



Conducting a Functional Analysis of Elopement Behavior: A Replication

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Introduction

Functional analysis procedures as defined by Iwata et al., 1994 are respected throughout literature as the gold standard for identifying the function of various problem behaviors. However, limited research is available on using functional analysis techniques for assessing elopement behavior. The present study is a replication and modification of functional analysis procedures for elopement as identified by Piazza et al., 1997.

METHOD

Participant and Setting

The participant was a 9-year-old female diagnosed with Autism who was referred to a behavioral stabilization unit for the assessment and treatment of elopement behavior. Elopement behaviors were defined as any part of the participant's body moving through a doorway or beyond 5 feet from the therapist (when in hallway situations). Previous caregivers reported that the participant engaged in this behavior in all environments while laughing and turning to observe whether someone was following her.

Interobserver agreement

A second observer was present for 67% of all sessions. Interobserver agreement was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the number of agreements plus disagreements and multiplying by 100%. Mean agreement was 88%.

PROCEDURE

A functional analysis was conducted using a multi-element design across attention, demand, ignore, tangible, and control conditions. Sessions were conducted on the living unit in an effort to replicate the natural environment and were 10 minutes in length. Frequency of elopement was recorded. During the attention condition, 1 minute of attention was provided prior to beginning the session and 30 seconds of attention was provided contingent upon elopement behavior. During the demand condition, various activities were placed around the room. The participant was prompted to walk across the room to each activity and 30 seconds of escape was provided contingent upon elopement behavior. During the ignore condition, the therapist stood in the hallway of the living unit, ignored all problem behavior, and no consequence was delivered for elopement behavior. During the tangible condition, two connecting rooms were used. The participant was given access to a preferred item for one minute, which was then removed and placed in the adjoining room. Access to the item was given contingent upon elopement behavior. During the toy play condition, leisure items were placed around the room and no consequence was delivered for elopement behavior. During all conditions the participant was verbally prompted to stay with the therapist every 30s.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that elopement behavior was maintained by access attention and tangible reinforcement. Elopement behavior was observed at high rates in the ignore condition, which also suggests a possible automatic function. Throughout this condition, the participant would turn and look at the therapist and when no consequence was delivered, she would continue to run throughout the building.

This study extended the literature by conducting the functional analysis design identified by Piazza et al., 1997 in a more natural environment. Due to the safety precautions already in place on the living unit, we were able to implement more natural contingencies for elopement without modifying the environment. Previous caregivers reported that they would run after the participant and prompt her to return. Therefore, these contingencies were replicated to the greatest extent possible throughout the assessment. Additional research should include evaluating treatments for elopement behavior.

