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*Journal of Early Intervention* 2000; 23; 22
DOI: 10.1177/10538151000230010601

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Further Consideration of the Role of the Environment on Stereotypic and Self-Injurious Behavior

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Gershon Berkson and Megan Tupa have provided a comprehensive review about the causes or functions of self-injurious and self-stimulatory behavior. Throughout the paper, the authors have offered an important perspective about the developmental sequences that these behaviors often follow in young children. Although the authors note the relation between aspects of the environment and the production of these challenging behaviors, they do not address specifically research that supports this notion. We agree that many children engage in SIB and self-stimulatory behaviors during their early years. We also believe, however, that the literature offers plausible reasons why some children continue to engage in these behaviors whereas others appear to outgrow them.

Berkson and Tupa devote one paragraph of their review to the importance of functional behavioral assessment (FBA; O’Neill, Horner, Albin, Storey, & Sprague, 1997). They call it a new and exciting approach, but in reality there is a fairly substantial and growing body of literature that indicates both the effectiveness and importance of FBA. Researchers and educators have used FBA not only to help determine the specific reinforcers of a particular behavior but to design interventions that address both the form and the function of the behavior. Using FBA procedures to assess SIB and self-stimulatory behaviors allows us better to identify the environmental factors that appear to influence the occurrence of these behaviors. It also allows the interventionist to look concurrently at differentiating controlling variables (i.e., do social or nonsocial forms of reinforcement, or both, maintain the behavior?). Clearly, some aspects of challenging behavior are influenced by biological or internal drives that emanate from within the individual.

Unfortunately, educators and parents tend to focus more on the possibility of internally driven stimuli than on the possibility that these behaviors are influenced by attention, escape, or access to tangible objects or activities. Even the authors seem to focus on internally motivating reinforcement as the primary cause of stereotypic and self-injurious behavior. They describe patterns of use that make an environmentally precipitated explanation difficult. It is plausible, however, that caregivers actually reinforce self-stimulatory behavior or SIB by failing to recognize other, less dangerous and previously occurring topographies of the behavior. For example, at several points in the article, the authors described social deprivation as being associated with emission of the challenging behaviors. This general point might suggest that the delivery of social stimulation at critical times would serve a preventative function. In other words, social stimuli delivered contingently on behavior other than challenging behavior might decelerate the challenging behavior. The caregiver in effect is shaping the topography of challenging behavior by reinforcing alternate forms.

In the infant literature, the term “fake cry-
McEvoy & Reichle

Summary

Berkson and Tupa have provided a catalyst to inspire further consideration of social antecedents and consequences for self-stimulatory behavior and SIB. Clearly, some challenging behaviors are intrinsically motivated. We have, though, observed many instances where caregivers actually increase their occurrence by providing attention or negative reinforcement (allowing escape from ongoing activity contingent on self-injury) after a behavior occurs. What the field does not need is to debate whether challenging behavior is intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. What it does need is a continued emphasis on assessments that allow caregivers to analyze both the internal and external motivations of a challenging behavior. This, in turn, may help caregivers identify clearly the precursors to self-stimulatory behavior and SIB and, when appropriate, design interventions that address the social functions of these behaviors.

REFERENCES


Mary McEvoy is Professor of Educational Psychology. Joe Reichle is Professor of Communications Disorders.

The authors wish to thank Shelley Neilsen and Karen Anderson for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.

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