

香港資優教育學院  
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

---

## Factsheet

### TEACHING AND LEARNING IDEAS IN A NUTSHELL – BEHAVIOURISM

#### Definition

Behaviourism is a theory of animal and human learning that only focuses on objectively observable behaviours and discounts mental activities. Behaviour theorists define learning as nothing more than the acquisition of new behaviour.

#### Discussion

Experiments by behaviourists identify **conditioning** as a universal learning process. There are two different types of conditioning, each yielding a different behavioural pattern:

- **Classic conditioning** occurs when a natural reflex responds to a stimulus. The most popular example is Pavlov's observation that dogs salivate when they eat or even see food. Essentially, animals and people are biologically "wired" so that a certain stimulus will produce a specific response.
- **Behavioral conditioning** occurs when a response to a stimulus is reinforced. Basically, operant conditioning is a simple feedback system: If a reward or reinforcement follows the response to a stimulus, then the response becomes more probable in the future. For example, leading behaviorist B.F. Skinner used reinforcement techniques to teach pigeons to dance and bowl a ball in a mini-alley.

There have been many criticisms of behaviourism, including the following:

- Behaviourism does not account for all kinds of learning, since it disregards the activities of the mind.
- Behaviourism does not explain some learning - such as the recognition of new language patterns by young children--for which there is no reinforcement mechanism.
- Research has shown that animals adapt their reinforced patterns to new information. For instance, a rat can shift its behaviour to respond to changes in the layout of a maze it had previously mastered through reinforcements.

#### How Behaviorism Impacts on Learning

This theory is relatively simple to understand because it relies only on observable behaviour and describes several universal laws of behavior. Its positive and negative reinforcement techniques can be very effective - both in animals, and in treatments for human disorders such as autism and antisocial behaviour. Behaviourism often is used by teachers, who reward or punish student behaviours.

#### Reading

Baum, W. M. *Understanding behaviorism: Behavior, Culture and Evolution*. Blackwell, 2005

D.C. Phillips & Jonas F. Soltis. *Perspectives on Learning*, Chapter 3. Teachers' College Press, 2003

Plotnik, Rod. *Introduction to Psychology*. Thomson-Wadsworth, 2005