Behaviorism

# **DEFINITION**

Behaviorism is a learning theory that only focuses on objectively observable behaviors and discounts any independent activities of the mind. Behavior theorists define learning as nothing more than the acquisition of new behavior based on environmental conditions.

# **DISCUSSION**

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

1. **Classic conditioning** occurs when a natural reflex responds to a stimulus. We are biologically “wired” so that a certain stimulus will produce a specific response. One of the more common examples of classical conditioning in the educational environment is in situations where students exhibit irrational fears and anxieties like  fear of failure, fear of public speaking and general school phobia.
2. **Behavioral** or **operant 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 behaviorism, including the following:

* Behaviorism does not account for all kinds of learning, since it disregards the activities of the mind.
* Behaviorism 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 behavior to respond to changes in the layout of a maze it had previously mastered through reinforcements.

# **HOW BEHAVIORISM IMPACTS LEARNING**

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

History of behaviorism.

Behaviorism started as a reaction against introspective psychology in the 19th century, which relied heavily on first-person accounts. J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner rejected introspective methods as being subjective and unquantifiable. These psychologists wanted to focus on observable, quantifiable events and behaviors. They said that science should take into account only observable indicators. They helped bring psychology into higher relevance by showing that it could be accurately measured and understood, and it wasn’t just based off opinions.

Watson and Skinner believed that if they were given a group of infants, the way they were raised and the environment they put them in would be the ultimate determining factor for how they acted, not their parents or their genetics.

Pavlov’s Dogs is a popular behaviorism experiment. A group of dogs would hear a bell ring and then they would be given food. After enough time, when the bell would ring the dogs would salivate, expecting the food before they even saw it. This is exactly what behaviorism argues—that the things we experience and our environment are the drivers of how we act.

The stimulus-response sequence is a key element of understanding behaviorism. A stimulus is given, for example a bell rings, and the response is what happens next, a dog salivates or a pellet of food is given. Behavioral learning theory argues that even complex actions can be broken down into the stimulus-response.

Behaviorism learning theory.

In the classroom, the behavioral learning theory is key in understanding how to motivate and help students. Information is transferred from teachers to learners from a response to the right stimulus. Students are a passive participant in behavioral learning—teachers are giving them the information as an element of stimulus-response. Teachers use behaviorism to show students how they should react and respond to certain stimuli. This needs to be done in a repetitive way, to regularly remind students what behavior a teacher is looking for.

Positive reinforcement is key in the[behavioral learning theory.](http://gsi.berkeley.edu/media/Learning.pdf) Without positive reinforcement, students will quickly abandon their responses because they don’t appear to be working. For example, if students are supposed to get a sticker every time they get an A on a test, and then teachers stop giving that positive reinforcement, less students may get A’s on their tests, because the behavior isn’t connected to a reward for them.

Repetition and positive reinforcement go hand-in-hand with the behavioral learning theory. Teachers often work to strike the right balance of repeating the situation and having the positive reinforcement come to show students why they should continue that behavior.

Motivation plays an important role in behavioral learning. Positive and negative reinforcement can be motivators for students. For example, a student who receives praise for a good test score is much more likely to learn the answers effectively than a student who receives no praise for a good test score. The student who receives no praise is experiencing negative reinforcement—their brain tells them that though they got a good grade, it didn’t really matter, so the material of the test becomes unimportant to them. Conversely students who receive positive reinforcement see a direct correlation to continuing excellence, completely based on that response to a positive stimulus.

Behaviorism and social learning theory.

The behavioral learning theory and the social learning theory stem from similar ideas. The social learning theory agrees with the behavioral learning theory about outside influences on behavior. However, the social learning theory goes a step further and suggests that internal psychological processes are also an influence on behavior. Students or individuals may see things being done, but the social learning theory says that internal thoughts impact what behavior response comes out.

Behaviorism doesn’t study or feature internal thought processes as an element of actions. Social learning argues that behavior is much more complicated than the simple stimulus and response of behaviorism. It suggests that students learn through observation, and then they consciously decide to imitate behavior. There are underlying emotions like peer pressure and a desire to fit in that impact behavior.

Behaviorist teaching strategies.

Teachers can implement behavioral learning strategy techniques in their classroom in many ways, including:

* Drills. Teachers may practice skills using drill patterns to help students see the repetition and reinforcement that behavioral learning theory uses.
* Question and answer. Teachers can use a question as a stimulus and answer as a response, gradually getting harder with questions to help students.
* Guided practice. Teachers can be directly involved in helping students go through problems to give them the reinforcement and behavior demonstration you want them to follow.
* Regular review. Reviews are important to behavioral learning theory. Going back over material and giving positive reinforcement will help students retain information much better.
* Positive reinforcement. Behaviorist classrooms utilize positive reinforcement regularly. This can be in the form of verbal reinforcement and praise, reward systems, added privileges, and more.

Behaviorism criticisms.

While behaviorism is a great option for many teachers, there are some criticisms of this theory. Behaviorism is best for certain learning outcomes, like foreign languages and math, but aren’t as effective for analytical and comprehensive learning.

Other critics of behavioral learning say that the theory doesn’t encompass enough of human learning and behavior, and that it’s not fully developed. Other theories have come forward that take behaviorism further, implying that there are many additional factors to consider when evaluating behavior.

If you are [hoping to one day become a teacher,](https://www.wgu.edu/online-teaching-degrees.html) it’s important to get the right degree and credentials to help you be prepared for success. It’s also important to understand learning theories to be ready to take on students and the classroom. When you understand more about psychology and how students learn, you’re much more likely to be successful as an educator.