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CHILDREN'S NONCOMPLIANCE, INEFFECTIVE PARENTAL
STRATEGIES, AND THERAPEUTIC SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

On the basis of the existing research, this article will review the noncompliant behaviors of preschool children. Noncompliance to parental requests is one of the most common problem behaviors of preschoolers; it tends to be chronic and to appear in numerous situations throughout the day and significantly affects parent-child relationships. Coping with children's noncompliance on a daily basis may lead to parental frustration and burnout that often trigger ill-advised parental strategies that may actually have the long-term effect of increasing and preserving the noncompliant behaviors of the child. The study presents two ineffective parental strategies: the use of bribery or benefits (treats) and the use of threats with punishment (tricks), in an effort to gain the child's cooperation. Behavioral training programs for parents are implemented in order to address the difficulty parents experience in achieving compliance. Such programs are based on the principles of applied behavior analysis. According to this approach, parents, as significant agents of socialization, have a substantial effect on teaching and shaping the various behaviors of their children. This article will describe how children's noncompliant behavior is analyzed with the applied behavior analysis approach, in the context of ineffective strategies used by parents in response to a child's refusal. Our contribution to the analysis of parent-child relationships and the proposed parental training program can be a resource for practitioners interested in developing their ability to provide guidance to parents in a precise, tailor-made, and effective form.

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1. Introduction

The ability to set limits and boundaries on children's behaviors is considered one of the most challenging practices for parents (Taffel, 2012), and parents indeed report that they feel they do not have sufficient knowledge in order to guide their decisions and parental behaviors, especially when it comes to discipline (Bethell, Peck, & Schor, 2001). Omer (2000) defined parental authority as the ability to establish rules and values for the child and to prevent all actions that might harm them. Continual discipline problems may lead to three types of unwanted parental tactics: (a) complementary escalation, in which parents give-in to child demands and refusal (Baumrind, 1991), (b) reciprocal escalation, in which parents tend to react punitively or violently towards the child (Forgatch, 1991), and (c) parental oscillation between impulsiveness and submission (Chamberlain & Patterson, 1995). Inconsistency in parenting, particularly inconsistency in discipline practices, has been linked to children problem behaviors (Pederson & Fite, 2014). The current article aims to present a successful behavioral parent training program based on Applied Behavior Analysis. For this purpose, the article will explain these concepts and demonstrate their use in the case of two common, ineffective parental strategies called here “trick or treat”, meaning bribes or threats. We will begin with a general discussion of the issue of child noncompliance.

1.1. Children's Noncompliance

Noncompliance is defined as doing anything other than what has been requested by a parent or other adult authority figure within a specific time frame (Kalb & Loeber, 2003). Wilder, Allison, Nicholson, Abellon, and Saulnier (2010) defined noncompliance as a low level of following instructions that are in the individual's response repertoire. The child's ability to regulate his behavior and to conform to the caregivers' demands increases during the second and third years of life. Also, the behavioral expression of noncompliance may change during this period and can be presented by the child in different response topographies. Children develop a sense of autonomy that can be manifested through a period of negativity or increased resistance to parental control. Even if it is suggested that negativity decreases after the third year in a child's life (Kuczynski, Kochanska, Radke-Yarrow & Girmius-Brown, 1987), the interaction between respect of authority and resistance to external control represents a continuous theme of parent-child interaction. Indeed, all children are noncompliant at times; however, researchers and parents are most concerned with what has been termed persistent or chronic noncompliance, which is correlated with a number of psychiatric diagnoses later in life (Kalb & Loeber, 2003). Persistent noncompliance has been consistently rated as a primary reason for referral by parents who seek outpatient behavioral or mental health services (Forehand, 1981), and for impairing child-adult relations (Kalb & Loeber, 2003), as well as contributing to maternal depression (Gross, Shaw, Burwell, & Nagin, 2009) and parent stress levels among foster parents and consequently to foster care displacement (White et al., 2019). Researchers have experimentally investigated noncompliance and found that noncompliance often begins at an early age and frequently in the home environment (Hester & Kaiser, 1998; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Families of children who are noncompliant often provide inappropriate and inconsistent discipline and poor monitoring of the child's behavior (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991; Reid & Eddy, 1997; Wierson & Forehand, 1994), thus inadvertently modeling and encouraging antisocial behaviors (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Noncompliant behaviors can vary in their style, and can be grouped into

four types: (a) passive noncompliance, which occurs when the child ignores the parental instruction or request, (b) simple refusal, which occurs when the child refuses to comply with the parental request, without exhibiting anger or hostility, (c) negotiation, which occurs when the child attempts to compromise with the parental request, to offer alternatives or bargain, and (d) direct defiance, which occurs when the child expresses overt resistance, anger, hostility, or aggression (Kochanska & Aksan, 1995).

1.2. Trick or Treat? An Analysis of Two Parental Strategies

There are two specific parental strategies that are widely used by parents as a response to their children's noncompliance (Kavurma et al., 2018). Both parental responses aim to reverse the children's noncompliance by convincing the children to comply with their original parental requests or instructions after all. The first parental strategy is offering benefits or bribes ("treats"): A parent whose request was refused by the child (with one or more response topographies of refusal) offers the child benefits in order to convince him to comply due to the reinforcers that are promised (e.g., "If you'll go to the shower you will get extra TV time" or "If you'll sit down and do your homework I will sit with you and help you"). The second parental strategy is threatening the child with punishment ("tricks"): A parent whose request was refused by the child threatens the child with a punitive result should the noncompliance continue. By explaining the risk of punishment, the parent wishes to convince the child to comply in order to avoid the aversive consequence (e.g., "If you don't turn off the computer now, you will not get access to it for the next week" or "If you won't eat the salad, you will not get desert"). Both of the described strategies can be very effective in producing compliance. Offering benefits and rewards can serve as an establishing operation (EO), meaning it increases the frequency of behavior that has been reinforced in the past by the benefit or reward that was offered (Cooper, 2007b). The problem will be that the behavior being reinforced by this positive reinforcement will be the noncompliant behavior, since the reward was offered immediately after it. In other words, parents tend to *not* reward compliance to their original request but to reward compliant behaviors that were presented after bribing the children (offering them rewards). Thus, the behavior that is being reinforced and that consequently will be learned and shaped and continue to appear in the future is refusal of the original request and complying after a benefit is offered. Similarly, threatening the child with punishment if he will not stop refusing can also serve as an establishing operation and increase the current frequency of behavior that has been reinforced in the past by the removal of the aversive stimulus (Cooper, 2007b). In this case the problem will be a little different: The aversive stimulus of a parental punitive response is presented, and complying with the parental request will result in removing it. Removing the aversive stimulus serves as a negative reinforcement. Thus, again, the child's behavior that will be reinforced and learned is complying after a threat of punishment is presented (and not to the original parental request). The probability that parents who apply one of these two strategies will continue using them is high, given the fact that both strategies are effective—not in reducing noncompliance but in gaining the child's compliance *after* his noncompliance.

Assuming that the noncompliant behaviors of a child are aversive to his parents, it can be determined that both these parental strategies are maintained by a negative reinforcement, since after applying the bribe or threat the noncompliance is discontinued and thus the parent aversive stimulus is removed. What must be emphasized here is that the skill of complying consists of complying to the request itself, directly. By complying to a request *after* a threat or a bribe, the child is not learning the skill of compliance, which is

crucial for his or her individual development and proper socialization. In the case of bribery, we are shaping a child's behavior of agreeing to act only after receiving a "treat", leading to a consistent refusal to comply until receiving a bribe. In other words, every parental request turns into an exhausting negotiation which makes family life difficult and unpleasant and of course sours the parent-child relationship. The use of threats is no better, as they teach the child to comply not to the request but to a threat. This type of conditioning means that parents must be constantly prepared both to make threats and to realize them once in a while, or else they will not be effective. In other words, threats lead to punishment and other negative educational means that do no favors to the child, the parents, and the family unit as whole.

2. Literature Review

As can be seen, child non-compliance and ineffective responses by parents create a viscous, negative circle that constantly reinforces itself. The question is how to break this circle so that children may learn the skill of compliance and improve the family climate? This will be discussed in the following section.

2.1. Applied Behavior Analysis and Behavioral Parent Training

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is a scientific approach for the discovery of environmental variables that reliably influence socially significant behavior and for the development of behavior-changing technology that relies on these discoveries (Cooper, 2007a). Applied Behavior Analysis assumes that all human behaviors occur within an environmental context and that the environment influences human behavior by stimulus changes that occur prior to the behavior or immediately following it (Cooper, 2007a). Stimulus changes that occur prior to the behavior and environmental conditions that exist before the behavior occur are called *antecedents*. Stimulus changes that immediately follow behaviors are called *consequences*. Operant behavior is a behavior whose future frequency is determined by its history of consequences. Operant conditioning establishes a functional relation between a behavior and its consequences and also establishes functional relations between behavior and certain antecedent conditions (Cooper, 2007a). The relation between the antecedent, the behavior, and the consequences is called the three-term contingency, and sometimes mentioned as "the ABC of Applied Behavior Analysis". All Applied Behavior Analysis procedures involve the manipulation of one or more components of the three-term contingency. The four basic types of consequences (stimulus changes that follow the behavior) are (1) positive reinforcement, (2) negative reinforcement, (3) positive punishment, and (4) negative punishment. Reinforcement is a key element in most behavioral interventions applied by behavior analysts. Reinforcement occurs when a behavior is followed immediately by a presentation of stimulus (positive reinforcement) or by a withdrawal of a stimulus (negative reinforcement) that increases the future frequency of that behavior. Punishment occurs when a behavior is followed immediately by a presentation of stimulus (positive punishment) or by a withdrawal of a stimulus (negative punishment) that decreases the future frequency of the behavior (Cooper, 2007a).

Behavioral Parent Training (BPT) is an approach for treating children's problem behaviors, in which parents are trained in the use of behavior modification. Parents are trained in altering their interactions with their child, for the purpose of decreasing problem behaviors and increasing prosocial behaviors (Kazdin, 1995). A broad range of Behavioral Parent Training programs have been developed to address children's

problem behaviors and to improve parenting competencies and parent-child interactions (Forehand et al., 2013). Behavioral Parent Training programs are based on the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis (Forehand et al., 2013) and are tailored to change parental behaviors by teaching parents the appropriate use of antecedents and consequences. Researches have shown Behavioral Parent Training (BPT) to be effective in reducing children's disruptive behavior (Nixon, 2002). Evaluations of BPT effects on families with children who have behavior disorders found that BPT graduates report significantly less child behavior problems and significantly less disruption to child and family quality of life due to child problem behavior. BPT graduates also report being more effective child behavior change agents in not only stopping child problem behavior, but also in preventing new occurrences and teaching the child appropriate behavior (Feldman & Werner, 2002; Kazdin et al., 2018; Lee, Niew, Yang, Chen, & Lin, 2012; Menting, Orobio, & Matthys, 2013).

3. Research Method

Based on the literature review we will discuss the subject of BPT programs, based on Applied Behavior Analysis for treating children's noncompliance.

BPT seeks to establish a change in social contingencies to a point that children's prosocial behaviors will obtain parental reinforcement and their aversive behaviors will consistently be punished or ignored (Serketich & Dumas, 1996). BPT assumes that appropriate and inappropriate behaviors of children are maintained by social agents, most often parents, who provide important cues and consequences for the child's behavior (Miller & Prinz, 1990). In other words, the BPT approach is based on the basic assumption that parents are a significant environment for their children and therefore have the potential of influencing their behavior, and that at least in some degree they are responsible for shaping and maintaining their children's behaviors.

4. Analyses and Findings

BPT has been used to treat a variety of child behavior problems, though it has been primarily employed as a treatment for young children's noncompliance behaviors. In BPT programs, clinicians teach parents to define behavior problems accurately, implement assessment measures that further define the problem and its intensity, and educate parents in the treatment plans that are appropriate for the problems within their individualized context (Briesmeister & Schaefer, 1998). The parents are the treatment providers, having to consistently implement the strategies they are taught in the parental training, in their home environment (Kazdin, 1995). Assuming that behaviors (both desirable and undesirable) are learned and maintained through interactions with the environment (Cooper, 2007a), there is great importance in identifying and understanding these specific interactions. Noncompliance behaviors can be versatile in nature among children and can be controlled by different environmental variables. A process of functional behavior assessment enables identifying the specific function of each child's noncompliant behavior and adjusting the intervention aimed at reducing it. Analysis of the three-term contingency of preschool children's noncompliance to parental instruction considers the *antecedents* as the parental instruction, the *behavior* as the child's reaction to the parental instruction (the behavioral expression of the refusal), and

the *consequences* as the parental response towards the child's refusal. Individualized BPT program for addressing children's noncompliance includes teaching the parents basic principles of applied behavior analysis and the rationale of the appropriate use of antecedents and consequences during their interactions with their child. BPT programs train the parents in avoiding inadvisable parental strategies such as offering benefits or bribes ("treats") and threatening the child with punishment ("tricks").

Individualized BPT programs for parents are based on the specific knowledge gained from interviewing the parents and from direct observations of family interactions, and it is this knowledge that makes such programs unique and particularly effective. For example, in such programs parents learn about the great importance of praising and reinforcing the child and especially the timing of the reinforcement. In other words, parents are trained in providing a high level of reinforcers—such as rewards, preferred items, and preferred activities—following proper behavior of cooperation and compliance. At the same time, they also learn to avoid reinforcing non-compliance behaviors. Parents are trained to avoid using threats after non-compliance and instead of threatening the child with punishment, parents learn how to define expectations from the child beforehand and how to provide effective guidance in a way that will decrease the probability that the child will present non-compliance in the first place. Nevertheless, parents still learn the subtle and critical nuances involved in applying punishment and also receive training related to the proper conditions in which to apply punishment as well as the ethical and age-appropriate manner in which to do so, if necessary.

5. Conclusion

A limitation of the noncompliance construct is that it inherently reflects the conceptualization of the child as a passive recipient of parental influence. In reality, child's noncompliance must not be seen as an intrapsychic problem of the child or of the parents, but as a result of the multiple interactions between the child, the parents, and other significant family and parental figures in the educational environment of the child. We have to agree that, as a descriptive category, noncompliance offers little scope for describing how children actively function as agents of influence in their own right. If some studies are more focused on children's susceptibility to parental influence, the present study aims to analyze the parental strategies for controlling children's behavior and to identify the appropriate training program for parents. Behavioral Parent Training programs use the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis to analyze the context of children's non-compliance in the family. Such analysis help therapists provide parents with personally tailored training programs that have proven to be effective in gaining children's compliance and improving children-parent relations. It is essential to develop trust between staff, child and parents, and reach a clear agreement on the goals of therapy, to avoid the emergence and escalation of noncompliance, which raises difficult clinical, legal and ethical issues.

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