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## Voting with Their Feet: The Role of Assent in Behavior Analytic Intervention for Children with Autism

Michael A. Fabrizio, M.A., BCBA

Fabrizio/Moors Consulting  
University of Washington  
University of North Texas  
Chicago School of Professional Psychology

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An opening thought...

"Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence [*sic*] of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason."

-Thomas Paine  
from Introduction to  
*Common Sense*, 1776

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Goals

•Some common goals for children with autism in behavior analytic care:

- Improved imitation skills
- Improved language skills
- Improved social skills
- Improved developmental trajectories
- Improved symptom profile

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Goals

•Some common goals for children with autism in behavior analytic care:

- Improved imitation skills
- Improved language skills
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- Improved symptom profile
- **Improved engagement with intervention practices??**

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- Would a happy learner, enthused with intervention, likely make better, faster, easier progress?
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- Would a willing learner be easier to teach?

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- Can behavior analysis accommodate and improve children's satisfaction with intervention?

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- Would a happy learner, enthused with intervention, likely make better, faster, easier progress?
  - Probably
- Would a willing learner be easier to teach?
  - Most assuredly
- Can behavior analysis accommodate and improve children's satisfaction with intervention?
  - Definitely

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A definition

- Assent
  - *n*
  - agreement;
  - concurrence;
  - to agree to something freely and with understanding

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A distinction

- Consent
  - *n*
  - legally and ethically required
  - Requires two things:
    - Capacity
    - Legal authority

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A distinction

- Children give assent when they
  - Come to a task willingly
  - Participate in learning interactions without coercion
- Children withdraw their assent when they
  - Avoid us
  - Avoid coming to the task
  - Leave (or at least try to leave) during a task
  - Participate far below their ability

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Why should we care about assent?

- Behavior Analysts' ethical requirements:
  - (a) Behavior analysts arrange for appropriate consultations ... based principally on the best interests of their clients, with appropriate consent, ... and contractual obligations (BACB Guidelines for Responsible Conduct 2.03)
  - The behavior analyst ... obtains the consent of the client, and respects the right of the client to terminate services at any time. (BACB Guidelines for Responsible Conduct 4.09)

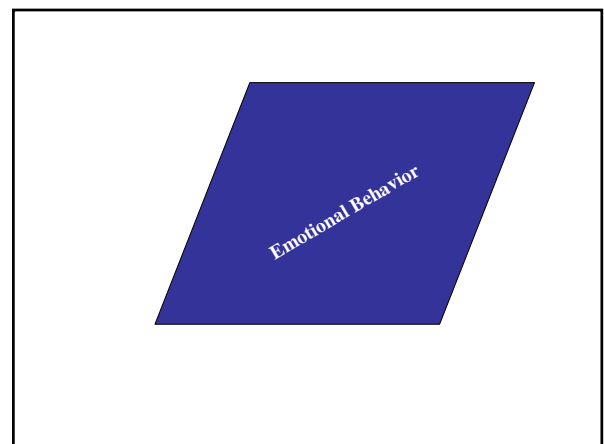
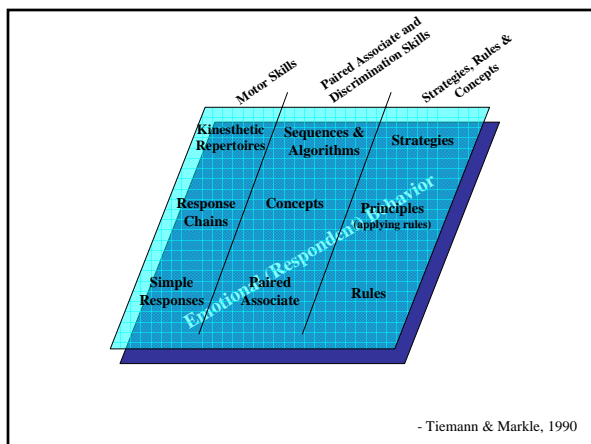
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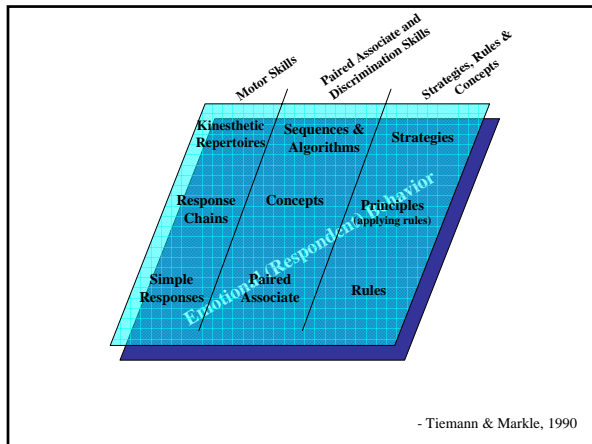
Big Ideas

- Escape-maintained behavior WILL be reinforced and SHOULD be reinforced
- Measure student assent
- Use that measurement to change intervention programs

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Let's take a moment to consider human learning...





### Emotional Behavior:

- Always accompanies learning (Tiemann & Markle, 1990)
- Refers to private events (Skinner, 1953, 1969; Calkin, 1989)
  - May or may not correlate with overt behavior
    - Higher correlation in children with autism

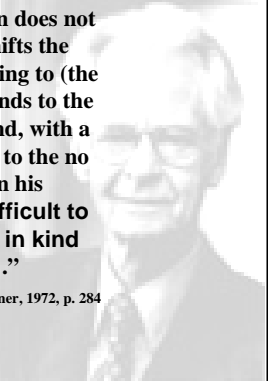



All people have feelings about what is happening. These feelings are real, measurable, valid, and a function of their **learning history**.

-Skinner, *Verbal Behavior*, 1957, pp. 214-215


“A behavioristic reformulation does not ignore feelings; it merely shifts the emphasis from the (act of) feeling to (the feeling itself). A person responds to the physical world around him and, with a rather different set of nerves, to the no less physical world within his skin...private events are difficult to observe, but not different in kind from overt behavior .”

- Skinner, 1972, p. 284

Instruction that does not attend to emotional behavior is doing a disservice to the learner and decreasing the probability of educational success

It is **NOT** okay for children to be consistently unhappy.



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Behavior Maintained by Negative Reinforcement

- The problem isn't the function...it's the form
  - Change the form
- Problem isn't WHETHER it'll be reinforced...it WILL be reinforced...but when?
  - Never get into a power struggle with a child
    - They always win
  - Reinforce escape-maintained behavior IMMEDIATELY and CONSISTENTLY
    - Really. It's okay. Don't panic.
    - Avoid the schedule of reinforcement trap
- THEN...CHANGE based on the data

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A note on extinction

- Extinction
  - To omit reinforcement of a previously-reinforced response sufficiently often that the response decreases in strength or frequency
- Extinction is a fundamentally aversive process
  - More aversive than punishment?

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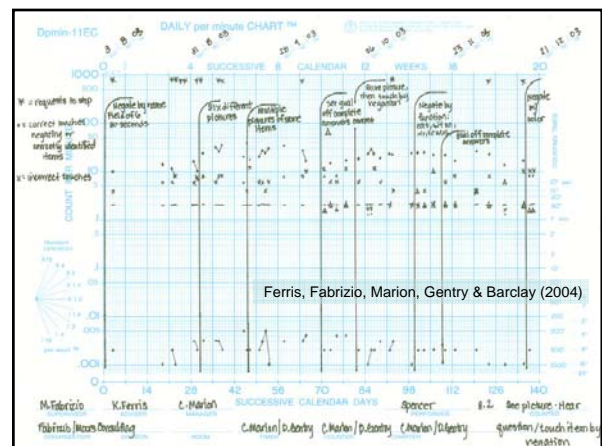
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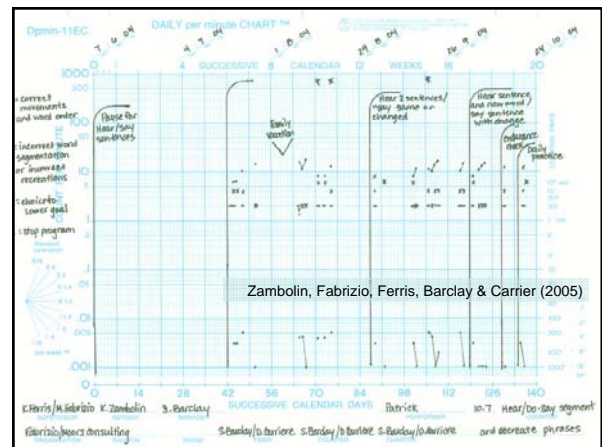
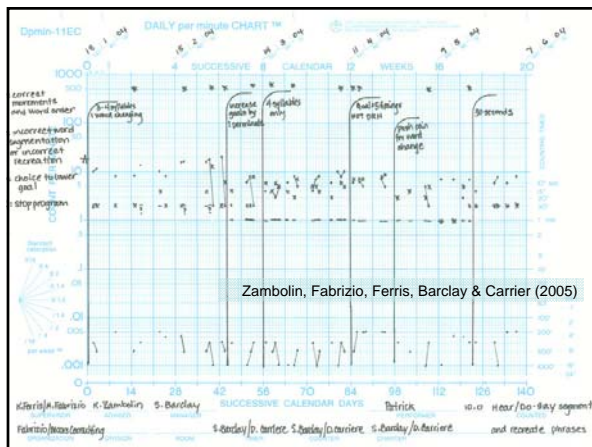
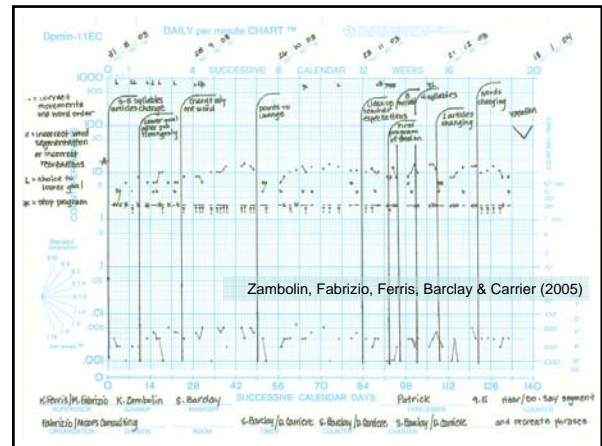
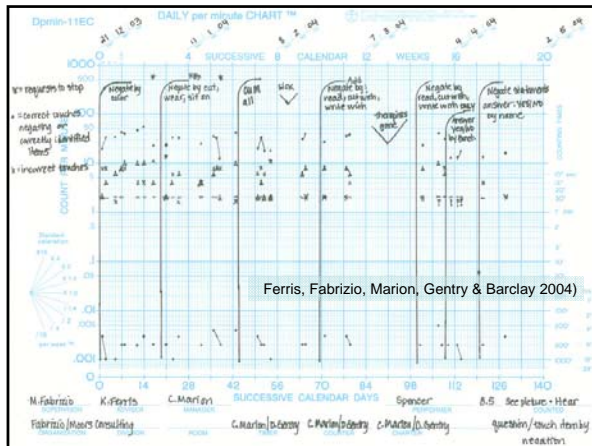
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Measuring student assent

- **COUNT** withdrawal of assent
- **Mark that withdrawal on the SAME GRAPH** used for student performance data
- **View assent as one more variable affecting the data**





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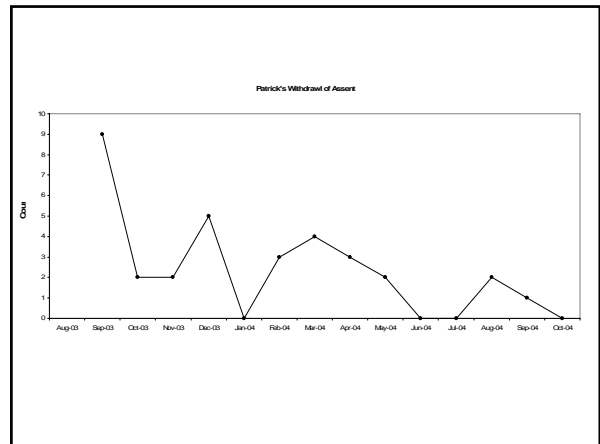
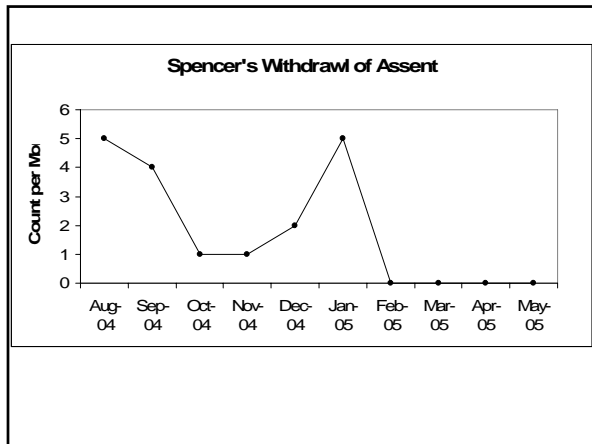
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Changing based on assent

- We currently change based on:
  - Correct responding
  - Incorrect responding
- Assent becomes one more variable
  - Allow that variable to exert control over your behavior
- Ultimate goal:
  - High rates of progress in correct responding
  - High rates of progress in incorrect responding
  - Low rates of withdrawal of assent



What could withdrawal of assent be telling us?

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- The instruction is
  - Too easy
    - Make it harder
      - Wider range of stimuli
      - All new stimuli rather than "adding in"
  - Too hard
    - Make it easier
      - CAREFUL!!
      - Smaller instructional slice
  - Too slow
    - Speed things up!
  - Too small and M&M
    - Find a stronger reinforcer
    - Potentiate existing reinforcers
    - Capture or contrive establishing operations

Some final thoughts

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- Behavior analysis is a science rich enough, strong enough, and elegant enough to accommodate student assent in the programming picture.
- YOU are strong enough and skilled enough to change your behavior based on child assent.

The first tenet.

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- The student is always right.

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