

**CHICAGO BEHAVIOR CONSULTANTS, INC.**  
1945 WEST WILSON AVE.  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS 60640  
773.769.9170

*Alice Belgrade, MEd., LCPC, BCBA*

*James L. Lawyer, LCSW, DCSW*

**STIMULUS CONTROL**  
**A System of Habit Training**

***What is stimulus control?***

Stimulus control means that a behavior (or set of behaviors) is emitted under a specific signal, and that it is inhibited in the absence of the signal.

***What are examples of stimulus control?***

Common examples of stimulus control are:

- Toilet training: voiding occurs under the *signal of the toilet* and it is withheld when the toilet is not there.
- Answering the telephone: picking up the phone occurs under the *signal of the ring* and does not occur in the absence of the ring.
- Red light: stopping occurs under the *signal of the red light* and tends not to occur in the absence of the red light. The behavior of stopping may be under the control of multiple stimuli (such as another car stopping, an obstacle in the road, a policeman's signal, etc.)
- Key in the Door: feeling excited and happy, running to the door may occur under the *signal of the sound of a key in the door* indicating that Daddy or Mommy is home!
- Door slam, distinctive short beep sound: Alice's sigh of relief that 20 year old son is home safe and sound.
- Pop Goes the Weasel Music: begging for a dollar and running out the front door occurs under the *signal that the ice cream truck is coming* and does not occur in the absence of the music.

Chicago Behavior Consultants, Inc.  
Stimulus Control

***Is stimulus control an automatic or learned behavior?***

Stimulus control is a learned response to a predictable cue.

***How do you learn stimulus control?***

Experience of a specific nature teaches one to bring behavior under the control of a signal. Positive outcomes reinforce our behavior. When the behavior is associated with a specific stimulus, or signal, we are likely to repeat that behavior the next time we are in the presence of that signal. When our behavior is not reinforced, or may even be punished when it occurs in the absence of that signal, we have learned to both express and inhibit behavior in relation to the signal.

If we want to teach our children to behave in specific ways under specific conditions, we use methods to teach stimulus control. The key is to make sure that predictable positive reinforcers are used when behavior is paired with the right signal and that reinforcement does not occur in the absence of the signal.

***What does this mean for toilet training?***

Reward voiding on the toilet (*the signal*) immediately! Reward withholding urine and feces (*absence of signal*): dry pants.

Negative consequences are sometimes applied when the child does not follow the signals appropriately. Usually these negative consequences prompt the child to be responsible for their behavior by cleaning and practicing running to the toilet.