



A Brief Explanation of Discrete Trail Training

Contributed by Steve Buckmann

Given the increasing interest in early behavioral interventions for children with autism spectrum disorders, it is not surprising that the Indiana Resource Center for Autism receives almost daily requests for information about such interventions. Two frequent questions asked by individuals requesting information are, "What is discrete trial training?" and "What is the difference between discrete trial training and the Lovaas Method?" The following is a brief explanation of discrete trial training and a basic contrast of the two.

Discrete trial training (DTT) is a method of providing intervention. According to Anderson et al. (1996), the discrete trial method has four distinct parts: (1) the trainer's presentation, (2) the child's response, (3) the consequence, and (4) a short pause between the consequence and the next instruction (between interval trials). For some readers, these four parts are perhaps more familiar when presented in the following model:

This model is the basic framework used fairly consistently across DTT programs. The primary difference among discrete trial training programs is found in what they teach, rather than how they teach. For example, the UCLA Young Autism Project (aka *Lovaas Method*) is one treatment program directed mainly at pre-school aged children with autism. It uses discrete trials as its main instructional method and follows a fairly set progression of instructional programs beginning with early receptive language and "terminating" with programs focused on achieving skills in self help, community and school situations. Not all programs using DTT follow the same program sequences or curriculum as the UCLA project.

Many readers may also be asking the question, "Don't ALL educational programs involve some use of the discrete trial method?" The answer is yes—at least to a limited degree. Instructional situations and interactions can generally be described in terms of this basic teaching model. However, there is often confusion between an informal or periodic use of this teaching model and "doing discrete trial training." What distinguishes DTT programs is the intensity and duration of the training and the primary role of the discrete trial method for instruction. DTT programs generally involve several hours of direct 1:1 instruction per day (including high rates of discrete trials) over many months or years.

Though the basic model for DTT appears relatively straightforward, applying the model effectively is not. A casual understanding of applied behavior analysis is insufficient for applying DTT programs. Given the high stakes of early intervention, the controversy surrounding discrete trial training programs, and the effort and knowledge required to effectively deliver DTT, parents, administrators and teachers must invest the time and energy to understand all aspects of discrete trial training programs. This includes not only understanding how to implement such a program, but having the ability to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness for each child. The following resources can assist this effort.

Reference

Anderson, S. R., Taras, M., & Cannon, B. O. (1996). Teaching new skills to young children with autism. In C. Maurice (Ed.), *Behavioral intervention for young children with autism*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Resources

Guralnick, M. J. (Ed.). (1996). *The effectiveness of early intervention*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing

Co.

Harris, S., & Handleman, J. (1994). Pre-school programs for children with autism. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Maurice, C. (Ed.). (1996). *Behavioral intervention for young children with autism*. Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Siegel, B. (1996). *The world of the autistic child: Understanding and treating autistic spectrum disorders*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Buckmann, S. (1997). A brief explanation of discrete trial training. *The Reporter*, 3(1), 4, 6.