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# **COMMUNICATION-BASED INTERVENTION FOR PROBLEM BEHAVIOR**

## ***A User's Guide for Producing Positive Change***

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## Chapter 7

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# Building Rapport

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We say that two people have established rapport when their relationship is characterized by closeness, empathy, and mutual liking. In the absence of rapport, people may show little interest in interacting spontaneously and enthusiastically with one another. As we see next, rapport-building is a critical feature of our approach to intervention. It is an ongoing part of the intervention, not just a stage that occurs once at the beginning and is then dropped. Furthermore, rapport-building is not a mechanical set of procedures but is based on sharing, cooperation, and mutual give-and-take. Because rapport involves an *interactive relationship*, it helps to overcome the passivity that people with disabilities often show or, worse, are encouraged to show. Rapport is therefore an important part of a communication-based approach to intervention, which assumes a speaker and a listener who want to interact with one another. The presence of either the speaker or the listener acts as a signal (or “discriminative stimulus” in scientific terminology) for the other person to initiate and maintain communication. The signal or cue is effective because in the past the speaker and the listener have shared a variety of enjoyable activities and events through communicating with one another. Sometimes, however, the presence of one person does not signal to the other person that communicative behavior will pay off. There are several reasons why this situation might develop. For example, a parent may have a long history of battling with a child at meals or at bedtime. Because of this negative history, the presence of the parent in these contexts becomes a signal for problem behavior rather than a signal for communication. A second example concerns a new staff member in a group home who is just getting to know a particular resident. The two individuals have not yet established a relationship in which communication is reliably followed by pleasant interactions. Therefore, the presence of the staff member may be a signal for the resident to seek out other people and activities, in effect ignoring the new staff member rather than communicating with him or her.

In situations such as these two, it may be worthwhile to consider using the following rapport-building procedures.

### **MAKE YOURSELF INTO A SIGNAL FOR REINFORCEMENT**

If you associate yourself repeatedly with a wide variety of activities, people, and things that the person values, then eventually your presence will become a signal that many rewarding activities and events are available with you. (In technical terms, your presence becomes a "generalized reinforcer.") The purpose of associating yourself with positive experiences is to begin reversing any hostility or indifference that the person with disabilities may feel toward you. In time, that person will view you as someone worth attending to and interacting with.

#### **Example: Val**

At first, Val had a poor relationship with Joan. Sometimes, Joan would angrily tell Val to stop spitting and cursing. Also, when Val hit others or grabbed someone's hair, Joan and her aides would have to restrain Val momentarily for protection. Because Val did not like to be held in this manner, she frequently became angrier and even more aggressive toward Joan. Over time, Joan became a person Val tried to avoid. To remedy this situation, Joan began by drawing up a list of things that she thought Val enjoyed the most. The list included singing, doing her nails, putting on cosmetics, and talking with Val about weekend activities at home as well as her art work. During the first few days of rapport-building, Joan provided these activities to Val without asking her to do anything to get them ("reinforcers were dispensed noncontingently," in scientific terms.) Joan helped Val to put on cosmetics. She turned on some popular music and sang songs with Val. Because Val liked to get strong reactions from others (such as she got whenever she displayed problem behavior), Joan made sure that whenever she and Val were talking, the conversation generated a strong reaction from her. For example, when the two were talking about Val's weekend shopping expedition, Joan was enthusiastic and animated rather than quiet and matter-of-fact. Joan knew that she was beginning to make progress when Val began to laugh regularly and make conversation spontaneously in the context of these activities.

#### **Example: Juan**

When Bill joined the group home, he was assigned to work closely with Juan in order to enhance Juan's community living skills. The other staff told Bill that Juan was for the most part indifferent to social interaction. This made it difficult for Bill to establish rapport with Juan. At first, Juan completely ignored Bill and spent most of

his time sitting on the couch staring at the television. To remedy this situation, Bill found out from the other staff what sorts of things Juan liked. Also, he observed Juan for himself. Bill was able to develop a list of things that Juan liked that included food items such as ice cream, cookies, juice, and oranges. Contrary to what the other staff had said, it appeared that Juan sometimes liked people to talk to him in a friendly way although he could not talk. Bill began to build rapport by going up to Juan and handing him some cookies and orange slices. As fast as Juan ate them, Bill was there with more. While Juan was eating, Bill kept up a steady stream of talk about life in the home and aspects of life in the community that Juan had recently experienced, such as neighborhood walks and going shopping. After a few days of this type of interaction, Juan was paying attention to Bill whenever Bill entered the room and was more interested in being near Bill than in sitting on the couch in front of the television.

### **Comment: Some Initial Issues in Rapport-Building**

Val is an example of an individual whose history of negative interactions with other people could prevent communication skills from developing further. Juan is an example of an individual whose lack of experience in interacting with another person could prevent the development of communication skills. Although Val was a rather friendly, social person and Juan was not, rapport-building was essential for both in order to provide a foundation on which to build genuine communicative interaction. Val liked to talk about her art work but Juan did not. Therefore, art work was a conversational topic in working with Val but not in working with Juan. Juan liked oranges but Val was not interested in them. Therefore, oranges were freely given out to Juan but were not part of any interaction with Val. Do not assume that what one person likes is what everyone likes. If you do, you will not be treating the person as an individual and rapport probably will not develop.

In the beginning, provide situations that the person likes without conditions (noncontingently). Do not ask the person with disabilities to earn these reinforcers or to ask for them. If you do, he or she may refuse to work and a battle will begin. Also, he or she may not yet know how to ask for the things he or she likes and may become frustrated and tantrum. In either case, any rapport-building will come to an end. The idea at this stage is for the person with disabilities to learn that you are associated with many positive, interesting, and valued experiences and are definitely someone worth paying attention to.

Rapport-building is not something that you do once and then drop in order to move on to something else. Rather, it is something that must continue as long as you have a relationship with the per-



son with disabilities. The initial rapport-building procedure that we just described should take place many times each day. Typically, we have used this initial procedure for 2 or 3 days before adding to it. How will you know when you are succeeding? You will know when the person becomes more responsive to you. He or she will look at you more often, stay close to you, and continue to interact with you, not walk away, once you have approached him or her. He or she will seem happy to see you and smile, laugh, or, if verbal, talk to you when you are around and ask for you when you are not around. In short, the person will appear to be enjoying him- or herself when around you.

The last point, concerning enjoyment and happiness, is important and deserves further comment. Rapport-building is not a mechanical procedure. You should not become a vending machine dispensing positive experiences. The idea is for you and the individual displaying behavior problems to interact with one another within a context of sharing entertaining and rewarding activities and generally enjoying each other's company. These interactions may strike you or others as "goofing off," but that is not a problem as long as it leads to an ongoing positive relationship. Ultimately, rapport-building is intended to establish a friendship between you and the person with disabilities, a friendship that can provide a basis for teaching that person that there are other ways besides problem behavior for achieving important goals. Therefore, spontaneous, enthusiastic, and emotionally satisfying interactions are the hallmark of success in building rapport.

#### ✓ CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO DO

1. Draw up a list of activities and items such as foods, games, and topics of conversation that are preferred by the person with whom you are working. (These are known as "individualized reinforcers.")
2. Provide these reinforcers for free. Do not ask the person to work for them and do not make the person request them. The aim is not just to carry out technical procedures but rather for both parties to enjoy themselves. Rapport-building should continue throughout the entire intervention process described in this book.
3. Continue to provide the activities and items for several days until successful. Success means that the person looks at you when you are nearby, tries to stay close to you, continues to interact with you after you have approached, and talks to you if he or she can. Success also means that he or she will smile and laugh when you are around and otherwise seems to enjoy your company.

## **MAKE YOURSELF INTO A SIGNAL FOR APPROACH AND SIMPLE COMMUNICATION**

Now that the person with disabilities is consistently paying attention to you, it is time to ensure that he or she will initiate interactions. You want the person to approach you when appropriate and ultimately to communicate with you in any way that he or she can. In this phase of intervention, the person begins to learn that he or she can influence you in order to get things of value (reinforcers) without resorting to problem behavior.

### **Example: Juan**

When Juan had learned to attend to Bill whenever Bill entered the room, Bill decided that it was time for Juan to learn to initiate interactions. Until now, Bill had initiated all the interactions. Now when Bill entered a room, he would stand 5–10 feet away from Juan and wait for him to approach. At first, Juan looked eagerly at Bill but did not move toward him. After 1 or 2 minutes, Juan became impatient and made some grunting sounds. Bill still did not move. At this point, Juan got out of his chair and walked over to Bill. Bill immediately responded by giving Juan some coffee and cookies and talking to him about the day's events. Over the next two days Bill repeated this procedure at least a dozen times using a variety of items. When Juan was reliably approaching Bill, they went on to the next step: when Juan approached Bill, Bill did not offer any reinforcers. After a minute, Juan said, "Orngy," a word that Bill recognized as "orange." Bill immediately gave Juan an orange slice and began talking to him. Since Juan had almost no speech, Bill was constantly on the lookout for word approximations to which he could respond. Another opportunity came an hour later when Juan approached Bill and asked for "keem," an approximation of ice cream. Again, Bill gave Juan what he wanted and started talking to him about his favorite flavors of ice cream. During the next three days, Bill repeated the procedure several dozen times. By the end of this phase, Juan was reliably approaching Bill and using all of his word approximations, at various times, to request desired foods and activities. Juan was on his way to learning that there was a direct relationship between saying specific words ("orngy") and obtaining specific consequences (getting an orange to eat).

### **Example: Gary**

Gary's mother, Mrs. Ibsen, had been successful in getting Gary to attend to her and now she wanted to move on to the next stage of rapport-building. She had taught Gary to approach her using the

procedure just described for Juan. When approach was established in this way, she decided it was time to encourage simple communication. Because Gary, unlike Juan, could talk, Mrs. Ibsen now required that Gary talk before she would give him what he wanted. When Gary approached her and looked at his tape recorder up on the shelf, Mrs. Ibsen smiled at him but did not provide the recorder. After less than a minute, Gary said, in a loud voice, "Music, please," and Mrs. Ibsen immediately handed him the recorder, allowing him to put in his favorite tape and play it. While the tape ran, Mrs. Ibsen sang along with Gary and later talked to him about the songs to which they had listened. A few hours later, Gary approached his mother in the kitchen while she was preparing food. Mrs. Ibsen repeated what she had done earlier, waiting for Gary to say something. When Gary remained silent for about 30 seconds, Mrs. Ibsen looked at him and said, "Sandwich?" When Gary repeated this statement, Mrs. Ibsen said, "Sure, Gary," and handed him the bread, mayonnaise, lettuce, and turkey so that Gary could make a sandwich for himself. The next day, in the same situation, Mrs. Ibsen did not have to cue Gary to ask for a sandwich. He spontaneously requested one. Over the next few days, Gary began to request many different things after he approached his mother and she honored all of his requests.

### **Comment: Linking Rapport-Building and Communication**

People with developmental disabilities are often not encouraged to take an active role in controlling their own lives. It is sometimes easier to do things for them and this approach encourages them to be passive. To counteract this passivity, it is important not to be satisfied when your child, student, or group home resident, for example, simply pays attention to you and appears happy to see you. You must move beyond this beginning level of rapport-building and make yourself into a signal for approach and communication, a signal that works because you are associated with many positive, valued, and interesting things.

When you are establishing this part of intervention, you may find that behavior problems continue to occur. If this happens, ask yourself if you are demanding too much of the person. For example, Bill could have withheld oranges when Juan said "orngy" and made him pronounce the word better. That would have been a pointless strategy because it would have delayed his getting what he wanted for too long, causing him to become frustrated and possibly aggressive. Later in intervention you can make more demands on the person, but for now the idea is to encourage him or her to use whatever communication he or she has in order to influence you. This strategy teaches the person that positive approach and

communication pay off and therefore problem behavior is not necessary.

Sometimes, as with Gary, the person does not ask for what he or she wants, although you know that the person knows how to ask. If this situation develops, do what Gary's mother did. That is, help (prompt) the person to make the request. Do not use this procedure every time, however, because then the person may always wait for you to provide prompts and become too passive. Instead, wait up to 60 seconds before providing the prompt, or prompt only every second or third time that the person fails to make the request. If you adopt this strategy, the person will soon learn that it is better to communicate right away because not communicating simply means that one has to wait until one's mother or teacher decides to give a prompt and that could mean waiting a long time.

Communication takes many forms. Clearly the way that Juan communicated was very different from the way that Gary communicated. If the person with whom you are working does not speak, you can still carry out this phase of rapport-building. However, instead of waiting for the person to use speech, you may have to accept grunts accompanied by pointing, or perhaps simple sign language or picture cards, or perhaps allow the person to lead you by the hand to where the desired object or activity is. The important thing is to honor whatever type of communication the person is able to use.

How will you know if you are successful? The answer is that the person will nag you a lot by approaching you frequently and making requests. You will probably find this development annoying at times because it prevents you from doing other things. But ask yourself this question: Would you rather be nagged or punched in the face? Would you rather be nagged or have the person bang his or her head in front of you until he or she is bloody? Most people learn to tolerate the nagging because it is short term and decreases problem behavior. If the nagging is too much for you, try to break up the day so that other people are available to assume part of the responsibility. In any case, remember that this phase of intervention lasts only a few days and soon you will have an opportunity to use additional interventions that will sharply reduce nagging.

#### ✓ CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO DO

1. Wait for the person to approach you before providing free reinforcers, and continue this procedure for a few days.

(continued)

2. Once the person is reliably approaching you, wait for up to 1 minute for him or her to make a request and then provide the reinforcer. The form of the request does not have to be speech; it can be sign language, gesture, picture cards, or any communication means that the person has at his or her disposal.
3. If the person does not make a request within 1 minute, use a prompt. Do not overdo prompting, but prompt intermittently as necessary and/or wait up to 1 minute before providing the prompt.
4. Monitor for success. Success means that the person is frequently approaching you to make requests. Remember, nagging can be annoying but it is temporary and better than self-injury and aggression.

### **HELP THE PERSON WITH DISABILITIES TO BECOME LIKEABLE TO YOU**

We have been focusing on ways to make yourself likeable to the person with disabilities. An equally important point, frequently overlooked, is that the person with disabilities should be likeable to you. In order for you to encourage communication, you must be a responsive listener. You are not likely to be responsive if you do not like the other person. Instead, you may avoid him or her whenever possible and try to keep your social interaction to a minimum. The result is that neither communication skills nor friendships are being built.

In reality, many teachers and direct support staff find some people with disabilities physically unattractive, boring, or fear-some. It is not good to deny these feelings when they exist by assuming that one ought not to have them. When these feelings exist, they often lead to a pattern of avoidance and even rejection. Therefore, it is better to be honest and acknowledge the feelings by actively confronting them. In our culture, friendship formation often depends on considerations of personal appearance and shared interests. Therefore, we will concentrate on these two factors.

#### **Example: Personal Appearance. Juan**

Juan was physically unattractive to most people in his group home. His clothes had a disheveled, institutional appearance and did not reflect community standards of how a person his age should dress. His face was covered with acne and his hair was unkempt. Juan frequently had body odor and sometimes bad breath as well. His table manners were poor and he frequently got food on his clothing and in his hair. At several meetings, some staff admitted that al-

though they had been successful in getting Juan to approach them and communicate, they were uncomfortable when Juan did come near because of his appearance and personal hygiene. Staff were assured by the group home manager that their reactions to Juan were natural given societal values and that they should not feel ashamed. Instead, the manager said that the staff members should ask themselves what expectations they had for physical appearance and personal hygiene for people who did not have disabilities, for example their friends and relatives. The expectations that the staff had for persons without disabilities became the basis for developing a program for Juan to ensure that whenever possible he would be held to the same standards as people who did not have disabilities. The program that was developed for Juan had several elements. First, many of his clothes were given away for recycling. Then, Juan was taken periodically to the shopping mall, and staff presented him with a number of plausible options for clothing. If Juan indicated a preference for an item, that item was purchased. If not, the staff made the choice. The goal of these outings was to select clothing that would evoke positive comments from the people with whom Juan interacted daily. A competition ensued among the staff to see who could help Juan select the most socially admired wardrobe. Second, Juan was taken to the dermatologist who prescribed medication for his acne, which subsequently cleared up. Third, a program was put into effect that systematically monitored and taught Juan to brush his teeth several times a day as well as to floss. Showering skills were another target of intervention as was the application of deodorant. Grooming intervention also included regular visits to a barber who focused on giving Juan a stylish but subdued haircut. Juan learned to brush and comb his hair as needed and his progress in this area was also monitored. Finally, a schedule was developed for improving Juan's table manners and cleanliness.

**Comment: Personal Appearance Is a Serious Consideration**

Some people may reject the focus on grooming or clothing as shallow and beneath the dignity of anyone who is serious about trying to help individuals with disabilities. That attitude is a mistake. That attitude implies that we ought to have lower expectations for certain individuals just because they have disabilities. It is equivalent to making excuses for these individuals based on the notion that in some basic way they are different. Making excuses is demeaning, counterproductive, and unnecessary. It is demeaning because it sets people with disabilities apart from the rest of us and is therefore a form of rejection. It is counterproductive because making excuses ensures that nothing is done about the impact the



individual has on others and therefore new learning experiences and the possibility of forming friendships with others is denied. It is unnecessary because many programs can effectively teach an individual with disabilities how to fit in better with community standards and, therefore, to make that individual more likeable to others.

Of course, an improvement in physical appearance does not by itself guarantee likability and there are some aspects of appearance that cannot be changed. Nonetheless, addressing this issue can sometimes start the process of helping the person to be accepted by others. For example, staff enjoyed the shopping outings with Juan, and he became a center of attention when he put on his new clothes and when he was later seen by others in them. His clothing became a topic of conversation and, although he could not speak, Juan appeared to enjoy being the star attraction. We would like to also note that when the staff took Juan to the shopping mall to buy new clothes, they were effectively beginning the process of broadening his life. Juan had previously been excluded from most community outings. Now, he was provided with the experience of shopping in the community mall, of going for haircuts, and of being seen in public as the well-groomed, well-dressed man he had become. Furthermore, Juan experienced an increase in personal control since he was asked to indicate, for instance, what his clothing preferences were and which aftershave lotion he liked best. Juan's stylish haircut, the scent of his aftershave lotion, and his improved complexion had a positive effect on the attitude of others toward him. These factors as well as the dramatic gains he made in the area of personal hygiene changed the way people viewed him. He now seemed much more like other people in the community, and staff became more responsive to his approaches and his communicative overtures. Indeed, based on the example of Juan, you may want to consider improving likability *before* you try to enhance approach and communication. If you feel that an individual's personal appearance is so unacceptable by community standards that few people would want to interact with him or her, then you may want to address acceptability as your first priority, only later focusing on approach and communication.

#### ✓ CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO DO

1. Draw up a list of reasons why you do not want to interact more with the person with disabilities. The list may include many things such as personal hygiene, grooming, style of clothing, and physical condition.

2. For each reason, write down what would need to change in order for you to feel like interacting more with the person, for example, eliminating body odor.
3. Draw up a plan to achieve each goal, for example, to teach the person to shower more effectively and to use deodorant on a regular basis.
4. Maintain all programs and monitor for success. Success means that you no longer feel uncomfortable about the person's physical appearance and more readily accept approaches and communicative overtures from the person. In addition, the focus on improved physical appearance provides opportunities for additional community outings and a more varied life.

### **Example: Shared Interests. Gary**

Gary's family often looked forward to respite care for Gary so that they could leave the house and pursue their independent interests. For years, they had viewed Gary as someone they had to take care of rather than someone with whom they could enjoy life. Gary's mother, Mrs. Ibsen, had spoken of this problem openly and with some guilt. One day, the behavior consultant with whom Mrs. Ibsen was working pointed out that perhaps the family found Gary boring. After some discussion, everyone in the family agreed that it was more fun to be with someone who had the same interests, and each member of the family thought about what activities both they and Gary enjoyed and could share. Gary's brother loved rock music and so did Gary, so several times a week Gary and his brother listened to rock music together. Gary's brother did not see this activity as a burden since it was something that he liked to do anyway. Gary and his brother shared a common interest and enjoyed singing together, collecting rock posters, and occasionally going to concerts. Gary's father did not like rock music, but he was an avid jogger. Gary's father noticed that his son would sometimes imitate him when he saw his father jogging. Therefore, it seemed reasonable that Gary and his father would go to the neighborhood park several times a week and run around the track. To everyone's surprise, Gary liked this activity and seemed happy whenever his father invited him to go to the park. Gary and his father shared a common interest and Gary frequently asked to go jogging. He developed curiosity about the equipment that went along with jogging (running gear, stop watches, water bottles) and his father and he would sometimes talk about these things. Mrs. Ibsen and her daughter were not interested in either rock music or jogging but enjoyed weekly expeditions to the pizza parlor. Because Gary loved pizza



too, it seemed reasonable that he would accompany his mother and sister to the pizza parlor and eat there as part of a family outing. While there, Gary talked about the food a lot and gradually learned about all the many topping possibilities.

### **Comment: Shared Interests Serve Many Positive Functions**

Shared interests are the basis for liking and friendship among people who do not have disabilities and there is no reason why they should not also be the basis for developing liking and friendship for people who do have disabilities. It is unreasonable and unnecessary to expect parents, teachers, or residential staff to befriend a person with disabilities who does not share any interests with them. With a little effort, it is frequently possible to identify several activities that are mutually enjoyable and that can serve as a basis for genuine liking and spontaneous interaction. In addition, as the example makes clear, common interests also serve as a springboard for developing communication skills because there is something that both partners want to talk about.

Shared interests also provided a springboard for enhancing Gary's lifestyle. In the past, Gary spent most of his time sitting at home, not participating in community activities. Now, he attended concerts with his brother, jogged in the neighborhood with his father, and frequented the local pizzeria with his mother and sister. People in the community began to recognize Gary and there was greater variety in his social circle. His brother's friends talked to him about music. The regulars in the park greeted him as he jogged with his father and asked him how his training was going. Occasionally, other people would join Gary and his father, jogging along with them, and adding further opportunities to socialize. The staff at the pizzeria as well as some of the other customers made small talk with Gary, especially as they got to know him better. In general, Gary experienced greater personal control. For example, he helped choose new tapes with his brother and was involved in planning concert outings. He got to pick the jogging route each day and was in charge of the jogging gear. He chose half of the toppings at each pizzeria visit, ordered the food, and began learning to count money and pay for the food. As with Juan, rapport-building provided an early opportunity in intervention for people around Gary to enable him to expand his life and to allow him to experience more control over his life.

**✓ CHECKLIST OF THINGS TO DO**

1. Draw up a list of activities that are of common interest to the person with disabilities and the person without disabilities.
2. Whenever possible, try to match the two people so that they frequently engage in activities that are mutually enjoyable.
3. Continue the procedure on an ongoing basis and monitor for success. Success means that the person with disabilities frequently requests that the other person join him or her in the desired activity, and that the person without disabilities frequently initiates the activity spontaneously, appearing happy to do so. In addition, the focus on shared interests provides opportunities for additional community outings, greater personal control, and, in general, a more varied life.