Referent-Based Instruction

In the analysis of verbal behavior, Skinner (1957) skillfully deconstructs language according to various controlling stimuli. The functional unsubstantiated (Grow & Kodak, 2010). This may be because multiple control of verbal behavior is the rule rather than independence of verbal operants has been empirically demonstrated (Hall & Sundberg, 1987), but largely the exception (Michael et al., 2011; Eikseth & Smith, 2011). For this reason, in our current paper we propose a verbal behavior curriculum based upon establishing multiple control of various referents. A referent is verbal behavior brought under the narrowing control of the relevant properties of a stimulus (after Skinner, 1953). Additional elements of contextual control of the speaker's environment serve to transform the function of the speaker's behavior. Founded on the principles of incidental teaching, referent-based instruction (RBI) is designed to promote generative language.

Referent-Based instruction (RBI) is a natural environment training (NET) model for verbal behavior instruction based in the principles of behavior analysis. RBI provides a framework for strengthening verbal behavior across four primary operants: mands, echoics, tacts, and sequels.

RBI is premised upon Drash and Tudor's model of autism as a contingency-shaped disorder of verbal behavior (2014). Consequently, in seeking to weaken autistic behaviors, our primary focus has been on strengthening verbal operants. Namely, we have identified that using referents as a hub for developing verbal behavior provides an efficient and effective method of developing a functional individualized treatment plan for the child.

Research Question:

To what extent does RBI instruction increase the verbal behavior of children with autism spectrum disorders?

Methodology:

Thirteen children received referent-based instruction at a university center for applied behavior analysis. Each participant received 90 minutes of RBI four days a week for 13 weeks. Instruction was individualized to the needs of the participant, but focused on the four primary verbal operants: mands, echoics, tacts, and sequels.

Results:

Using the Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP; Sundberg, 2008) as a pre- and post-test, we analyzed the effects of RBI. A Wilcoxon Signed-ranks test indicated that, after one semester of RBI, participants scored significantly higher on the VB-MAPP post-test (Mdn = 65.5) than when initially assessed on the VB-MAPP pre-test (Mdn = 32.5), Z = -3.18, p = .001, r = .62.

The results of this study will be discussed within the context of its limitations. Specifically, our findings suggest that referent-based teaching is an effective method for increasing the language of children with autism.