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Intervention for tact as reporting in children with autism

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Abstract

Many children with autism have severe difficulty in ‘reporting’ on events at schools to mothers at home despite their ability to tact some objects and actions in discrete trial setting. Many studies have attempted to establish tact as labeling in children with autism. Few studies, however, have attempted to establish tact as a functional communication skill. The conditions under which children with autism acquired tact regarding objects and events that are remote in time and space from the listener was investigated in three children with autism. A multiple-baseline design was implemented to evaluate intervention effects. Animated cartoons or still pictures were used as stimuli and the children were required to walk to see a stimulus, observe it, walk back to an adult listener, and tact what they had seen. In the baseline condition, no participants were able to sufficiently tact after moving 1-m from the stimulus. Then tacting was trained using vocal prompts. Through this procedure, all children acquired tact for untrained events that were remote in time and space from their mothers.

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Children with autism are known to have severe difficulties in communication (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Previous studies have suggested that many children with autism frequently demonstrate stereotypic and repetitive use of language and have difficulties in using language for functional social communication (Tager-Flusberg, Paul, & Lord, 2005; Wetherby & Prutting, 1984).

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Skinner (1957) in his analysis of verbal behavior has classified these behaviors into six core classes, mand, tact, echoic, textual, intraverbal, and autoclitic. A mand is defined as a verbal operant in which the response is evoked by a specific establishing operation and reinforced by a characteristic consequence (Skinner, 1957). Many studies have been conducted for establishing mands in children with autism (Duker, Dortmans, & Lodder, 1993; Hartman & Klatt, 2005; Yamamoto & Mochizuki, 1988). Tact is a verbal operant in which a given response form is evoked (or at least strengthened) by a particular object or event or a property of an object or event (Skinner, 1957). Recently, many studies have focused on establishing tact in children with autism (Nuzzolo-Gomez & Greer, 2004; Partington, Sundberg, Newhouse, & Spengler, 1994; Sundberg, Endicott, & Eigenheer, 2000). For example, Partington et al. (1994) used procedures to transfer stimulus control from verbal stimuli to nonverbal stimuli in a 6-year-old girl with autism. She quickly learned to tact 18 target objects and pictures of objects such as ‘cup’, ‘flower’, ‘car’ and so on. In addition, Nuzzolo-Gomez and Greer (2004) examined the effects of multiple exemplar instruction (MEI) on the emergence of untaught mands or tacts of adjective–object pairs in four students with autism. Alternating mand and tact training conditions resulted in the emergence of untaught mands or tacts. These intervention studies have examined the effects of tact training on acquisition of labeling (Nuzzolo-Gomez & Greer, 2004; Partington et al., 1994; Sundberg et al., 2000). The studies were significant because they were able to develop verbal skills in children with autism. However, only a few studies have attempted to establish tact as a functional communication skill in daily life. Moreover the generalization of tact to more natural setting has rarely been assessed.

‘Tact’ in everyday life situation is not just simple labeling, but also includes functional communication such as ‘describing and ‘reporting’ (Fushimi, 1997).

There are some differences between simple labeling and reporting. In antecedents of a behavior and a listener’s condition, the stimulus, which the tact specifies is not directly accessible to the listener in reporting, whereas the tacted stimulus and a listener are simultaneously present in labeling (Inoue, 2001). With regard to the consequence of the behavior, in the case of reporting, the verbal behavior is reinforced regardless of whether the referent of tact is consistent with the antecedent condition, whereas in labeling the verbal response is reinforced when it corresponds to the antecedent stimuli (Inoue, 2001).

Many children with autism who have some verbal ability demonstrate deficits in the ability to report on events at schools to mothers at home, despite their ability to mand and tact certain objects and actions in discrete trial setting. In typical development, talk about events that are remote in time and space emerge from about 3 to 4 years of age (Tager-Flusberg et al., 2005). It is known that talking about a child’s shared or unshared past experiences with another individual leads to the development of autobiographical memory and social sharing of experiences and emotions. It might also contribute to stable mother–child interactions and interactions with peers (Fivush, 1988; Nelson, 1992, 1993; Tessler & Nelson, 1994).

Intervention strategies are needed for teaching tacts as a functional communication skill. However, few studies have directly targeting tacts as reporting (Yamamoto, 1997). Yamamoto (1997) trained two children with autism (7 years and 2 months and 7 years and 5 months of age) to walk to a sample stimulus, observe it, walk back to an adult listener and tact it to the listener by using an appropriate “subject, particle, object, verb” sentence.

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