

Education update:

Task variation helps motivate autistic students

Autistic students learn more and are less disruptive when their tasks are varied to include both new material and material they have already mastered, according to a 1987 study by Vincent Winterling et al.

The researchers studied three autistic or autistic-like students in both single-task and varied task situations. They found that crying, aggression and other inappropriate behaviors decreased significantly during varied trial conditions, and that two of the students also improved their task performance.

Winterling and fellow researchers speculate that constant tasks "consisting of repetitive presentations of a single difficult task" are aversive to students, while varied tasks may provide a favorable ratio of easy to difficult tasks and offer more opportunity to earn reinforcements. They believe it is important to intersperse new tasks with tasks that have already been mastered, rather than just to offer a variety of new tasks.

"The influence of task variation on the aberrant behaviors of autistic students," Vincent Winterling, Glen Dunlap and Robert E. O'Neill; *Education and Treatment of Children*, Vol. 10, No. 2, May 1987, pp. 105-119. Address: Vincent Winterling or Glen Dunlap, Autism Training Center, Marshall University, Huntington, WV 25701. See also: "Using task variation to motivate handicapped students," Lee Kern Dunlap and Glen Dunlap; *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Spring 1987, pp. 16-19. (See address for Glen Dunlap above.)

Cues-pause-point technique works well with echolalics

A language training method called cues-pause-point appears to be very successful with autistic and retarded people who use echolalic, nonsensical or perseverative speech (Foxy et al., McMorrow et al.).

Cues-pause-point teaches individuals to use physical cues in their environment to answer questions, rather than using echolalia. Steps include:

- Selecting question/answer pairs to be trained (eg., "What do you use to clean your teeth?", "Toothbrush.")
- Teaching the student to label the objects which will be used in the question/answer sessions. In the case of the toothbrush, the student is taught to

respond correctly when asked "what is it?" and shown either the object or a picture of the object (or a card with the word "toothbrush" written on it).

- Training the student to remain silent before, during and briefly after the trainer asks a question. To do this, the trainer holds up his index finger midway between himself and the student when silence is required, and says "no" or "shh" if the student talks.
- Asking a question and then pointing to the object or photo which depicts the correct answer. (If the question is "what do you wear on your feet?", the trainer will point to an actual pair of shoes, a picture of shoes, or a card with the word "shoes" written on it.) If necessary, the trainer taps the correct card and says, "What is it?" to obtain the correct response.
- Covering up the correct object with a hand or a folder (while nodding or smiling to acknowledge a correct answer), raising an index finger (a prompt for the student to pause and remain silent) and asking the question again, touching the covered-up object. Correct answers are rewarded with food or other reinforcers.

The researchers report that cues-pause-point training rapidly replaced their subjects' echolalia with correct responses, and that improvement was maintained even when prompts, cues, feedback and reinforcement were either faded or eliminated. Correct responding also occurred in different settings and with different trainers. Further, the strategies the students learned in initial training sessions seemed to help them learn more quickly when new question/answer pairs were introduced.

"Cues-pause-point language training: structuring trainer statements to provide students with correct answers to questions," R. M. Foxy et al.; *Behavioral Residential Treatment*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1987, pp. 103-115.

—and—

"Some direct and generalized effects of replacing an autistic man's echolalia with correct responses to questions," M. J. McMorrow et al.; *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Fall 1986, pp. 289-297.

—and—

"Cues-pause-point language training: teaching echolalics functional use of their verbal labeling repertoires," M. J. McMorrow et al.; *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 1987, pp. 11-22.

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Simultaneous language training proves effective

Language-impaired children learn prepositions and pronouns more quickly when taught using "simultaneous communication"—a combination of spoken words and sign language—than when speech training alone is used, according to a Canadian study (Konstantareas et al.).

The 14 subjects, two of whom were autistic, acquired more new words, and also were better able to remember these words, when taught by trainers using both signs and spoken words.

Konstantareas says, "We can now consider using signs not as the main vehicle for communication but as aids to more complex speech production for those children who have useful but limited speech."

"Sign language as a communication prosthesis with language-impaired children," M. Mary Konstantareas; *Journal of Autism and Dev. Disorders*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 1984, pp. 9-25. See also: "Autistic children exposed to simultaneous communication training: a follow-up," same author, *Journal of Autism and Dev. Disorders*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1987, pp. 115-131. Address: M. Mary Konstantareas, Child and Family Studies Centre, Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, 250 College Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5T 1R8.

Offensive "stims" reduced by offering substitutes

"Determining the reinforcing aspects of self-stimulation and providing clients with similar but more appropriate sensory experiences seems to be a practical, humane way of reducing self-stimulatory behavior in community settings," according to a recent study.

This approach was used to reduce one severely retarded adult woman's rectal digging and finger-sniffing from approximately 35 incidents per day to less than one incident daily. As an alternative, staff members offered the woman scented hand lotion, perfume or sachets every 15 minutes.

"Use of similar sensory stimuli in the community-based treatment of self-stimulatory behavior in an adult disabled by autism," Marcia Datlow Smith; *Journal of Behavioral Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1986, pp. 121-125. Address: Marcia Datlow Smith, Community Services for Autistic Adults and Children, 751 Twinbrook Parkway, Rockville, Maryland 20851.