

*EFFECTS OF CHOOSING ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENTS ON
A STUDENT WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT
HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER*

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The effects of choosing academic assignments on the undesirable behaviors manifested by a second-grade student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder were analyzed. This study extended Dunlap et al.'s (1994) research on choice making as a form of antecedent control. A reversal design showed that undesirable behaviors decreased when the student was given a choice of academic assignments.

DESCRIPTORS: antecedent control, behavior management, classroom management

Classrooms have been identified as being problematic settings for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (DuPaul, 1991). In response, this study extended the research on antecedent control reported by Dunlap et al. (1994). The first extension involved the participant, a second-grade student with ADHD, who had not been identified as having special education needs and received all instruction in a general education class. Second, the researchers were assigned as permanent staff members to the school in which the study occurred. The third extension was that this project studied the effects of choice in isolation and did not incorporate other behavioral management programs.

METHOD

Evan was a 7-year-old boy who had been diagnosed with ADHD by a pediatrician and received 15 mg of Ritalin® per day. Pri-

or to this study, his teacher described the majority of his behaviors as undesirable. It was further stated that Evan had poor peer relations and did not understand second-grade work.

This study was conducted in Evan's classroom. Observations were taken during language arts instruction between 1:30 and 2:00 p.m., when Evan's undesirable behaviors were reported to be the most severe. During observations, the teacher and one or two observers were present in the classroom, which had an average attendance of 23 students. The dependent variable, undesirable behavior, was defined in a manner similar to Dunlap et al. (1994). For Evan, undesirable behavior included noncompliance, being away from his desk, disturbing others, staring off, and not doing work. Data were collected on the occurrence of interactions between Evan and his teacher.

Observations were cued by a tape recorder, using a 10-s momentary time-sampling recording method. The observers were a school psychologist and an educational assistant. Before the study began, observer training was held in the classroom in which the observations were to take place until interobserver agreement exceeded 80%. Interobserver agreement was assessed during 14 of the 20 (70%) observation sessions. Agree-

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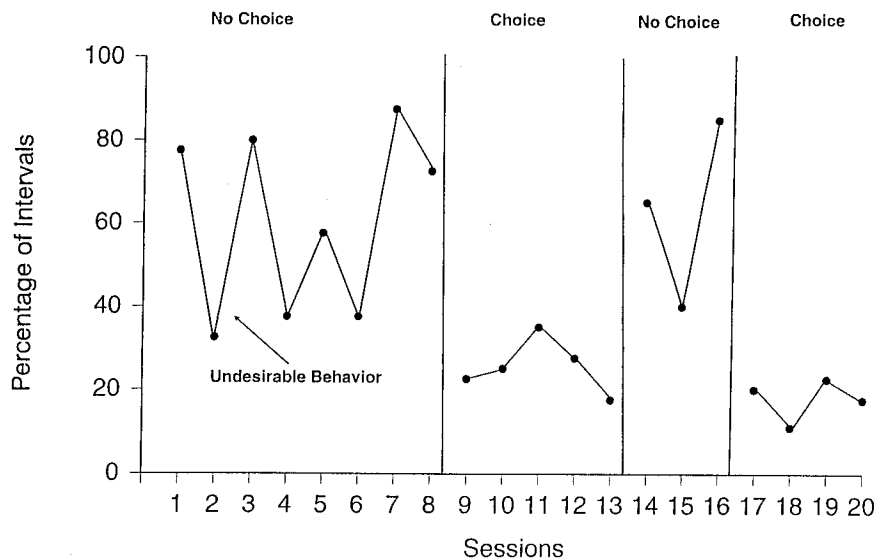


Figure 1. Percentage of intervals rated as containing undesirable behaviors across conditions.

ment data were obtained using an interobserver percentage agreement index that averaged 92.6% (range, 85% to 100%) during the entire study.

For both the choice and no-choice conditions, Evan's classroom assignments were given by the teacher. During data collection in the baseline no-choice phases, Evan was directed to work on the same assignment as the rest of the class. During the choice phases, the teacher presented Evan with three different language arts assignments taken from the class curriculum, and he chose one to complete. The assignment choices were identical in length and difficulty. They varied in content (e.g., spelling lists, silent reading assignments, grammar and punctuation exercises, etc.) because they were taken from the language arts assignments the class was completing. In addition, the assignment choices varied, and Evan was not given the same choice of assignments twice.

An ABAB design was used to evaluate the effects of choice making on Evan's undesirable behavior. During the no-choice condition, Evan was not given a choice of academic assignments. During the choice condition,

he was allowed to choose his assignments. Prior to the study's last phase in which Evan chose his assignments, his teacher was informed of the results of the data collection. Therefore, the final phase represented informed choice, because his teacher was made aware of the intervention's results prior to the observation sessions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in Figure 1 and are similar to those reported by Dunlap et al. (1994) with children with emotional disorders. Compared to no-choice conditions, Evan's levels of undesirable behaviors decreased during choice conditions. Comparable to the levels of teacher interactions reported by Dunlap et al. (1994), levels of direct teacher interactions were infrequent and varied slightly across treatment conditions. The percentage of intervals rated as direct teacher interaction averaged 5% during the no-choice phases and 9% during the choice phases.

This study adds to the growing body of literature supporting the efficacy of choice

making as an antecedent control technique. First, the student in this study had been diagnosed with ADHD; however, he was not receiving instruction in a special education classroom. These results suggest that choice procedures may be helpful to educators in managing the behaviors of students in general education classrooms. Second, the study was performed by staff members who were permanently assigned to the school without additional researcher involvement. This suggests that this intervention could be implemented in public schools without requiring much modification to ongoing instruction. Third, this investigation proceeded in isolation because no extra behavior management programs (other than Ritalin) were used during the study. Therefore, allowing students a choice of academic assignments as an antecedent control technique may be both effective and efficient for reducing undesirable behavior.

One practical limitation of allowing students to choose their assignments is the importance of ensuring that the available selections are within acceptable standards (Shapiro & Cole, 1994). To be effective, the choices that students are offered must be ap-

propriate for the setting in which antecedent control programs are used. Prior to determining if this intervention can be generalized to other general education students with ADHD, it needs to be replicated. Future research in this area should incorporate the level of student achievement, which was not measured and was a limitation in this study. In addition, the methods that extended the original work deserve further research attention (e.g., the degree to which this approach can be used in regular classroom settings).

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