decided that the form looked a bit stark, so we added a note at the bottom, suggesting that the teachers smile at Jack every time they signed him in!

**FOLLOW-UP**

A one-month follow-up check revealed that Jack's attendance had been perfect. He had been leaving campus for lunch, receiving his allowance regularly, and doing chores around the house. I talked with the high-school counselor about Jack:

**MR. F:** We sure worked out a good strategy with him. He finally looks like he's going to shape up. I have to admit, there was a time there for a while when I thought it might have been hopeless.⁹

⁹ *Editors' note:* It is a wise counselor who lets others take credit for their actions (even though that secret inner self is yelling, "Yes, but if it hadn't been for me, you never would have done it").
I also passed Jack on the school grounds, and we talked for a while. He said that there was one thing that he could not understand.

J: That counselor. He’s been really nice to me. I just can’t figure it out. And even the wood-shop teacher seems to have changed. He said it was okay for me to make a model plane in his class. It’s going to take a long time, but, when I get done, I’ll bring it by and show it to you.

COMMENTS

The intervention was short. The total time, including phone calls to the mother and the high-school counselor, was three hours.

No one client was ever identified, neither the mother, the son, nor the high-school counselor. The intervention consisted of trying to shape all three individuals’ behavior. Jack was encouraged to make decisions about his own life, his mother to give him freedom to leave the school campus and money contingent upon his assuming certain responsibilities, and both his mother and the high-school counselor to be more positive toward Jack and to reinforce his successive approximations.

Past behavior was almost completely ignored, and the focus of the counseling session was on “Where can we go from here?” It seemed to me that, even though the problem that originally brought Jack to the Center from the police was jimmying open a pinball machine, to dwell on the whys of this action or to spend time figuring out how to punish it would be to dwell on the past—neither useful nor appropriate for counseling activities. Thus, the pinball-machine theft was used only as a means of understanding the present, of pointing out to the mother that Jack did not have any money of his own to spend and of pointing out to Jack that there are alternative ways to achieve the same end and that some ways have more aversive consequences than others.

The emphasis was always on Jack’s making choices about his own life. Jack was “shaped” to feel that he was existentially in charge of his life. He saw, through covert rehearsal, the consequences of alternative courses of action and that he himself was the one who had to make each choice.

Data collecting was a means to an end. Jack was to record his urges not to attend school and self-reinforcement for attending. He reported that he kept the sheet for the first two days but then found it unnecessary and threw it away. It is problematical whether or not in fact he kept it at all. However, the data sheet was merely a technique by which to help Jack attend classes. Therefore, if the sheet did nothing more than make Jack more aware of how he was sabotaging himself and point out to him the importance of reinforcing himself for working toward his goals, then whether or not he actually made written notes on it was less relevant. As a Chinese saying has it: “The finger points the way to the moon. Once the moon is seen, the finger is no longer necessary.”

Jack’s “will power” was increased by specific environmental programming. Having Jack sign in with his teachers and persuading the high-school counselor and Mrs. Jameson to reinforce
successive approximations in his behavior are both examples of altering and shaping environmental contingencies.

Finally, relationship variables were important. At each stage, behavioral techniques were used within the context of a relationship. The high-school counselor was willing to go along with me because he felt that I was not threatening his competence; rather I understood his middle-man position. Jack felt that he could talk openly to me about school without being punished. His mother felt that I cared about her son and was trying to make him more adult; she was therefore willing to "trust my strategy," to ignore her son's past truancy and petty theft, and to begin to give him an allowance and more rights for present appropriate behavior. It is problematical whether or not these behavioral techniques, applied in a vacuum, would have been effective. It is equally problematical whether or not relationship variables alone, without the other techniques, would have been effective. It seems that this case clearly illustrates the complementary nature of behavioral techniques and relationship variables in the counseling process.

Outline Summary of Salient Points

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