

Functional communication training and manipulation of discriminative stimuli to reduce behaviours that challenge maintained by access to routines

Cat Bradly

Executive summary

Ritualistic behaviours and routines are common in individuals with autism, and disruption of these routines can be very difficult to tolerate and may lead to behaviours that challenge. (Risplai et al, 2014) This study looks at how we are supporting a learner to identify and communicate to his staff team when there has been a disruption to his routine that he is finding difficult. In addition, it will look at other environmental adaptations that have been put in place to reduce behaviours that challenge related to routines, and how we have started to increase delay tolerance to these routines.

Introduction

The pupil in this case study is a 14-year-old male with a diagnosis of autism, learning difficulties and a complex language and communication disorder, who first started Tram House School in September 2020. He communicates using single word vocals accompanied by some signs. His last setting reported a history of high intensity behaviours that challenge, in particular related to disruptions to his routines and transitions around the school building.

Although many barriers to learning were identified during the assessment period, routines did not appear to be one of the pupil's significant barriers at that time. However, once the pupil found more activities that he was motivated by at school (cooking, making hot chocolate and going to the park) and once he started to attend academic groups, staff noticed that he had developed more routines around how these activities were completed and more behaviours that challenge when these routines were disrupted. Functional communication responses were

implemented so the pupil could express to those around him when items were missing, and manipulation of discriminative stimuli were implemented to support the pupil to access going home-time routine activities that he wanted to complete. Delay tolerance has been started for some routines and will be expanded to other routines so that the pupil can tolerate unavoidable changes in routine without aggressive behaviour.

Method

Initial analysis of incidents of behaviours that challenge (including hitting others, spitting and throwing furniture) indicated that the triggers for these incidents were when there had been a change in the pupil's routine or that he had a strong preference for the way that an activity should be run but was not able to express this. Although he would sometimes attempt to communicate by repeating the name of the activity, he was not able to identify what was wrong, and it was only after a debrief between tutors and the class supervisor after incidents that his preference could be identified. For example, an escalation had occurred when the pupil had made hot chocolate without milk, whereas usually he made it with milk. He was not able to express how he wanted this activity to be run, and so would want to keep repeating it until it was done the 'right' way. He also struggled when the hot chocolate was running low; he would refuse to participate in the activity because he did not want the hot chocolate to run out, but would then escalate because he wanted to make hot chocolate as part of his daily routine.

Multiple functional communication responses in the form of requesting milk when it was missing from the hot chocolate, and teaching the student how to ask for more hot chocolate when it was running out, were taught to support him in these situations.

The learner also liked to shower at the end of the day, having been taught how to do this independently as part of his programme. However, some days he was refusing the shower when offered, but then engaging in behaviours that challenge if he ran out of time and was not able to have a shower before going home. To support the learner with being able to complete tasks before home time, a discriminative stimulus was added. A radio call with his car number and name was provided, with a reminder to get ready for home time.

Results

The learner is now independent in using the functional communication response for 'milk'. He is still working on requesting to convey when the hot chocolate is running out, but no longer engages in behaviours that challenge in this situation. The discriminative stimuli to support his home time routine has been successful; the pupil is able to complete preferred tasks before leaving school. Figure 1 shows the decrease in behaviours that challenge related to these situations.

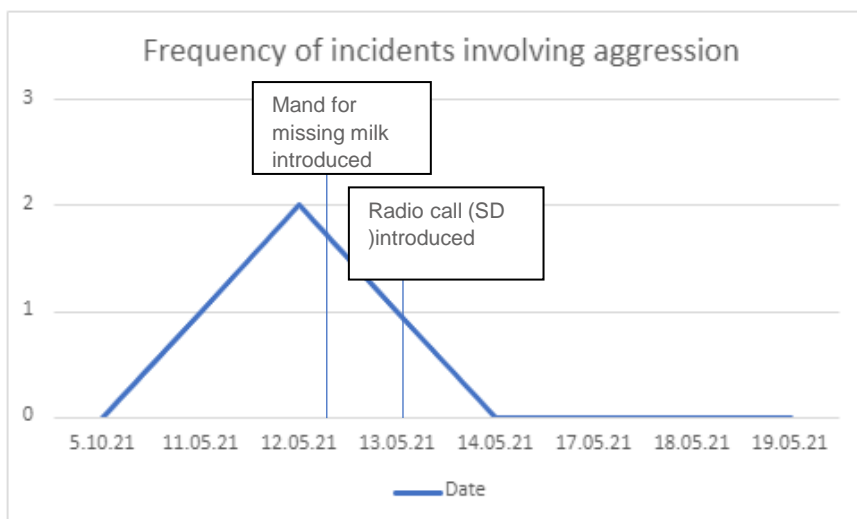
Researchers have similarly found that teaching functional communication responses for children who struggle with routines has been effective, although often a generalised request that there is something wrong with a routine has been taught rather than a specific request (Rispoli et al, 2014). This approach was not used for this pupil as he was already attempting to communicate that something was wrong with the activity before he escalated. For example, he would repeatedly say 'hot chocolate' if this activity was completed in the way he wanted it. A specific request for what was wrong with the routine seemed more appropriate for his language skills.

Similarly, to Rispoli et al, delay tolerance to routines is now being introduced. So, when the learner wants to complete an activity from his routine, small natural delays are introduced. Currently the learner is able to complete one other activity before accessing the next part of his routine.

Discussion

Supporting this pupil with this situation has been a balance between teaching him how to communicate the way he wants his day to look (and the language skills he needs to convey this to those around him) and teaching him to tolerate delays and changes to his routine. Tolerating changes to his routine without engaging in high intensity behaviours that challenge will be an important life skill for him but needs to be approached carefully by introducing changes to routines in small, manageable steps.

Figure 1



References

Rispoli, M. Camargo, S. Machalicek, W. Lang, R & Sigafoos, J. (2014) Functional Communication Training in the Treatment of Problem Behavior Maintained by Access to Rituals. *JABA*: 47 (3): 580-593