



Effects of a brief staff training procedure on instructors' use of incidental teaching and students' frequency of initiation toward instructors

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Abstract

Incidental teaching is a technique that is used to increase the spontaneous use of language. This study evaluated effects of a brief staff training procedures on instructors' incidental teaching responses and on student initiations. In three experiments, instructors of children with autism participated in individual or group training sessions under multiple baseline designs. In Experiment 1, three instructors were provided with multiple individualized training sessions that continued until instructors met a performance criterion during subsequent teaching sessions. In Experiment 2, groups of three instructors were provided with a single, 20-min one-to-one training session. Experiment 3 was a large-scale replication of Experiment 2 in which training was presented in a large group. Thus, across experiments, brief staff training in incidental teaching was conducted in a decreasingly individualized manner. Following staff training, there was a systematic increase in the occurrence of incidental teaching responses and of student initiations in each experiment. The findings suggest that brief training is a valid initial step toward improving the likelihood of incidental teaching and level of student initiation. The consistently positive initial effects of training warrant further research to identify methods to increase the magnitude and durability of training effects under such brief staff training procedures.

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Three experiments on the effects of brief staff training for use of incidental teaching with students with autism are reported. Incidental teaching is an applied behavior analytic teaching technique that occurs in the context of interactions between two people. An incidental teaching episode begins with an initiation by the first person (the student) who specifies a reinforcer; the

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second person prompts for a language form from the first person and differentially reinforces that language form by delivery of the reinforcer previously specified by the first person (Cavallaro & Poulson, 1985). Incidental teaching is also one component of naturalistic language training (Hart, 1985; Odom & Haring, 1994; Warren & Gazdag, 1990). Incidental teaching has been used to increase pre-existing language use in economically disadvantaged students (Hart & Risley, 1974, 1975, 1980, 2000), to promote generalization of language from one-to-one training situations to play settings in students with moderate and severe handicaps (Rogers-Warren & Warren, 1980), to teach novel language forms to students with moderate or severe handicaps (Cavallaro & Poulson, 1985), to increase language use by adults in group homes using their peers with disabilities as instructors (Farmer-Dougan, 1994) and to encourage preschoolers with autism in their preschool classrooms (McGee, Almeida, Sulzer-Azaroff, & Feldman, 1992).

An advantage of incidental teaching is its portability. Incidental teaching can be used in virtually any situation – structured or unstructured – when speaking is an appropriate response. It can, and should be used by individuals who come into contact with students with language delays. This aspect of incidental teaching presents a substantial staff training burden, both because many staff members must be trained and because incidental teaching requires considerably greater stimulus and response generalization of staff performance than is the case for discrete-trial teaching, for example.

The need for such training is further indicated by the increased prevalence of autism, the increase in services, such as early intervention and special education services for students with these disorders, and the large numbers of instructional staff and family members now involved in such services (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Herbert, Sharp, & Gaudiano, 2002; Kaye, Melero-Montes, & Jick, 2001; Lovaas, 1987; Volkmar, Szatmari, & Sparrow, 1993; Yeargin-Allsopp et al., 2003).

Two studies have addressed the issue of effectively training instructors to implement incidental teaching procedures (MacDuff, Krantz, MacDuff, & McClannahan, 1988; Schepis et al., 1982). Schepis et al. (1982) demonstrated increased use sign language in children with mental retardation and children with autism with a training program for instructors that had been previously trained in the general use of incidental teaching. The program consisted of explaining incidental teaching to the instructors, daily modeling, giving them regular feedback on their performance, and making the criteria and setting for performance of incidental teaching specific. Schepis et al. (1982) did not directly measure the incidental teaching behavior of the instructors, therefore it is unclear if the skills taught in the training were learned and if it was related to the changes in behavior of the children. MacDuff et al. (1988) demonstrated increased use of incidental teaching in preset environments from instructors with no prior training in incidental teaching. The method used by MacDuff et al. was the following: explaining the procedure to the instructors, providing examples of how to use incidental teaching and requesting a written example of how to use incidental teaching in a variety of situations. MacDuff et al. (1988) did not measure student behavior. Although previous experiments have demonstrated the effectiveness of incidental teaching in increasing language in children with disabilities (Cavallaro & Poulson, 1985), the lack of evidence in this experiment does leave the possibility that the training procedure was ultimately ineffective in changing the student's behavior. Furthermore, MacDuff et al. (1988) measured behavior in a one-on-one setting outside of the student's typical environment.

In the present report, we describe the effects of brief procedures to train staff to use incidental teaching with students with autism in classroom settings. Because incidental teaching can effectively provide learning opportunities in all contexts of students' daily school activities, it is

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