How 'pairing' differs between different aged autistic learners

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ABSTRACT: This case study aims to answer the question: How does pairing differ between different aged autistic learners" and the significance of any differences. Pairing is one of the most fundamental practises in behaviour analysis. Pairing is the act of building a relationship between a tutor/parent and the child; it is what allows positive relationships to form and increase instructional control within a relationship. Instructional control is important to allow the ability of further learning to occur for the autistic learner, with less reluctance to want to do so. There is already a wide understanding of what pairing is and why it is seen as one of the crucial starting points within behaviour analysis, however, there is not much-existing research as to how and why pairing practices might differ between different aged autistic learners. This case study looks at any possible differences between pairing with different aged learners from the perspective of someone who has worked in three different teaching environments with autistic learners; having had the opportunity to experience pairing techniques with a range of learners from 4 years old all the way up to 24 years old.

Introduction

This case study is going to be exploring the fundamental differences of 'pairing' when working with different aged autistic learners. The main objectives of this case study are to:

- Uncover whether there are many notable differences in pairing for different aged autistic learners;

- Identify what these differences may be;

- Explain why differences are necessary across different age groups;

- Evaluate the effectiveness of different pairing techniques between age groups.

To begin we must first understand what 'pairing' is and why it is used in Behaviour Analysis.

Pairing is widely recognised as one of the most fundamental practices in Behaviour Analysis. Pairing is "a technique used to help form and maintain rapport with a child/learner by combining the learning environment and the parent/teacher with already established reinforcers" (Evenstad, Flynn-Privett, & Gudding, n.d.). Essentially pairing helps a positive relationship to develop between an adult and an autistic learner. It should be first implemented when a new person works with a learner to start an initial relationship between the two. Moreover, pairing is not only used at the beginning of a new relationship, but in existing relationships pairing should be used to help maintain positivity and strength in these relationships. It is important during pairing that a tutor is not placing demands on their learner and focussing on making an activity as fun as possible for the student.

Here are a couple examples of real-life pairing sessions:

Example A

Student A really likes arts and crafts. The tutor has gathered lots of art resources for their pairing session with the student. To begin with the tutor lets the student choose from an array of different coloured paper. It is important to not restrict the student's choice or place demands which is why the tutor allows them to freely choose. Next the tutor brings out some paint and some coloured pencils. Once they notice which of the two the student seems more interested in (the paint) they bring out more coloured bottles of paint to allow the student to choose from. Furthermore, the tutor continues to provide different items which can be used for painting such as different paint brushes, sponges etc. This illustrates to the students that this tutor can provide them with the things they are interested in and allows the two to begin to pair as the student will associate the things they like with this tutor.

Example B

Student B does not have a noticeably big interest in tangible items but is more interested in physical interaction such as tickles, squeezes, funny noises, and facial expressions. To begin this pairing session the tutor approaches the student with lots of high energy. It is especially important in a pairing session for a tutor to appear engaged and excited to their learner, so they are more likely to experience the same positive emotions. The tutor then begins to offer tickles to their student. As they can see the student is interested, they start to decipher where the student most likes the tickles. The student begins to laugh and smile, and their tutor reflects on these behaviours. As the tutor takes a step back the student reaches out towards their tutor indicating they would like more attention from this tutor. As the tutor makes a conscious effort to keep pairing with their student when the student sees this tutor, they now associate them with fun and tickles and will often reach out manding for more attention from this tutor.

Literature Review

As one of the fundamental practices in Behaviour Analysis, there is

lots of existing literature available on the topic of pairing. Most of the literature outlines what, how, why and when of pairing, however, there is little research on how pairing differs across age groups.

Why do we use pairing in Behaviour Analysis?

Pairing is crucial to help build and maintain a relationship between an adult and an autistic learner KidsAbility, n.d.). Dr. James P Comer, a world-renowned child psychiatrist, explains 'No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship' (Steinberg Behavior Solutions, 2023). The reason being that the relationship/rapport that is established through pairing is essential to help create instructional control, i.e., the learner listening and following instructions placed by their tutor. Instructional control is what drives an autistic child/learner with autism to follow instructions placed by their tutor or parent (Meadows, 2015). Without pairing, instructional control is unlikely to occur. Furthermore, to maintain instructional control with a learner pairing must be regularly practised, even after relationships are established. Research has shown that pairing is invaluable for both a student and their tutor as pairing decreases the likelihood of behaviours that challenge and increases the possibility of learners being willing to try new things (Steinberg Behaviour Solutions, 2023).

When do we use pairing?

Firstly, pairing is used at the start of a new relationship between a tutor and a learner. The reasoning being to help form a new, positive relationship between the two. Pairing must also be used throughout an already established relationship to maintain the foundations of this relationship. It is important for a tutor to pair with their student at the start of every session they work with them, as well as throughout the day to reinforce their instructional control. Another common time to reintroduce pairing activities would be before doing a table work session or any other situations where larger demands will be placed upon the student. This is, once again, to strengthen the instructional control between a tutor and their learner and to encourage the learner to positively engage with their tutor and follow instructions placed.

Method

How was the topic decided?

The topic of this case study and main objectives were formulated based on a personal interest in the difference of pairing across age groups after having worked with different aged autistic learners myself. Furthermore, as one of the fundamental practises in Behaviour Analysis 'pairing' is a remarkably interesting topic to explore, with few pre-existing studies making a comparison of pairing across different aged autistic learners.

What is the main research methodology used?

The main research methodology that has been used to complete this is second hand research aided by first hand experiences and knowledge. Second hand research is 'flexible and relies on a range of data sources, including academic literature, online material, discussions with individuals, publicly available statistics, the press, or directories or databases' (Guerin et al. 2018, p63). I deemed this particular research methodology as the most appropriate for my case study given that the advantages of secondary research outweigh the limitations, as well as avoiding difficulties involved in undertaking primary research.

What are the advantages of this research methodology?

Secondary research has many advantages. One advantage is limiting the ethical barriers to research. Primary research must be given an ethical clearing and thus secondary researchers are able to use this research without the need for their own ethical approval. Furthermore, secondary research is 'cheaper than others in terms of costs and time - since it can provide information within a relatively short timeframe' (Guerin et al. 2018, p65). Finally, secondary research allows the comparison of research across different organisations, therefore introducing a large pool of information.

What are the disadvantages of this research methodology?

Nonetheless, with any research method, there are also disadvantages. The most notable disadvantage of secondary research is the lack of first-hand information collected. Primary research allows for a greater accuracy of results, as it is undertaken directly by the researcher; Secondary research does not allow for the same control over data collected (Taylor, 2022). Secondary researchers may need to adjust data collected by other researchers with slightly different research focuses and finding relevant information can be a lengthy process (Guerin et al. 2018), not to mention research/books can be outdated.

In conclusion, secondary research, with firsthand experience, was deemed the most appropriate research methodology for this case study. Mainly for the reason of being able to overcome ethical barriers and allow for a wide scope of research and findings to be included in the study.

Results

After conducting this case study, it is clear to see why there is limited pre-existing literature on the differences between pairing with different aged learners as there are very few. The fundamental principles of pairing should be as consistent as possible across different learners, no matter their interests, gender, ability, age, or any other personal factors. The main difference between pairing

with any student is finding the best way to pair with that individual learner. For example, if one student does not like physical touch then tickles and squeezes would not be an effective way to pair with them, whereas it could be the most effective pairing method with a learner who loves physical touch. Another major difference in pairing across learners, which has no direct influence by age, is how quickly a learner pairs with their tutor. Some learners may need an increased number of pairing sessions to form a strong positive relationship whereas others may pair relatively quickly.

The one major difference in pairing between different aged autistic learners is making sure the activities you are using to pair with your learner are as age appropriate as possible for the learner you are working with. For example, it may be more appropriate to offer tickles and hugs to a 5-year-old learner and move on to squeezes for an older learner; still offering physical interaction but in a more appropriate way. The reason for doing so is to make life more functional for the learner. However, it can be difficult to implement the idea of "age appropriateness" all the time as autistic learners may not always have the same interests as their peers. For example, you may not expect for an adult to be engaging with children's cartoons, but many autistic (and non-autistic) learners may still be extremely interested in these types of shows and/or toys. Therefore, the overarching principle of pairing should be at the core of itself, to find the things your learner is interested in and use these to pair and keep these methods as age appropriate as possible.

Discussion and conclusion

In conclusion, pairing does not differ much between different aged autistic learners. In fact, the fundamental principles and practices of pairing do not differ much between any learners. Simply, the pairing must only vary depending on the interests of the learner you are working with to ensure the pairing can be as successful as possible. The only real difference between pairing that relates to age is trying to be age appropriate with your learners. The biggest conclusion from this case study I believe is highlighting the need for further research on how to implement being age appropriate with learners with autism. Many older learners with autism may have interests that are not 'typical' to their age.

Furthermore, they may not understand themselves what age appropriateness is and what is/is not appropriate. Therefore, we need to generate a greater understanding of how to be and teach age appropriateness to staff and our learners to be able to use it in all practices, including pairing.

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