Community Living Skills

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In 1986, a United States District Court in Alabama approved the consent settlement of the Wyatt v. Stickney litigation (Marchetti, 1987) thus bringing to a close the most significant court-related event prompting community placement of mentally retarded people. It is important to note that the court enjoined Alabama "to continue to make substantial progress in placing members of the plaintiff class in community facilities and programs" (Marchetti, 1987, p. 252).

Wyatt v. Stickney, in conjunction with efforts of those who espouse the philosophy of "normalization," has resulted in the community placement of a significant number of mentally retarded (and mentally ill) people. Normalization, as it has been defined by such proponents as Nirje (1969) and Wolfensberger (1972), espouses that mentally retarded individuals be accorded the same basic educational, social, and habitation privileges as those maintained by the rest of society in which that individual lives. The result, in this country, was a decline in population of the institutionalized mentally retarded of over 70,000 from 1971 to 1982 (Scheerenberger, 1982). Yet most of the individuals who have entered the community are still, in effect, separated from mainstream society. As Sarason (1974) noted,

Few things are as destructive of the psychological sense of community . . . as the tendency to segregate the atypical person, to place him in a special geographical area where he will be with his "own kind" and receive "special handling." (p. 161)

In spite of the trend toward community placement, it is clear that exposing mentally retarded individuals to the community is only a beginning step to achieving normalization. In order for mentally retarded citizens to merge into community settings, both in a social and practical independent living sense, many skill deficits need to be overcome through explicit training in community living skills. Educators, acknowledging this need, are now incorporating community living skills into the curriculum of special needs students (Brown et al., 1983; Snell, 1983; Wilcox & Bellamy, 1982; Wuerch & Voeltz, 1982).
In their 1981 review of community living skills, Marchetti and Matson noted limited behavioral research on training independent living skills, but they predicted an expansion of this training in the next few years. The purpose of this chapter was to review the experimental research on community living skills since that time. Three categories of skills were covered: food-related skills, leisure skills, and pragmatic domestic skills. Following this, generalization and methodological research issues were discussed.

FOOD-RELATED SKILLS

An area that has received increased attention recently is food-related skills. These skills consist of self-help behaviors that allow individuals to plan meals independently, as well as acquire and cook nutritious food. Institutionalized people are usually not responsible for selecting or preparing their own food; therefore, clients placed in the community often need to acquire these behaviors. Skills to be examined under this rubric include shopping, menu planning, cooking, and eating out.

Shopping

Shopping for their own food allows individuals to function more independently in community-based domestic environments, and is an essential survival skill for independent living. Although descriptive studies suggested that the technology was available to teach handicapped children and adolescents nutrition education (Stapley, Smith, Bittle, Andrews, & Nuckolls, 1984) and supermarket shopping skills (Wheeler, Ford, Nietupski, Loomis, & Brown, 1980), the test-teach design employed in these studies failed to provide experimental evidence that the teaching programs were responsible for the skill acquisition.

A controlled study by Nietupski, Welch, and Wacker (1983) attempted to determine if picture prompts and calculators facilitated grocery item purchasing by four moderately to severely retarded young adult males (mean IQ of 39, and age of 20). Given one paper money denomination, a money card displaying pictures of bills, a calculator, and a 10-item grocery list, students were taught an 8-step task that included deducting the cost of the grocery items from the money available. A multiple probe design across students was used to assess the effectiveness of the teaching program, which included modeling, praising correct performance, and verbally prompting, modeling, or physically guiding the student after incorrect performance. The multiple probe design called for periodic rather than continuous probes of student behavior in order to attenuate extinction problems associated with prolonged baseline conditions. Students achieved the skill as a result of the training procedure, and they maintained their skills as assessed by a generalization probe conducted in a local supermarket. However, as pointed out by these