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# A Brief Method for Conducting a Negative-Reinforcement Assessment

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*A brief negative-reinforcement assessment was conducted with developmentally disabled children with severe destructive behavior. Five children were trained to engage in a simple escape response (e.g., a hand clap). Then each child was presented with a variety of stimuli or tasks that ranged on a scale from preferred to nonpreferred, based on parent ranking. The participant received a brief break from the stimuli or task, contingent on each escape response. For one child, an avoidance contingency was also implemented in which he could engage in the response to avoid the presentation of stimuli. Results showed that for each child, several stimuli were identified that may serve as effective negative reinforcers. Results also indicated that the procedure did not elicit any negative side effects for four children and low rates of destructive behavior for the fifth child. For one child, the results of the negative-reinforcement assessment were used to develop an effective treatment for destructive behavior. Additional applications of the reinforcement assessment to treatment interventions is discussed, as well as limitations to the procedure. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd*

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Previous research has shown that conducting reinforcer assessments may increase treatment efficacy with developmentally disabled individuals by motivating either the absence of destructive behavior or reinforcing an alternative, appropriate behavior (e.g., Piazza, Fisher, Hanley, Hilker, & Derby, 1996; Ringdahl, Vollmer, Marcus, & Roane, 1997). Currently, reinforcer assessments include primarily positive reinforcers in the form of social and tangible items that have shown to be effective in increasing targeted behavior (e.g., Fisher, Piazza, Bowman, Hagopian, Owens, & Slevin, 1992; Pace, Ivancic, Edwards, Iwata, & Page, 1985). However, nonpreferred events are common occurrences in the daily routine of most individuals, including those with developmental disabilities, and these events could affect the acquisition and maintenance of destructive behavior (Iwata, 1987). That is, nonpreferred activities may evoke a client's destructive behavior, which in turn may motivate parents or teachers to avoid or terminate these activities, and thus negatively reinforce the destructive behavior. This hypothesis is supported by the results of an epidemiologic analysis conducted by Iwata et al. (1994a), which identified that negative reinforcement (i.e., escape from instructions) served as the most common variable maintaining self-injurious behavior in 152 individuals.

In addition to the role negative reinforcement can play in maintaining destructive behavior, several studies have shown how negative reinforcement can be used to shape and maintain appropriate, alternative behavior. For example, negative reinforcement can be used during functional communication training with individuals who exhibit escape-maintained destructive behavior (e.g., Bird, Dores, Moniz, & Robinson, 1989; Carr & Durand, 1985; Wacker et al., 1990). Fisher et al. (1993) trained participants, whose destructive behavior was maintained by escape from instructions, to use a communication response to escape from difficult tasks. Other studies have shown that negative reinforcement, in the form of a brief escape contingent on compliance, can be used to decrease noncompliance and other destructive behaviors (e.g., Marcus & Vollmer, 1995; Zarcone, Fisher, & Piazza, 1996).

Given the likelihood that individuals may exhibit both appropriate and destructive behavior to escape or avoid events that are nonpreferred, it would be important to identify those stimuli empirically so that they can be manipulated therapeutically. One method is to identify nonpreferred events or stimuli during an experimental functional analysis, specifically during the escape or demand condition (Iwata, Dorsey, Slifer, Bauman, & Richman, 1982/1994b). In this condition, academic, vocational, or self-care demands are presented and escape is provided contingent on destructive behavior. During the course of a functional analysis, specific demands that consistently produce destructive behavior could be identified and assessed directly as part of a negative reinforcer assessment. However, the demand condition of the functional analysis primarily assesses the role of self-care, academic, and vocational tasks only. Other stimuli, such as crowded conditions,

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