

CASE 12

The Marble Jar

Of the 28 students in Mr. Fenwick's second-grade class, nine come from homes in which a language other than English is spoken. These students, plus four others who have been diagnosed as having learning disabilities, are reading at a preprimer (i.e., kindergarten) level or not at all, and many of them have not yet learned their basic addition and subtraction facts. Yet in the same class, Mr. Fenwick has another nine students who have been identified as being eligible for special services for the gifted and talented.

"I should be thankful," Mr. Fenwick tells himself. "Yes, it's a group with many academic deficiencies, but it's also a very nice group. There are no thieves, no pathological liars. Things could certainly be worse."

To accommodate the diverse academic needs of his class, Mr. Fenwick has his students working independently or in small groups much of the time so that they can all work on tasks tailored to their specific academic needs. A number of his students have difficulty staying on the tasks he's given, yet he is hardly in a position to keep his eye on everyone all of the time.

Although it's only October, Mr. Fenwick can already see behavior problems escalating in his classroom. He seeks the advice of the school psychologist, Ms. Rashad, who suggests that he consider using principles of behaviorism to encourage on-task behavior. Together the two of them identify a strategy that Mr. Fenwick might be able to use with the entire class.

The following morning, Mr. Fenwick brings to school a bag of marbles and a large, empty jar. Holding the jar and marbles up for everyone to see, he says, "Boys and girls, I've brought this jar and these marbles to help us get our work done."

When the children look puzzled, he adds, "Every time I see someone in the room doing what he or she is supposed to be doing, I will put a marble in the jar. I will also put one in every time I see someone doing something to help someone else learn."

Gillian raises her hand. "You mean, every time we learn something, we get a marble?"

"That's right," Mr. Fenwick responds. "And when the jar is full, the whole class gets a reward—perhaps an ice cream party, a field trip, or an afternoon of fun and games in the classroom."

"Cool!" several of the children shout. A couple of them exchange high-fives.

"What reward shall we work for the first time?" Mr. Fenwick asks. He writes a number of possibilities on the chalkboard. Through a series of votes, the children narrow down the choices and eventually settle on a trip to the neighborhood firehouse as something that they would all enjoy.

This case is derived from an unpublished unpublished case study written by Barbara Day.

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In the days that follow, Mr. Fenwick keeps a lookout for appropriate and productive behaviors. Every time he drops a marble into the marble jar, he explains why he is doing so: "I see that all of you are hard at work on your reading assignments." "Thank you, Fernando, for helping James with his math problems." "You've all cleaned up your desks so nicely. Who would guess that just five minutes ago there were crayons, bottles of glue, and scraps of paper scattered everywhere?" As the weeks roll on, Mr. Fenwick finds his children's classroom behavior slowly improving. Eventually, some behaviors occur so regularly that he decides that he probably doesn't need to reinforce them as frequently as he has in the past. At the same time, he adds new behaviors—for example, returning to one's seat promptly after recess, respecting other people's property, being a good listener—to his list of those that merit a marble when he sees them.

Possible questions for "The Marble Jar":

1. *What basic principle of behaviorism is Mr. Fenwick using in this situation?*
2. *A reinforcement is an act following a particular response with a reinforcer and thereby increasing the frequency of that response. Characterize the nature*

of the reinforcement that Mr. Fenwick is using.

3. Why do you think the marble jar is effective in improving students' behavior changes in Mr. Fenwick's classroom?