

Behavior analysis psychological reinforcer

By Karin Gregory

Staff Writer

Most students don't get a crack at the real world until they graduate.

Most students aren't in Dr. James Kopp's behavior mod class.

Both graduate and undergraduate students in Kopp's Practicum in Applied Behavior Analysis work every week with handicapped and retarded children using behavior analysis, a technique forming the basis of a new graduate program in applied behavior analysis.

With this method, children are given reinforcers to strengthen good behavior. The reinforcers include candy, activity time, "a lot of social praise, pats and hugs, and anything that's not illegal, immoral or fattening," Kopp said.

Kopp's 20 practicum students work 12-20 hours a week for three hours credit. They work mostly mornings, but some work at night and on weekends, tutoring privately.

The only other school in the state to offer a behavior analysis graduate program is Texas Tech. Kopp has 20 graduate students in the program, 11 working this semester in practicum. He said he would like to build the program up to 50 students.

About nine practicum students (three are graduates) work with approximately 100 retarded children at Veda Knox school, for the trainable mentally retarded.

The school has a circular training program, which allows each child to complete a certain task in one area

before going on to the next.

Children are grouped according to their ability and work in a study hall atmosphere to master skills they already know, such as buttoning their clothes and tying their shoes.

For a job well done, the children earn tokens that get them five minutes of activity between tasks.

Each practicum student works with a child individually for about 10 minutes each, teaching him tasks he doesn't know, such as counting money and reading street signs. Through this one to one process, a student can teach about six children in one hour.

"One of the basic ideas of the program," undergraduate Lynn Mc-

Mann said "is that if a child can't learn, it's the fault of the teaching system being used."

When a child is not working, he is simply ignored, Kopp said. The students stand back and wait for the child to complete his task. The child raises his hand when he is finished, and if he has done his work correctly, he gets a

token.

"Praise and ignoring are the key," Kopp said.

Kopp said the practicum "came together very much spontaneously" at the Arlington Training Center in 1972 and was jointly sponsored by the Arlington Association of Retarded Citizens and the Child Study Center in Fort Worth. His students began volunteering to work with the children at the Arlington Training Center and the next year the Arlington Public Schools picked up the project.

Practicum students are also working this semester at the Center for Behavioral Studies in Denton, the Fort Worth State School, the Intensive Behavior Shaping Unit of Trinity Valley Mental Health Retardation and the Garland public schools.

The past two summers Kopp's students have worked with autistic children. Autism is a disorder of unknown origin "in which a child who will often be developing normally will withdraw and quit speaking," Kopp said. "They are often quite beautiful children who become very aggressive and self-injurious, but overall, the most obvious presenting symptom is severe behavior problems."

He said there is no known treatment for autism except the behavioral approach. "Using the behavioral technique," he said, "autistic children have often been rehabilitated."

During the summer 1976, Kopp's students worked with autistic children at Peace Lutheran Church in Euless. The group paid about \$30 a month for expenses. Last summer, Kopp's stu-

dents worked with 16 autistic children at Veda Knox, with the Arlington schools paying overhead.

Kopp said the behavioral technique is the same for every child with behavior problems, no matter if he is retarded, blind or autistic. The technique is approached with different intensities for different problems.

"Labels are desperation of medical analysis," he said.

Kopp said the parents of the retarded children support the program by donating reinforcers such as toys and candy, and by providing transportation. Parents are consulted on what kinds of foods the children can have.

"We get a lot of moral support from parents," Kopp said.

Kopp said he has about 20 students in his practicum each semester, but thinks he could use more.

"I never have enough students," he said. "The community soaks them up like a sponge."

He and his practicum students meet every Thursday at 3 p.m. to bring learning curves and other data on the children and teaching system for the rest of the students to critique.

"I had never been into anything like this before," McMann said "so I didn't know what I was getting into. The first day you walk into the classroom, and you feel so sorry for them you could cry."

But she said her reward comes when a child learns from her. "From that first smile you're hooked," she said. "It's probably more reinforcing for us than it is for them."

