

“WHERE’S THE COOKIE JAR?”

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Several weeks ago I received a frantic call from staff requesting assistance with an individual engaged in what was described as "challenging behavior,"

The staff quickly came to the heart of the matter, venting frustration that Bill was incessantly foraging for cookies --rummaging through cabinets in the kitchen that were host to his much valued treasure.

The staff described in considerable detail the behavior-management plan that was presently in force. It was a tried-and-true plan in its adherence to the principles of operant conditioning. It spoke with great objectivity about the antecedent conditions that seem to frequently give rise to Bill's pursuit of his preferred treats. Additionally, the behavior management plan detailed a variety of consequences to be applied when Bill was caught in the act of "stealing" cookies. Unfortunately, consequence incorporating redirection and non-seclusionary timeout as the immediate response to Bill's "thievery," more often than not, escalated to an altercation that played out as a lose-lose power struggle.

According to the staff, Bill had engaged in this cookie search-and-seize behavior throughout the three years he had resided in his group residence. Bill's disturbing behavior was finally brought to my attention as a result of an injury to a staff member, sustained while attempting to redirect Bill from his cookie-retrieval mission. As I began to discuss with the staff what Bill might be attempting to communicate to us by his behavior, I was struck by what I thought was an insightful question --where is the cookie jar?

As I processed Bill's behavior, I began to realize that Bill spent his life in places where his behavior was externally controlled by staff. Prior to moving into his current residence, Bill lived in places where the doors were key-locked, the kitchen was never accessible, and recreation items were maintained under lock and key by the staff.

Bill was never given the opportunity to learn how to develop self-control --an internal

locus of control. The temptations of life to which we are all exposed were never presented to Bill in such a way that he could learn the essential skills to control his compulsions and desires.

Bill never learned to monitor his body clock and make an enlightened decision as to what time was appropriate for going to bed, for going to bed was scheduled and controlled. Bill never learned to differentiate when it was appropriate to indulge himself by sleeping late, for waking up was always a scheduled event. Bill never learned to temper his desire to stand in a warm shower for an hour, for staff determined when Bill was to exit the shower. Bill was never given an opportunity to carry appropriate items in his pockets (comb, keys, money, handkerchief), so now he stuffs his pockets full of discarded items he retrieves from waste baskets. Bill never learned to moderate his voice volume, for he seldom had access to places where speaking softly was mandated (restaurants, churches, movie theaters).

The desires with which we are all confronted in life take shape and are controlled- by most of us -- through a series of frequent learning trials. These trials start from the time we are toddlers, so that our ability to control our impulses shifts away from the cohesive action of our parents to the internal function of our own self-discipline. For many persons with mental retardation who have lived in highly regulated and cohesive environments, self-discipline is never attained. Unfortunately, our attempts to teach self-discipline to a person with mental retardation are frequently thwarted by our expectations of the individual's ability to learn self-control. Those expectations frequently limit our efforts to teach self-determination.

Thus, where is the cookie jar? Cookie jars, you see, are placed before us from the time we are infants to beckon us to partake of their delicious contents. Cookie jars are decorated with bright colors, adorned with clowns or animated cartoon characters. It is as if a situation is deviously contrived that purposefully, if not insensitively, entices us

to remove the lid and eat every last cookie. Though the cookie jar is prominently displayed, sometimes requiring a chair to access, we learn through trial and error that, just because there are cookies in the jar, it may not be in our best interest to eat them. We quickly learn of the disappointment that comes from sneaking three Oreos before dinner and experiencing the frustration of being too full to enjoy our favorite dinner of macaroni and cheese.

The cookie jar is a grand and glorious metaphor that speaks to the critical importance of learning self-control. If you haven't already guessed, there is no cookie jar in Bill's home. There were no boundaries that Bill needed to learn with regard to eating cookies, for the staff controlled access to the cookies and determined where, when and how many should be eaten. Turning the screws and increasing the intrusiveness of our consequence when Bill sneaks cookies, cannot resolve the real challenge faced by him and the staff. That challenge is how can we support Bill in learning self-control?

The answer to this challenge is found in the cookie jar. Let's remove ourselves from the power struggle of keeping Bill out of the cupboard on his quest to locate the hidden cookies. The cookie jar should be one that screams out to all who see it, "Come here and eat my cookies." In this scenario, Bill will undoubtedly be most disappointed that he has no room for his favorite dessert, chocolate pudding, because he ate too many cookies. We must be willing to risk, more importantly we must be willing to allow Bill to risk the various consequences that result from eating too many cookies. It is through our willingness and courage to risk that Bill will evolve an internal locus of control, freeing himself from the ever-vigilant eye of staff.