How to take 4-term contingency data.

Esta lección en español

What it is. Every time a behavior happens, you write four things: the **motivating operation** (MO), what made the payoff worth more right then; the **discriminative stimulus** (S^D), the signal that the behavior would pay off here; the **behavior** itself; and the **consequence**, what happened right after. That is the 4-term contingency: MO, S^D, B, C.

Why it matters. You cannot change a behavior you cannot describe. A sheet that puts everything before the behavior in one box hides the two things you most need to know: *when* the payoff is worth the most (the MO) and *who or what* signals it is available (the S^D). Split them and you have two levers instead of one. Ten honest lines beat a month of "he has been having a hard time."

THE METHOD

How to do it yourself: eight steps, one sheet.

1. **Pick one behavior and define it so a stranger could spot it.** Not "aggression" — "open- or closed-hand contact with another person, hard enough to hear." Not "meltdown" — "drops to the floor and screams for longer than ten seconds." Write the definition at the top of the sheet.
2. **Set the sheet up before the day starts.** Date, time, where, then MO, S^D, B, C, and a box for how long or how many. Print the one at the bottom of this page.

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3. **When it happens, handle the moment first and write second.** Within five minutes, while it is fresh. Tomorrow's memory is a story, not data.
4. **MO: what made the payoff worth more right then.** How long since they ate, slept, had attention, had the thing. What was about to end or be asked of them. Facts only. "Up since 5:50, tablet on" is a fact. "She was cranky" is a guess.
5. **S^D: the signal that the behavior would pay off here.** Who was there, what they said, where it was. The person who gave in last time is a signal. So is the instruction. "Mom, who dressed her yesterday, said 'shoes on'" is the S^D.
6. **Behavior is what you saw and heard.** Count it or time it. "Screamed, about two minutes." "Hit three times."
7. **Consequence is what happened in the thirty seconds after — especially what people did.** "I said 'no hitting' and picked him up" counts. "Nothing" is almost never true; write what actually happened, even if it was you giving in.
8. **Collect ten instances, or five days, then read down the columns.** A repeating MO tells you *when* to act before it starts. A repeating S^D tells you *who and where*. A repeating consequence tells you what the behavior is *for* — the next lesson, on function, takes it from there.

WORKED EXAMPLE

Mia, age six, and the floor.

Made-up example. The names and numbers below are invented to show the method.

Behavior, defined: *drops to the floor and screams for longer than ten seconds.*
Five entries from one week:

When, where	MO — payoff worth more because	S^D — the signal	B — what happened	C — what happened next

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Mon 7:40, hallway	Up since 5:50; tablet on; shoes end it	Mom: “Shoes on, we’re leaving.”	Floor, screamed ~2 min	Mom put her shoes on for her
Mon 5:30, kitchen	Mid-show; bath ends it	Dad: “Bath time.”	Floor, screamed ~4 min	Dad: “Fine, five more minutes.” Bath was later
Tue 7:35, hallway	Tablet on; shoes end it	Mom: “Shoes.”	Floor, screamed ~1 min	Mom put her shoes on for her
Wed 12:10, kitchen	Mid-game; lunch ends it	Grandma: “Come sit at the table.”	Floor, screamed ~3 min	Lunch brought to the couch
Wed 7:00, bedroom	Bed at 10 the night before	Dad: “Pajamas.”	Floor, screamed ~2 min	Dad dressed her on the floor

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Read down the columns. MO: five of five, something she wanted was ending or she was short on sleep, so getting out of the task was worth a lot. S^D: five of five, an instruction from an adult who has done it for her before. C: five of five, the task done for her or put off. The floor pays. Two levers: change the MO (finish the show first, warn before it ends, earlier bedtime) and change the C (the task still happens, and she does it). That is a hypothesis to bring to the team, not a verdict — but it beats “she has tantrums.”

MISTAKES TO AVOID

Where good sheets go wrong.

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- Writing feelings instead of facts (“he was being defiant”). Write what was said and done.
- Putting the instruction in the MO column. The instruction is the signal (S^D). What made escaping it worth so much — tired, a show ending — is the MO.
- Logging only the bad days. The quiet days tell you what was different.
- Stopping after three entries because a pattern “seems obvious.”
- Defining the behavior as a label (“meltdown,” “attitude”) so two adults log two different things.
- Changing what you do mid-week without writing that down too. Change is fine; unrecorded change wrecks the sheet.

TRY IT

One question, then the answer.

Which of these belongs in the MO column? (a) “Mom said ‘shoes on.’” (b) “Up since 5:50, and the tablet was on.” (c) “She was being difficult.”

▼ Show the answer, and why

(b). It is a condition that made getting out of the task worth more right then. (a) is the S^D: the signal that the floor could pay off. (c) is a label, not data. Write (b) and (a) in their own columns and you know both when and who.

Something to keep

The 4-term data sheet.

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Behavior, defined so a stranger could spot it:	

Date, time, where	MO — payoff worth more because (sleep, food, what was ending)	S^D — the signal (who, what was said)	B — what I saw and heard (how long / how many)	C — the 30 seconds after

WHERE DRAGEN HELPS

Log it in one tap, see the graph.

The DRAGENfamily hub records what you see at home as it happens and draws the last two weeks as a graph. The paper sheet above works without it — the hub just means the sheet is never in the wrong bag.

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SOURCE

Where this comes from.

Skinner described the contingency of stimulus, response and consequence (*Science and Human Behavior*, 1953). Michael (1982, *Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior*) separated the motivating function of a stimulus from its discriminative function, which is why this sheet has four terms. Laraway, Snycerski, Michael & Poling (2003, *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*) set out the motivating operation as used today. The method as taught: Cooper, Heron & Heward, *Applied Behavior Analysis* (3rd ed., 2020).

Examples on this page are made up. They contain no client, student or family information. This lesson teaches a method; it does not replace your child’s care team, your BCBA, or your payer’s written rules.

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