

*EVALUATING A MORE COST-EFFICIENT ALTERNATIVE TO
PROVIDING IN-HOME FEEDBACK TO PARENTS:
THE USE OF SPOUSAL FEEDBACK*

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We evaluated the contribution of spousal feedback to a parent education curriculum designed for parents of children with autism. A modified multiple baseline design across 3 husband-and-wife dyads was used to examine the effects of teaching parents to give each other feedback on their teaching performance. For 5 of 6 participants, improvement in teaching performance occurred following didactic presentations. However, additional improvement was observed for 5 participants when the spousal feedback component was implemented.

DESCRIPTORS: parent training, parent education, autism, feedback, teaching skills

Research in the area of staff training has suggested that didactic training, when not supported by other training interventions, is typically not sufficient to achieve durable and generalized improvements in performance (Ziarnik & Bernstein, 1982). As with training of professional staff, changes in the performance of family members who participate in parent education programs should not be expected without provisions for in-home feedback and reinforcement. However, providing ongoing feedback to families in their homes can be a costly endeavor. It is therefore important to identify and evaluate techniques that are more economical to implement. The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the contribution of spousal feedback to a parent education curriculum.

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The curriculum itself consisted of instruction in behavior analysis skills with practice applying the skills to specific situations in the home (Koegel, Glahn, & Nieminen, 1978; Moran & Whitman, 1991).

METHOD

Participants

Three husband-and-wife dyads agreed to participate after reviewing and signing an informed consent sheet. The following criteria were used to select participants: (a) The family had not previously received systematic in-home training, and (b) both the husband and the wife had already agreed to participate in a general parent education curriculum and were attending group sessions. Participants in the general curriculum were those who had responded to a letter offering the training that was sent to all parents of children in the public school program for children with autism. The target children in all three families were male and ranged in

age from 2 years 9 months to 3 years 8 months at the start of the program.

Measurement and Observation

To evaluate the performance of the participants, an “effective teaching” checklist of 11 steps was developed based upon topics covered within the first four instructional units (available from the first author). Each step was scored as to whether it was correctly implemented (yes or no). If the step was not performed, but should have been, it was scored as incorrect. If a step was not performed but was not necessary (e.g., the child did not display any problem behavior), it was scored as not applicable.

Checklist data were collected in the participants’ homes at least twice per month by trained observers. Observations occurred for 1 to 3 weeks following each large-group presentation. Interobserver agreement checks were conducted on 35% of the sessions and averaged 82% (range, 69% to 100%). Treatment integrity data were collected on whether parents followed the four-step feedback checklist. Integrity checks occurred during 58% of sessions in the spousal feedback and maintenance conditions. Parents correctly implemented an average of 86.3% of the feedback steps (range, 25% to 100%).

Experimental Design and Procedure

Although the first independent variable was introduced simultaneously for all participants, the introduction of the other conditions was staggered across time. Therefore, a modified multiple baseline design was used to assess the effects of the monthly didactic presentations and the spousal feedback training on the performance of the participants. Curriculum components included monthly group presentations, including lectures and demonstrations, on a particular topic (e.g., use of reinforcement, prompting procedures) followed by small-group discussions. Each meeting concluded with an assignment for

parents to carry out at home with their child. Parents selected the skills they taught their child, in consultation with their parent trainer. Thus, although the parents were taught a uniform set of skills, the application of these skills was individualized for each family. The curriculum also regularly included home visits, during which staff members observed parents’ implementation of the skills with their children and gave them feedback. This component was altered for parents in the spousal feedback study to include training on how to deliver feedback effectively to their spouses (in lieu of receiving specific feedback from staff).

Baseline consisted of observations of parents teaching their children at home. Observers provided parents with general feedback (e.g., “nice job” or “you’re doing fine”), but no specific feedback related to their teaching performances was given. The presentations condition began with the onset of the instructional units. As in baseline and all other subsequent experimental conditions, no feedback specific to teaching performance was delivered to the participants. However, staff members continued to respond to questions asked by the parents during the group meetings. The spousal feedback condition began when participants were trained by the experimenters to give their spouses performance feedback. Training occurred in the participants’ homes and included modeling, task clarification (in the form of a feedback checklist), and praise. The following steps were taught regarding delivery of feedback (adapted from Daniels & Rosen, 1988): (a) Be positive, (b) be specific, (c) use visual mediators, and (d) be immediate. Each participant was also instructed to avoid interrupting his or her spouse when he or she was delivering feedback and not to disagree with the content of the feedback. Training averaged 1 hr in duration and concluded for each parent dyad when both participants successfully completed at least three of the four feedback steps

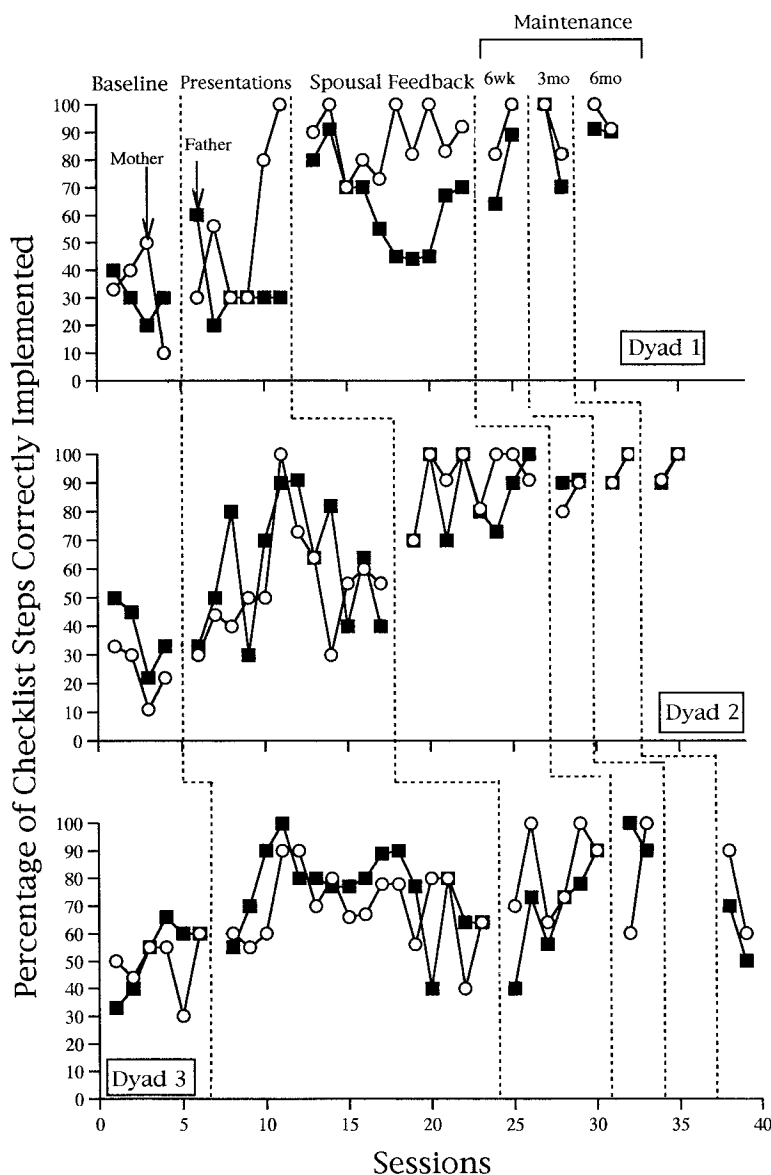


Figure 1. Percentage of effective teaching checklist steps correctly implemented by parents.

across three consecutive practice observations. Upon completion of training, participants were encouraged to use spousal feedback after each teaching session. The trainers commented on the participants' effectiveness when delivering feedback only during the first visit after training. Maintenance probes were collected at the end of the curriculum in the same manner as in baseline. These probes were scheduled at 6-week, 3-month,

and 6-month intervals following completion of the curriculum (with no data collected during the 3-month interval for Parent Dyad 3 because of scheduling conflicts).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in Figure 1, 5 parents demonstrated an increase in the percentage of

teaching steps correctly implemented. However, for 4 participants, initial improvements in performance were not sustained.

The introduction of the spousal feedback condition was associated with additional increases in average performance for 5 of the 6 participants compared to the previous condition. In Parent Dyad 1, average performances increased from 54% to 87% for the mother and from 34% to 64% for the father. Averages in Parent Dyad 2 increased from 54% and 62% during the presentations to 92% and 86% following the spousal feedback training for the mother and father, respectively. For the mother in Parent Dyad 3, an increase from 69% to 82% occurred, whereas the father's average performance decreased from 76% to 67%. However, an increasing trend was observed throughout the spousal feedback condition for the father.

Results of the maintenance probes suggested improved or sustained performance for 5 of the 6 parents. The parent dyad (Parent Dyad 2) who possessed the highest average percentage during spousal feedback and maintenance conditions also was the most proficient in delivering feedback to their spouses. Conversely, Parent Dyad 3 had the lowest average teaching performance and was the least effective in implementing the feedback steps.

It must be noted that the design of this study does not eliminate the possibility of an order effect and that the data were collected by the parent trainers themselves, who were not naive to the hypotheses of the

study and the conditions. The data suggest, however, that spousal feedback may hold promise as a cost-efficient alternative to staff feedback provided in the home. One advantage over staff feedback is that parents have more naturally occurring opportunities to observe and give each other feedback than even the most ambitious home visit schedule can provide. Naturally occurring feedback may not necessarily be constructive, but the feedback training we provided may help to ameliorate this possibility and help parents to give feedback in a more constructive manner. Further studies might evaluate a program in which staff members would initially provide the feedback, thus modeling it, and then train the parents to assume this responsibility.

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