

## Introduction

Human beings are social animals. They live, work, and recreate with other human beings. When humans are praised by other people, they are delighted; when they are scorned or ridiculed, they get upset or depressed.

Humans are affected by the actions of other people in many ways. For example, when other people in the environment live in a socially responsible manner, everyone gets to breathe clean air. When a sufficient number of people pollute the atmosphere, all people suffer—not only those who pollute. Also, the question as to whether a person arrives at his or her destination safely is not determined simply by how one drives, but also according to how other motorists on the same road drive their cars.

In many ways, society treats people as members of a defined group. Automobile insurance companies, for example, set rates not only according to one's driving record, but also according to the performance of one's age group and neighborhood. Sometimes companies award employees bonuses for overall increases in productivity. Teachers will often read children a story or give them a day without homework when all students complete their assignments. Even the Bible deals with the question of collective consequences when Moses and Aaron ask of God, "Shall one man sin and You grow angry at a whole congregation?"

### What Are Group Contingencies?

Many of the examples given in the present series involve the behavior change of individuals. Perhaps there was an effort made to have a child become more punctual for school, or an employee more productive at work, or a person more considerate in social interactions. These are all important goals. In other cases, however, one might be interested in teaching an entire classroom of students to do their assignments on time, or factory workers to miss fewer days of work, or tenants in an apartment building to use less energy. In such cases it is helpful to use a *group contingency*, an arrangement in which the consequences for group members depend, at least in part, on the behavior of other group members. Strictly speaking, the consequences can be either reinforcing or punishing. The emphasis in this booklet, however, as with all other booklets in the series, will be on positive reinforcement of behavior.

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