

Rituals and Behavioral Rigidity in Children with Autism: Experimental Analysis of Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP).

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DESCRIPTION:

This study examines the efficacy of a form of behavioral therapy based on exposure-response prevention (ERP), a validated form of treatment for childhood obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), as a treatment for behavioral rigidity in children with autism. In autism, behavioral rigidity presents as a set of associated problems for parents and teachers including: (1) a child's singular, ritualized focus on specific items or activities, (2) behavior problems that result when the parent or teacher attempts to limit these rituals, and (3) the child's poor compliance and engagement with alternative activities such as academic or self-care tasks. For the present study, we designed a variant of ERP to address these aspects of behavioral rigidity in children with autism. The treatment consists of a block of 10 discrete trials. During each trial the child is: (1) allowed to engage in a highly preferred activity or ritual for 1 minute, (2) then switched from the ritual item to an academic task, and given hand-over-hand prompting and praise during a 1 minute period of academic task demands with the preferred/ritual item present. This is designed to simulate ritual blocking, transition from a preferred / ritual or activity to a non-preferred activity, and compliance with academic training during exposure to the preferred / ritual item.