

Intervention Name: Mystery Motivator

Function of Intervention:

This intervention was developed to increase fluency through the application of positive reinforcement. There have been a number of empirical demonstrations of the effectiveness of the Mystery Motivator interventions (e.g. Madus, Kehle Madus, & Bray, 2003; Moore, Waguespack, Wickstrom, Witt & Gaydos, 1994).

Brief Description:

While many students will engage in appropriate academic and behavior task demands without systematic reinforcement plans, others will need additional behavioral supports. The Mystery Motivator intervention was designed to increase the proficiency of any academic or behavioral task demand by providing a “mystery” reinforcement using a random schedule (Jenson, Rhode & Reavis, 1994). Assuming that the reinforcer pool has some reinforcing value, the lure of a mystery reinforcer should additionally motivate students to engage in the academic task, even when the task is difficult. It can be difficult for teachers to develop a deep enough pool of interventions which retain value for the whole school year. Adding a surprise component to the reinforcer pool helps keep the process fun and exciting. Mystery Motivators can be used in a variety of content areas including reading, math, social studies, science, writing, and homework completion as well as social behavior compliance. They can also be contingent on a variety of outcome-based criteria (e.g. high-test averages, classroom participation, rule adherence). This intervention can be used to shape the behavior of an entire class or tailored to work for one individual.

Procedures:

1. Make reinforcement chart.
2. Construct a Motivation Chart for the entire class with all the student names and days of the week.
 - a. Randomly place some letter on a few days of the week beside each student’s name. For example Jenson (1994) and colleagues suggest using an “M” to designate a mystery motivator day. Be sure to place more motivators on the calendar during the initial stages of the intervention so that children are more likely to earn a mystery motivator. Each child should have different placement of the mystery “M.”
 - b. Cover up all of the days using a note card.
 - c. For each note card placed over the “M,” place the name of the motivator on the back.
3. Define goal (e.g. 100% homework completion in all subject areas, 80% accuracy on test grades in math).
4. If criterion is met, have the child remove the note card on that particular day. It is important to make this activity exciting. If the “M” is located on that day, the reinforcer should be given as soon as possible.
5. When there is not an “M” behind the note card, be sure to encourage students that there will be other opportunities to earn the Mystery Motivator.

Critical components that must be implemented for intervention to be successful:

- Place many “M’s” on the calendar during the teaching (initial) phase of the intervention.
- After the initial intervention phase of the intervention, place reinforcements randomly. A child should not be able to determine a pattern of when it is more likely that there will be a “M”.
- All goals should be clearly noted in a manner that students fully understand. Students must know what they are expected to do in order to earn the chance to receive a mystery reinforcer for this intervention to be successful.
- Select a goal that is easy to attain during the initial stages of the intervention. This will increase the likelihood that the initial intervention implementation will be a success.
- Reinforcers should be given as soon as possible.

Critical assumptions/problem-solving questions to be asked:

- It is important to know whether or not the students are performing their academic tasks at grade level and whether or not they are capable of performing the assigned tasks successfully. If not, a skill-based acquisition-level intervention should be selected in order to teach the academic/behavioral skill first.
- Students have to desire the mystery motivators; otherwise the intervention will be unsuccessful.
- Students in lower grades or with lower cognitive functioning may need more consistent reinforcement in order for them to understand the connection between the demonstration of an appropriate behavior and receipt of the Mystery Motivator. In such cases each day can have an “M” but with a different reinforcer on each day. In this case, the type of reinforcer is the surprise.
- Tangible motivators may be more enticing for younger students or students who are functioning at a lower cognitive level.

Materials:

- Preferred reinforcing stimuli list
- Reinforcers
- Mystery motivator chart
- Note cards

References

- Jenson, W.R., Rhode, G., Revis, H.K., (1994). *The Tough Kid Tool Box*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Madaus, M. M. R., Kehle, T. J., Madaus, J., & Bray, M. A. (2003). Mystery motivator as an intervention to promote homework completion and accuracy. *School Psychology International, 24*, 369-377.
- Moore, L. A., Waguespack, A. M., Wickstrom, K. F., Witt, J. C., & Gaydos G. R. (1994). Mystery motivator: An effective and time-efficient intervention. *School Psychology Review, 23*, 106-118.

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