Teaching Parents to Use Positive Reinforcement Skills

While teaching abusive parents nonviolent methods to control child misbehavior is often an immediate, necessary aim of child-management training, it is rarely a sufficient form of family intervention. Simply stated, therapists should never train parents to use attention withdrawal or time out procedures without concurrently teaching them how to reinforce desirable child behavior. Extinction-based management techniques are most effective when a child learns not only that certain misbehaviors will not result in reinforcement, but also that other desirable actions will be noticed and responded to in a positive way. In addition, since abusive parents provide less verbal attention to their children than nonabusive parents (Burgess & Conger, 1978), it might well be considered unfair or unethical to instruct them simply to reduce further the amount of attention given to their youngsters. Therefore, a clinical aim is to assist parents in altering and redirecting the attention they provide, from negative notice contingent upon child misbehavior to demonstrative positive reinforcement contingent upon appropriate child behavior.

There is another more global rationale for encouraging abusive parents to use positive-based techniques with their children. Clinical and research descriptions of child-abusive parents indicate that these
individuals often have negative feelings toward their children, may expect that their youngsters will cause them difficulty, and find it difficult to identify positive child attributes and behavior (Blumberg, 1974; Friedrich & Boriskin, 1976; Green, 1976). If parents have a history of few positive interactions with their children and experience difficulty handling child behavior problems, the development of such negative cognitions and feelings would be anticipated. Further, from a cognitive-dissonance perspective (Festinger, 1957), some parents may perceive their children as being “mean,” “uncontrollable,” or “deserving of punishment” in order to create cognitive consistency and thereby justify the harsh conduct they feel is necessary to impose.

For all of these reasons, therapists should carefully develop interventions that improve the quality of parent–child interactions in abusive families by teaching parents to use effectively positive-reinforcement techniques. Not only will such intervention further broaden the parent’s child-management skills repertoire, but it can also interrupt a cycle in which parents observe, perceive, and respond primarily to their children’s aversive behavior.

In this chapter we will discuss parent training of two types: (1) using social reinforcement and attention to strengthen desirable child behavior and (2) teaching parents to develop structured contingency-management techniques to reduce problems such as noncompliance.

6.1. TRAINING PARENTS TO USE ATTENTION TO REINFORCE DESIRABLE BEHAVIOR

Clinicians and researchers have long observed that parents are likely to notice and provide attentional recognition for children’s misbehavior, but allow appropriate actions to go unnoticed and ignored. As we saw in the last chapter, parents can become more effective managers of their children’s behavior if they remove reinforcement for inappropriate conduct and provide increased reinforcement contingent upon appropriate child behavior. Unfortunately, just as “ignore misbehavior” is a direction that is easy to give but difficult for parents to actually follow, vague therapist directives to “praise more”