

## Introduction

One of the first learning strategies used by a normally developing young child is to imitate the behavior modeled by the parent or primary caregiver. Research demonstrates that infants as young as 1 month of age imitate the facial expressions of their mother (Azar, 1997). By learning to imitate more and more complex behaviors, both visual and auditory, young children can acquire many new behaviors in a very short period of time. In fact, without imitating sounds, nobody would learn to use a spoken language correctly, and without learning to imitate the tracing of letters and numbers, nobody would learn to print letters, words, or numbers correctly. As such, imitation of models is one of the most essential and powerful learning strategies available. The ability to imitate is a skill that each person can use to learn new skills throughout his or her lifetime.

Some children do not learn to imitate on their own. This can be due to impairments in sensory physiology (i.e., visual or hearing deficits), to neurological problems that interfere with the child's ability to attend, to other developmental problems, or to a lack of appropriate consequences when the child does imitate. Children who do not imitate are developmentally delayed and their behavior may seem abnormal even to the average parent. For years research has shown that, through the use of systematic procedures, nonimitators can be taught to imitate various types of models and thus can learn a strategy for one-trial learning (Striefel, Bryan, & Aikins, 1974; Striefel & Eberl, 1974; Striefel, Wetherby, & Karlan, 1978). In the process of learning to imitate, individuals are taught to systematically attend to the modeled behavior and when they imitate or even attempt to imitate, the behavior is strengthened through approval, feedback, or other planned consequences. Learning to imitate can be left to chance or it can be taught systematically so that one can eventually have one-trial learning.

The world is filled with models from which people learn. Because some of the models are "appropriate" and some are "inappropriate," it is important to understand how individuals learn through modeling and imitation,

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how they learn to discriminate between "good" and "bad" models, and how adults can teach children and others to do the same. It is also important to understand how people can learn to imitate the behaviors of persons around them and how to use the principles of modeling to teach others to imitate models provided for them. This book will describe the process for teaching individuals of all ages to imitate a diversity of models and behaviors.

This manual was written for parents, teachers, and others who want to teach or learn by using modeling and imitation. It includes information, procedures, examples, and exercises to simplify the understanding of modeling and imitation and to help the user learn how to teach with these techniques.

The exercises in this book should be completed by the individual who is interested in understanding and using modeling and imitation for acquiring and teaching new skills. This book can be used by an individual for self-study and improvement, or it can be used under the guidance of a professional who has a background in the behavioral principles upon which modeling and imitation are based. If errors are made on any exercise, the individual should reread the appropriate section of the book or seek feedback and additional information from a professional. The exercise should then be repeated to assure that the material has been mastered. Feedback can be obtained in a face-to-face setting, through written correspondence, or with telephone communication.

Most persons will be able to use modeling and imitation to acquire new skills without additional assistance after having mastered the concepts provided herein. Others may find that reading some of the other books in the *How To Manage Behavior Series*, of which this book is a part, will provide them with an understanding of related concepts, such as how to use attention and approval and other reinforcers for motivating individuals to imitate models.

## Definitions

The word *model* can refer either to a person (the trainer, parent, another child) or to the behavior that is demonstrated (modeled) so that it can be learned (imitated). A *behavioral model* is a motor or verbal behavior demonstrated by a trainer that is to be reproduced by the learner (student, trainee, child, etc.); it is the behavior the trainee is expected to produce (say or do) at any point in a training program. Over time, as the trainee learns to reproduce the modeled behavior (imitate), the model is faded so the trainee must remember what to say or do without a model (prompt). There are two types of models, planned and unplanned.