

Precise Free Operant Fluency and Clicker Treatment of Toddlers with Autism

Introduction by Ogden Lindsley, Chair

Why Me?

Why would I organize a symposium on clicker treatment of toddlers with autism.

First reason, Clicker Training made me an Operant Conditioner.

The power of what used to be called shaping, and I called Teaching By Reward Only TEBRO, and is now called clicker training by most people, made me switch from physiological psychology to free operant conditioning.

Skinner often said that he didn't make operant conditioners, the rats did. Skinner assigned me the job of shaping rats to high jump for a class demonstration in Natural Sciences 114.

Samson Lifts 3 1/2 Times his Body Weight

One of the four rats pulled down on the end of the meter stick I was training them to jump over. I thought cool, and clicked him. I pivoted one end of the meter stick, put a weight lifting handle on the other end, and off we went to weight lifting.

When the weight to pull down the bar equalled his own body weight, Samson just swung from the handle trying to bounce it. One time his back feet dug into the plywood wall of his exercise room, and he was able to press down the lever. But his toe nails kept sliding out from the wood! He needed an exercise mat!

I hurried Samson back into his home cage, ran to the Coop in Harvard Square and bought a rubber stair tread to keep Samson's back feet from slipping. I so wanted to see how much it helped Samson lift, that I could not wait for the glue holding the rubber tread to the wall to dry. So I sneaked down into the electro physiological operating room and got some ambroid, a non conductive, electrode glue that dried almost on contact, but cost about \$200 for a half pint!

With the fluted rubber tread in place on the wall, Samson's hind feet no longer slipped and he pulled down weights heavier than his weight with ease. Within two weeks Samson was pulling down 3 1/2 times his

own body weight. He walked with a sort of roll, and was the semester demonstration hit with the undergraduate students. They chanted, "Samson, Samson, Samson!"

I had more control over and learned more from, one freely moving rat than I had from years of recording impulses from the chorda tympani nerve of anesthetized rats exposed in moist chambers.

But what impressed me more, was how eager Samson was to perform. He would race from his carrying cage to his lifting platform to perform. But what impressed me most was that Samson had taught me two things. First, to make him a weight lifter rather than high jumper. Second, to get him a stair tread lifting mat to keep his hind feet from slipping when the weight got over his body weight.

Gargantua Plays Star-Spangled Banner

When ever I go off on a new adventure I always have an alternative plan that I call my parachute. In 1953 I went into the back wards of Metropolitan State Hospital to study free operant behavior of psychotic adults and children. I planned to give human operant conditioning five years of my life. If it did not pan out, I would parachute into Sarasota, Florida, and shape Gargantua the Ringling Brothers Circus gorilla, who just sat scowling in a cage while squashing together truck tires. I planned to build a big 44 key piano and teach Gargantua to hoist an American flag, salute, and play The Star-Spangled Banner on his piano, me with him, in Harvard PhD gown.

That's how much impressed I was with shaping or clicker training. For years I have tried to talk friends and directors of schools that I consult with to shape their most severely handicapped students. A few made half hearted two or three day attempts but most gave up.

I required students in my graduate education classes to clicker train a pet and bring it to class to perform. Only then would they feel the power of a sharp response definer in

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training. It is a crime that we have not used this power to help handicapped learners

The second reason I organized this symposium is that clicker training with people is actively resisted by professionals at this time. Having been the first to use free operants with people I have become expert in resisting academic ridicule and criticism. For this reason I chose to spear head clicker training with people.

One of the first invited to be on this symposium was a teacher who had successfully clicker trained speech articulation in a young person with autism. The teacher accepted, was excited, had never been to Washington, DC, and planned a family trip with children and husband. About two weeks later I got a very depressed email message from the teacher saying that she had to cancel out on her participation, Her director had said it was too early to talk about this work, and it wasn't carefully researched enough as yet. Participation forbidden!

Here is a second example of academic resistance to clicker training with people. One of our best known and most experienced small animal clicker trainers gave a colloquium on clicker training at a university with a large behavior analysis program. I was not at the talk and in asking how it went I asked if human clicker training was well received. The presenter told me the possibility was not mentioned, because the department member who met the plane and drove to the university cautioned against mentioning human clicker training, because it was very controversial on campus. The clicker training expert did not mention human clicker training. Suppression!

Suppression of powerful methods because they may be ridiculed as "coming from small animal research" is criminal. Almost all powerful medical treatments were first done and first discovered in small animal research. To deny toddlers with autism the awesome power of clicker training because

it was first done with pigeons, rats, chickens, porpoises, and whales is criminal.

This symposium is an attempt to overcome this demonstrated academic resistance and bring clicker training and free operant treatment to the parents and teachers of toddlers with autism.

I can not introduce this symposium without mentioning the fine ground breaking work of my friend Ivar Lovaas and his students. They demonstrated that if we begin massive 40 hour a week behavioral discrete trial training with toddlers we can return most to the normal educational stream by first grade. If we wait till age 6 or 7 it is too late. That is beautiful, land mark research (Lovaas, 1987). Thank you, Ivar!

Lovaas gave us the platform that we can stand on to further enhance the behavioral training with our free operants and clicker training.

We have the honor of hearing from three pioneering teams in bringing free operants and clicker training to toddlers with autism. They each have the courage to withstand ridicule and criticism, and the guts to try new things with paying clients.

I am honored to introduce your pioneers:
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