Accepting “No” Teaching Protocol

WHAT IS IT?

Teaching a student to accept being told “no” serves as a Functionally Equivalent Replacement Behavior (FERB) for problem behavior maintained by escape of demands. The goal is to replace maladaptive responses when told “no” with a socially acceptable alternative, such as saying “okay” or offering a fist bump, which can be prompted and reinforced to support regulation and continued engagement. The learner is taught to tolerate being denied access to something without engaging in challenging behavior.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Teaching an appropriate way to tolerate being told “no” replaces challenging escape-maintained behaviors with functional communication. This increases independent communication, reduces frustration, and improves social interactions. When the learner uses a socially acceptable tolerance response, problem behaviors maintained by escape are less likely to occur.

WHEN DO I USE IT?

This protocol is designed for students whose challenging behavior is maintained by access to desired items, attention, or activities, which may be inadvertently reinforced when others attempt to avoid or de-escalate problem behavior. The protocol should be implemented when the student is calm, regulated, and ready to learn—not during episodes of challenging behavior. Before using this protocol, teach the student how to ask for what they want without engaging in problem behavior through Functional Communication Training.

HOW DO I IMPLEMENT IT?

1. **Ensure the student can request for preferred items and confirm that the challenging behavior functions as escape** before using this strategy.
2. **Identify and define the problem behavior** that will not be reinforced during the session (ie: saying no, aggression, elopement).
3. **Wait for a natural opportunity** when the student requests something. Begin by **denying access** to a moderately preferred item. After the request, say “Not right now” **and offer a higher-value alternative** to increase acceptance.
4. **Immediately prompt the expected toleration response** (ie: say “ok”, point to “ok” icon or AAC button, give a high five) using an identified prompt hierarchy.
5. **If the student stays calm**, immediately provide specific praise and give access to the alternative **(**e.g., “Great job saying okay! You can have…”).
6. **If the student is not calm**, give empathy, repeat the denial, and prompt the tolerance response. When they engage in the tolerance response, give specific praise but do not provide access to the denied item.

7. **If the student is still not calm after the 2nd trial**, offer empathy, end the trial, and transition to the next activity.
8. **Collect data** to know when to fade to more natural conditions.
   Suggested Fading Plan:
   -Deny a reinforcing item while offering an alternative that is somewhat equal in value for 100% of trials
   -Deny a reinforcing item while offering a less reinforcing alternative for 100% of trials
   -Deny a reinforcing item while offering a less reinforcing alternative for 80% of trials
   -Deny a reinforcing item while offering a less reinforcing alternative for 50% of trials
   -Deny a reinforcing item while offering a less reinforcing alternative for 30% of trials
   -Deny a reinforcing item while offering a less reinforcing alternative for 10% of trials
9. **Train staff** on fidelity of implementation to ensure implementation is as trained.

QR CODES FOR MORE LEARNING

Video Instructions

Blog & Video

Visual/Social Story

REFERENCES

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