Running Head: MYSTERY MOTIVATORS

Mystery Motivators

08/01/2009

Clara Mills

University of Utah

Mystery Motivators is an effective and evidence-based intervention that is used to promote positive behavior. This intervention can be easily implemented at home or in the schools. Mystery Motivators use a lottery-like system that allows an individual to select from a variety of high and low valued prizes for their engagement in targeted positive behaviors. Each day the individual meets the criteria for the targeted positive behavior, the individual gets to look at the corresponding day on a weekly chart. If that particular day contains the Mystery Motivator symbol (a capital "M"), the individual gets to select a reward. The participants do not know which days contain the "M", because the "M" has been hidden, usually with an invisible ink pen. This adds a component of unpredictability and surprise. This intervention also allows for random reinforcement. (Moore et al., 1994)

This intervention may be used to increase motivation (hence the name) to perform or not perform a wide variety of behaviors. MM's may be used to increase positive behaviors as well as decrease negative or disruptive behaviors. For example, Murphy et al. (2006) studied the effect of mystery motivators on the behavior of preschool children. The MM's were implemented in an effort to reduce problem behaviors in the preschool students. The MM package, implemented successfully, reduced problem behavior. Rather than decrease a problem behavior, Madaus (2003) used Mystery Motivators to try and increase positive behaviors. In this study, MM's were used to increase the math homework completion and accuracy in fifth grade students. The MM's were quite successful. MM's have also been used to increase bedtime compliance. A study was conducted by Robinson and Sheridan (2000) to investigate the success of MM's for bed time compliance. MM's successfully increased bedtime compliance and decreased time out of bed for three out of four of the participants. As you can see, MM's can be used for a wide variety of behaviors.

MM's may also be used for a wide range of populations. MM's have been effective for children as young as 3 years of age. For example, the Murphy et al. (2006) study successfully implemented MM's with pre-school children. Also, the Robinson and Sheridan (2000) study effectively improved bed time cooperation with children age three to five. Other studies have shown that MM's are an effective intervention for older populations as well. For instance, the above Madaus (2003) study increased homework completion and accuracy in fifth grade students. Research has also shown that MM's are also effective tools to use with students suffering from disabilities. Musser, Kehle, and Jenson (2001) investigated the effects of using MM's along with several other interventions in order to reduce disruptive classroom behavior in students with Serious Emotional Disturbance. Disruptive behaviors were successfully reduced. This study, along with many others, also demonstrates that MM's can be effective in a package or multi-component intervention. In this study, MM's were used along with a precision request program, token economy with response cost, and antecedent strategies such as public posting of school rules and teacher movement.

As noted above, MM's can be effective for a wide range of behaviors and populations. More importantly, this intervention is evidence based practice. Evidence based practice refers to using interventions whose effects have been shown to be statistically significant through systematic empirical research. (Evidence Based Practice, Wikipedia) This is indeed the case for MM's. MM's have been thoroughly studied with outstanding positive outcomes demonstrating the effectiveness of the treatment. For example, in the study by Musser, Kehle, and Jenson (2001) examining the effects of MM's on disruptive behavior found significant results. Researchers found that the MM intervention package successfully reduced problem behaviors in all three students. Baseline data showed that students were disruptive 37% of the time. During

the intervention phase, disruptive behavior was reduced to an average of 10%. Disruptive

behavior continued at lower levels at follow up with disruptive behaviors remaining at an

average of 10% of the time. MM's were also significantly effective in the study conducted by

Murphy et al. (2006). This study found that the disruptive behaviors of all participants were

significantly reduced. Effects sizes for Students 1 to 8 were 7.71, 3.04, 2.36, 2.06, 1.58, 1.59,

.99, and 2.64, respectively. Indeed, MM's have extensive research indicating their effectiveness.

There are some necessary materials needed to perform this intervention. To begin with,

you need a Mystery Motivator Weekly Chart. This chart has spaces for each day of the week

and may be pre-printed or manually created. An example of a Mystery Motivator Weekly Chart

is shown in the appendix. Markers in varying colors are needed in order for the individual to

color in the specific day when they meet their goal. An invisible ink pen is needed to make the

Mystery Motivator symbol ("M") on several random days of the week. Lastly, a reward menu

and prizes are required. These rewards may be tangible or involve social incentives. (Rhode,

Jenson, & Reavis, 1992)

Mystery Motivators is a straightforward and uncomplicated intervention that may be

implemented with some basic steps. To begin with, all materials listed above must be gathered

and prepared. The adult conducting the program must then draw in the M's with the invisible

ink pen onto three to four random days of the week. If the adult does not wish to use an invisible

ink pen, or does not have one available, they may use a different technique to keep track of MM

days. One alternate technique is to use construction paper to cover the days and write an M with

a regular marker. Another alternative is to use an envelope and small slips of paper. There is a

piece of paper for each day of the week. The adult writes an "M" on several of the slips, leaving

some of them blank. Then, all slips of paper are placed in the envelope. The student then gets to

draw a slip of paper out of the envelope if they reach the target for that day. (Moore et al., 1994)

Once the MM chart is complete, the adult should post it. The next step requires the adult

in charge to explain the intervention to all of the participants. This may be done with one single

person or with an entire classroom. After the process is explained, the instructor needs to

identify the specific target behaviors that will be worked on with each participant. One to three

target behaviors that one wishes to increase or decrease may be selected. Each participant should

know exactly what they need to do in order to be eligible for the reward for that day. One also

needs to determine when the MM intervention will be in effect. It may be in effect all day or if it

is being conducted in a school setting, it may only be implemented in one class. The next step is

most likely the greatest in the eyes of the participants. It is necessary to create a reward menu

with the help of all participants involved. This is done to make sure that the rewards are salient.

The rewards should then be posted for all to see. Rewards may be tangible or social. In a school

setting, students may also receive certain privileges such as leaving early for lunch. Generally, it

is recommended that rewards are given out frequently and a few larger rewards or attainable.

When participants achieve their daily goal, they color in the corresponding day on the MM chart.

If they reveal an "M" for that day, the participant is allowed to select a prize from the reward

menu. If there is no "M" for that day, a reward is not distributed. (Rhode, Jenson, & Reavis,

1992)

Although the use of MM's has been very successful across a wide range of problems and

ages, there are issues that may arise. For instance, if a student receives a MM one day, they may

assume that they will not get a reward the next day. This causes the student or participant to stop

working on the target behaviors for that day because they do not think they can obtain a reward. This is not ideal for obvious reasons. Participants need to be motivated to work on their behaviors every day. This problem can be remedied by starting the MM program with several hidden "M's" written on days right next to each other. If participants are able to see at the beginning that they may receive rewards two days in a row, they will be less likely to fall into the un-motivated trap. (Murphy et al., 2006). Also, if rewards are delayed too long, participants may grow restless and lose motivation. In order to maintain motivation and success for the program, smaller rewards should be administered more frequently. Also, if you are working with adults or high school students, small rewards may not be motivating enough. Several large prizes should be on the reward list to motivate older participants. (Moore et al., 1994)

Many interventions end up having to confront certain legal issues. Mystery Motivators are usually deemed acceptable by the law and any school regulations. However, the one thing that may be a problem are the rewards that are offered. If tangible rewards such as food are offered, administrators need to make sure that no child is allergic to the edible reward. Also, getting out of school or class early may be a problem if the student causes trouble outside of class or is lacking in necessary supervision.

Overall, Mystery Motivators is a useful tool to use in or out of schools to help increase positive behaviors and decrease disruptive behaviors. MM's have been used anywhere from pre-school students to adults and have been successful with all ages. Also, a wide variety of behaviors have been improved with MM's. MM's have been shown to decrease problem behavior in pre-school students, increase homework performance in 5th grade students, and increased bed time compliance in three to five year old children. This intervention is easy to

implement with several basic steps outlined above. If one is in need of a fun motivational

strategy to improve behavior, MM's should be on top of the list.

References

Evidence Based Practice (n.d.) In Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia online. Retrieved from
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evidence-based_practice

Madaus, M. M. R., Kehle, T. J., Madaus, J., & Bray, M. A. (2003). Mystery Motivator as an
Intervention to Promote Homework Completion and Accuracy. *School Psychology
International, 24*(4), 369.

Moore, L.A., Waguespack, A.M., Wickstrom, K.F., Witt, J.C., & Gaydon, G.R. (1994).
Mystery Motivator: An effective and time efficient intervention. *School Psychology
Review, 23,* 106-117.

Murphy, K. A., Theodore, L. A., Aloiso, D., Alric-Edwards, J. M., & Hughes, T. L. (2007).
Interdependent group contingency and mystery motivators to reduce preschool disruptive
behavior. *Psychology in the Schools*, 44(1), 53-63.

Musser, E. H., Bray, M. A., Kehle, T. J., & Jenson, W. R. (2001). Reducing disruptive behaviors
in students with serious emotional disturbance. *School Psychology Review*, 30(2), 294-
304.

Rhode, G., Jenson, W.R., & Reavis, H.K. (1992). *The tough kid book.* Longmont, CO:
Sopriswest, Inc.

MYSTERY MOTIVATOR CHART

FRANKIE THE FROG

THINKS YOU'RE TOADALLY AWESOME!

Class/Student: _____   Week of: _____

BEHAVIOR GOALS: 1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Bonus