



Reinforcer Pairing: Developing Functional Leisure Skills

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Introduction

Many individuals with autism do not display a wide variety of functional leisure skills. In a residential setting, this can be an important behavioral target for increase as it allows an individual to remain functionally engaged and safe without a high level of staff supervision and interaction. One way to increase leisure skills is to embed an already established reinforcer into less preferred activities (Hanley, et al., 2003). The purpose of the current study was to assess the effects of embedded continuous reinforcement for engagement in a low preferred leisure activity.

METHOD

Participants

The participant was a 19-year old male diagnosed with Down syndrome and autism, who resided in a campus-based residential facility and attended the adjacent special education school. Upon initiation of the study, he exhibited no functional leisure skills and indicated no preference for functional leisure items during a preference assessment.

Setting and Materials

Materials included an iPod with preferred music and dock with speakers, a “play-a-sound book”, data sheets and timers.

All sessions were conducted in the participant’s residence. Sessions were 3 to 5 minutes in duration.

Dependent Measures

Data were collected on engagement with the targeted leisure item. In baseline and treatment 1, engagement was defined as touching, manipulation, or functional engagement with the targeted leisure item. In treatment 2, the definition was revised to include physically prompted engagement. Whole interval data were collected throughout each session that was conducted.

Inter-Observer Agreement Data

Inter-Observer agreement data were collected by a second observer during 33% of sessions. The mean inter-observer agreement was 100%.

PROCEDURE

Baseline: The targeted leisure item was presented to the participant along with the instruction, “Time to play”. No other prompts, instructions or reinforcement was provided.

Treatment 1: The targeted leisure item was presented to the participant with the instruction, “Time to play”. Music was provided contingent upon engagement as defined.

Treatment 2: The targeted leisure item was presented to the participant with the instruction “Time to play”. The therapist provided physical prompting to have the participant functionally engage with the leisure item. Music was provided contingent upon engagement as defined

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During baseline, the participant exhibited engagement during an average of 4.24% of intervals with a range of 0%-11%. During treatment 1: Engagement increased to an average of 68.5% of intervals, with a range of 0-100%. During treatment 2: The participant exhibited engagement with the targeted leisure item during 16.7% of intervals with a range of 0-44%. The treatment was successful in increasing basic engagement; however, the participant still required prompting and continuous reinforcement to engage with the targeted leisure item.

Reinforcer pairing was successful in the initial phase, perhaps due to very low response effort required for access to reinforcement. When response effort increased, more prompting was required, however, the reinforcer continued to be effective. Despite the fact that independent functional leisure skills were not acquired, this intervention shows promise for the participant. The information gathered from this study indicates that music may be an effective reinforcer for other activities or skill acquisition tasks.

