Introduction

• Young children with ASDs often display noncompliance, tantrums, and other problem behavior when instructional requests are presented (Lovaas, 1981) or when they are asked to surrender an unusual object (e.g., piece of dirt; Rutter, Bailey, & Lord, 2003) they are holding at the start of an instructional session.

• Various strategies have been shown to help increase compliance and decrease destructive behavior including prompting (e.g., 3-step guided compliance) and extinction (e.g., escape no longer provided for problem behavior; Lovaas, 1981; Iwata et al., 1994).

• Guided compliance may evoke more severe problem behavior (Goh & Iwata, 1994; Lerman, Iwata, & Wallace, 1999), interfering with a caregiver’s implementation of the treatment.

• Studies have also shown that providing choices between tasks can improve behavior (Dunlap et al., 1994; Vaughn & Horner, 1997).

• We combined these strategies by teaching a mother of a child with ASD to initially provide a choice between 2 tasks and then using 3-step guided compliance to complete the task chosen.

Methods

Participant and Setting:

• Jake was a 4 year old male diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

• Jake was observed to engage in non-compliance when demands were present.

• Jake was also observed to engage in destructive behavior when preferred items were removed prior to demand situations.

• Sessions were conducted in small therapy rooms at a day treatment center for individuals with autism spectrum disorders.

Procedures: Sessions consisted of 10 trials:

• Baseline: Jake’s mother was instructed to implement demands to Jake as she would at home. All preferred objects were removed prior to sessions. Demands including handing her objects, pointing to objects, and placing objects in a bucket.

• 3-step guided compliance: Jake’s mother was trained to implement a prompting procedure involving sequential verbal, gestured, and physical guidance depending on compliance with graduated levels of praise. Problem behavior was ignored and all preferred items were removed prior to session.

• Choice: Jake’s mother provided an initial choice between two tasks: to surrender the item or to complete an alternative demand. 3-step was initiated after Jake made a choice, or in the absence of a choice, Jake’s mother picked a task and then continued with 3-step. Jake was allowed to pick an item to keep prior to each session.

Results:

• During baseline and 3-step guided compliance, levels of compliance were relatively low ($M = 28.0\%$ and $23.8\%$ respectively).

• Compliance increased during the choice condition ($M = 76.7\%$).

• Destructive behavior emerged during 3-step guided compliance ($M = 43.1\%$) and decreased during the choice condition ($M = 2.0\%$).

• Experimental control was demonstrated in a reversal design.

• Results also demonstrated higher levels of choice allocated to the task.

Discussion

• For Jake, providing a choice between surrendering a preferred item or completing an alternative demand decreased destructive behavior and increased compliance.

• This may be due to avoiding deprivation from preferred stimuli (i.e., surrendering a preferred item may have produced a state of deprivation from reinforcing stimuli and led to increased problem behavior).

• This may also be due to decreased aversiveness of the demand context (i.e., removal of preferred item may have increase aversiveness of demands).

Limitations:

• Single participant.

• No function for destructive behavior was determined initially therefore it is unknown if destructive behavior was evoked by removal of items or non-preferred tasks or both.

• Type of task was limited (e.g., all tasks could be completed with one hand).

Future Research:

• Conduct with a larger cohort of participants and evaluate functions of problem behavior.

• Assess the utility of providing choices for more complex and necessary tasks (e.g., taking medication, tying shoes).