



Research Brief

Prevention of Severe Problem Behavior

Reeve, C. E., & Carr, E. G. (2000). Prevention of severe behavior problems in children with developmental disorders. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 2, 144-160.

Why was it conducted?

Dealing with severe problem behavior is often difficult, dangerous, and demoralizing for teachers and parents. If such behavior can be prevented, then one would not have to deal with ongoing crises related to self-injury, aggression, tantrums, and property destruction. The purpose of this study was to investigate the use of Functional Communication Training (FCT) as a means for preventing serious problem behavior from developing.

Who participated?

Eight children with a variety of developmental disorders (including autism and speech impairments) participated. The children ranged from 4 to 6 years of age. In addition, eight adults (parents and teachers) participated as intervention agents.

What was done?

A functional analysis was carried out to determine the purpose of the minor problem behavior (e.g., whining) that all the children displayed at the beginning of the study. The assessment indicated that such behavior was attention-seeking in nature. Next, the adults were taught to implement FCT for each child within the context of routine language training sessions at home or school. For example, a child might be taught to use a phrase such as "Look what I'm doing!" when he/she wanted attention from the teacher or parent.

What were the results?

1. A group of four children (control group) who did not receive FCT showed increases in the intensity and frequency of problem behavior over time. That is, their minor problem behavior escalated into more serious problem behavior.
2. A group of four children who received FCT at the outset (intervention group) did not escalate from minor to serious problem behavior. FCT prevented the emergence of dangerous and severe problem behavior.
3. When the control group was provided with FCT, problem behavior decreased to very low levels.

What are the implications?

1. It may be possible to use FCT to “nip problem behavior in the bud.” That is, FCT may help prevent the escalation of minor problems to major ones.
2. It would be useful to explore whether the continued application of FCT procedures could produce long-term prevention since the present study was conducted for a maximum of only 6 months.

It would be worthwhile to explore whether FCT could be used to prevent the emergence of serious problem behavior motivated by other functions besides attention-seeking (e.g., escape, tangible-seeking, sensory reinforcement).

Other resources

Dunlap, G. Johnson, L. F., & Robbins, F. R. (1990). Preventing serious behavior problems through skill development and early intervention. In A. C. Repp & N. N. Singh (Eds.), Perspectives on the use of nonaversive and aversive interventions for persons with developmental disabilities (pp. 273-286). Sycamore, IL: Sycamore Publishing Co.