An Analysis of Children's Oppositional Behavior¹,²

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The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationship between children's oppositional behavior and the following two variables: number of commands issued and time from command presentation. Twenty-four five-year-old children and their mothers served as subjects. The results indicated an increase in oppositional behavior as the number of commands increased. Furthermore, most oppositional behavior occurred immediately following the presentation of a command.

A number of investigators (Forehand, Cheney, & Yoder, 1974; Patterson, Cobb, & Ray, 1973; Wahler, 1969; Walter & Gilmore, 1973) have been concerned with modifying children's noncompliant or oppositional behavior. Although all these investigators have reported that parents can be trained to reduce oppositional behavior, an examination of variables other than reinforcing and punishing consequences that may affect such behavior has seldom been undertaken. However, one relevant investigation has been recently reported: Piat, Sadler, and Vickers (1973) found an inverse relation between number of commands and compliance in preschool settings.

The purpose of the present study was twofold. First, the relationship between number of commands and oppositional behavior was examined. It was hypothesized that an increase in oppositional behavior would occur as the frequency of commands increased. Second, the temporal relationship between the presentation of a command and the occurrence of oppositional behavior was investigated. It was hypothesized that oppositional behavior would occur primarily

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immediately following a command (during initiation of compliance) and would decrease significantly as the time from the command presentation increased. This hypothesis was based on informal reports from parents and teachers that they experienced most difficulty in having children initiate compliance to commands rather than maintain compliance.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 24 five-year-old children (15 girls and 9 boys) and their mothers. The socioeconomic status of the families ranged from middle class to upper-middle class as the majority of the husbands were either graduate students or faculty members at the University of Georgia. All subjects were solicited by a newspaper advertisement for “Mothers and children, age 5, to participate in a research study at the University of Georgia, fee paid,” followed by a phone number.

Environment

The experimental environment was a playroom which permitted simultaneous visual and auditory monitoring of the mother and child. The room was furnished with a table, two chairs, and nine different toys (Tinker Toys, blocks, crayons, racetrack, Lincoln Logs, pick-up-sticks, cash register, paper dolls, and toy soldiers). A Farrall Instruments “bug-in-the-ear” was used to communicate instructions to the mother in the playroom.

Procedure

Each mother-child pair was observed for one session in the playroom. During the session the mother issued 12 standard commands instructing the child to play with a particular toy. The commands were relayed to the mother via the bug-in-the-ear by the experimenter at three-minute intervals. The order of presentation was randomized in order to control for the likelihood of a toy preference or sequencing effect. The following is a list of the six commands, each of which was issued twice, that were used:

Play with the Tinker Toys for a while.
Play with the Lincoln Logs for a while.
Play with blocks for a while.
Play with the pick-up-sticks for a while.