



The Effects of Task Presentation on Reducing Tantrum Behavior

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Introduction

Individuals who are diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder frequently prefer structure and predictability with daily routines. Often structured schedules are used to provide that consistency. The method of task presentation within the schedule is typically not considered or evaluated. Research has been conducted on providing “predictability signals” (Flannery and Horner, 1994) during task completion. The present study evaluates how demands are presented and its effects on reducing tantrum behavior.

METHOD

Participants and Setting

The participant was a 12-year-old female diagnosed with Autism who engaged in high rates of severe tantrum behavior. She resided in a residential treatment facility for the assessment and treatment of frequent, high intensity tantrum behavior.

Dependent Measures

Throughout this study, frequency data were collected on episodes of tantrum behavior, which included aggression, disruption and self-injury. Aggression was defined as hitting, kicking, charging, and biting. Disruption included slamming her body into walls, property destruction, and flipping and throwing furniture. Self-injury consisted of biting herself on her arms, repeated banging of head on hard surfaces and hitting herself with an open hand on her face.

Interobserver agreement

A second observer was present for 54% of all sessions. Interobserver agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements and multiplying by 100%. Agreement was 86% for all sessions.

PROCEDURE

Across all phases of the study, tantrum behavior was blocked and ignored and the participant was redirected back to the current task. The same materials were used across conditions, sessions lasted for 30 minutes, and the same discriminative stimulus was given to begin working (“It’s time to work”).

Following an initial baseline where demands were presented one at a time for 30 minutes without any cues or instructions, an alternating treatments design was used to evaluate the effects of two different approaches to demand presentation. During time-based presentation, a timer was set for 30 minutes and remained on the table as the participant completed demands. The therapist presented activities one at a time from a bin and placed them back into the bin when completed. During task-based presentation, no timer was used and no time limits were communicated to the participant. However, in this condition, the therapist placed all activities on the table and put them into a bin as they were completed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Baseline rates of tantrum behavior were 3.8 per minute. During the time-based presentation, tantrum behavior was lower than baseline, but remained variable with a mean of 1.48 per minute. During the task-based presentation, tantrum behavior

decreased to 0 across sessions. During the return to baseline, while rates of tantrums did increase, they were variable and did not increase to the level of the initial baseline. This may have been due to the familiarity of the tasks and the routine. Therefore, five new tasks of a similar difficulty were introduced and baseline was extended. The participant also had a medication adjustment during the return to baseline condition, which could have affected rates of tantrum behavior. When task-based presentation was reintroduced, tantrum again dropped to 0.

The results of this study indicate that a time-based presentation of demands decreased tantrum behavior, but inconsistently. The task-based presentation was effective at reducing tantrum behavior to 0 across sessions.

Often daily schedules based upon time and predictable routines are used for individuals diagnosed with Autism. In this study, the method of demand presentation was demonstrated to be an important factor when reducing tantrum behavior. Presenting demands in the context of time may have been too abstract for the participant, who demonstrated success when a more concrete end to a period of demands was presented. Future research should evaluate the effectiveness of the procedure across the day to all routines and in a variety of settings to promote generalization.

