


 RESEARCH DEVELOPMENTS
 

A Publication of the May Center for Applied Research

### STAFF TRAINING AND PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

Effective staff training is integral to the operation of human services and behavioral healthcare organizations. At May Institute, we emphasize pre-service and in-service training of educational, clinical, and administrative staff using evidence-supported procedures to improve performance. Training is not a one-time event, but is delivered continuously at all levels of the organization.

Within our comprehensive staff development program, we have designed and evaluated many training initiatives. This issue of *Research Developments* describes several May Institute training projects.

One objective of training is to teach staff the skills they need to function successfully. To this end, we emphasize both knowledge and performance competencies.

Another key element of training is evaluating outcomes: does training achieve its stated goals, and how do you measure results? We disseminate our findings to the professional community through a dedicated program of conference presentations and peer-reviewed publications.

This issue includes a list of recent May Institute publications on the topic of staff training and performance improvement. To request copies, contact Dr. James K. Luiselli, Senior Vice President for Applied Research, Clinical Training, and Peer Review at [jluiselli@mayinstitute.org](mailto:jluiselli@mayinstitute.org).

### Teaching Knowledge Competencies

Newly hired staff at May Institute child and adult centers receive pre-service training in applied behavior analysis (ABA) knowledge competencies. The purpose of training is to teach staff basic ABA principles, terminology, and applications before they assume program responsibilities with students and consumers. We have evaluated this training in two studies that included staff from four centers (Luiselli & St. Amand, 2005; Luiselli, St. Amand, MaGee, & Sperry, 2007). The training program is comprised of “content modules” that address numerous knowledge competencies (e.g., principles of reinforcement, prompting, measurement, intervention evaluation).

A trainer teaches each module through PowerPoint presentations that combine didactic instruction, demonstration, behavioral rehearsal, and group discussion. Using standardized Assessment of Knowledge (AOK) tests, our research indicates that staff typically acquire competencies at 85-100% after a single training session and maintain their newly acquired skills one month later.

This research has been instrumental in verifying an effective and practical method of pre-service training within human services organizations.

### Implementing Discrete Trial Instruction

Discrete trial instruction (DTI) is an evidence-based and empirically supported methodology for teaching skills to children who have autism and other developmental disabilities. DTI incorporates several procedures that are applied systematically according to behavior-specific criteria. Although research verifies the effectiveness of DTI, few studies have evaluated methods for training service providers in its proper implementation. In studies by Leblanc, Ricciardi, and Luiselli (2005), and

Gilligan, Luiselli, and Pace (2007), we targeted DTI with classroom teachers using a combination of training procedures.

We observed the teachers instructing students and documented their performance according to a “discrete trial checklist.” Following these observations, a trainer met with each teacher, reviewed the checklist results, corrected errors (with directions and practice), and praised accurate implementation. This com-

## RECENT PUBLICATIONS

- Luiselli, J.K., & St. Amand, C. (2005). Staff training in applied behavior analysis: Improving knowledge competencies of services providers for people with developmental disabilities. *Mental Health Aspects of Developmental Disabilities, 8*, 120-125.
- Luiselli, J.K., St. Amand, C., MaGee, C., & Sperry, J.M. (2007). Group training of applied behavior analysis (ABA) knowledge competencies to community-based service providers for adults with developmental disabilities. Submitted for publication, *Journal of Intellectual Disability*.
- Leblanc, M.P., Ricciardi, J.N., & Luiselli, J.K. (2005). Improving discrete trial instruction by paraprofessional staff through an abbreviated performance feed-back intervention. *Education and Treatment of Children, 28*, 76-82.
- Gilligan, K. T., Luiselli, J. K., & Pace, G. M. (2007). Training paraprofessional staff to implement discrete trial instruction: Evaluation of a practical performance feedback intervention. *The Behavior Therapist, 30*, 63-66.
- Wood, A. L., Luiselli, J. K., & Harchik, A. E. (2007). Training instructional skills with paraprofessional service providers at a community-based habilitation setting. *Behavior Modification, 31*, 847-855.
- Garrity, M. L., Luiselli, J. K., & McCollum, S. A. (in press). Effects of a supervisory intervention on assessment of interobserver agreement (IOA) by educational service providers. *Behavioral Interventions*.
- Garrity, M.L., & Luiselli, J.K. (2005). Brief report: Effects of an administrative supervisory protocol on preparation of behavior support plans at a child service setting. *International Journal of Behavioral Consultation and Therapy, 1*, 287-291.
- Luiselli, J. K. (in press). Effects of a performance management intervention on frequency of behavioral supervision at a specialized school for students with developmental disabilities. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*.



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## DISCRETE TRIAL INSTRUCTION...

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petency-based training immediately improved teachers' DTI skills. Follow-up observations revealed that these gains were maintained.

Figure 1 shows the experimental design and results from the Gilligan et al (2007) study. The training procedures we used were practical, time-efficient, and well received by trainees.

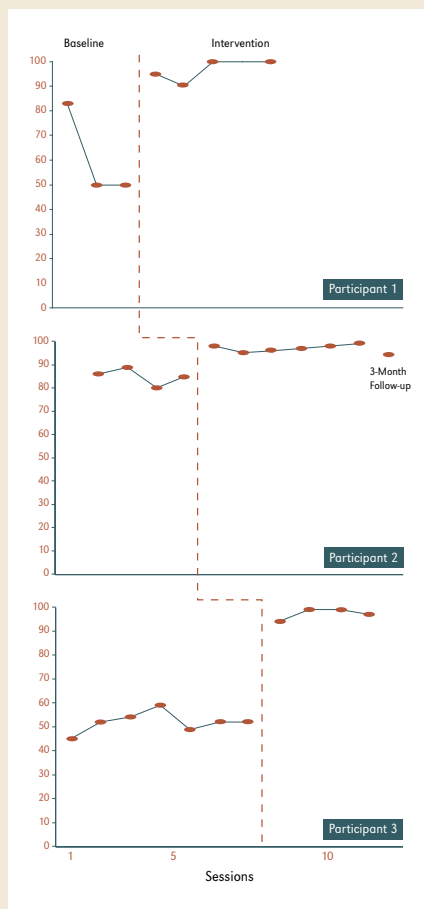


Figure 1. Percentage of discrete trial component behaviors implemented correctly

## Systems-Level Performance Improvement

A systems-level orientation to human services training considers administrative and supervisory protocols to improve the performance of direct-care, middle management, and senior clinical personnel (Luiselli & Russo, 2005). Our approach to performance enhancement relies on a specification and description of work expectations (quality indicators), competency-based assessment, systematic measurement of goal attainment, and behavior-specific feedback. In several studies (publications noted at left) we found that this model was successful in training direct-care staff to implement communication skills instruction, teachers to conduct more frequent assessment of interobserver agreement, and program managers to write behavior support plans.

Another study showed that a performance monitoring intervention improved the frequency of supervision completed by senior clinicians. Our principal findings from these studies suggest that successful performance improvement depends on continuous training that is competency focused, targets multiple quality indicators, includes routine measurement, and is integrated within all levels of organizational service delivery.

### ABOUT MAY INSTITUTE

May Institute is a nonprofit organization that provides educational, rehabilitative, and behavioral healthcare services to individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities, brain injury, mental illness, and other behavioral healthcare needs. The Institute serves over 25,000 individuals and their families annually at more than 200 service locations in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, Midwest, and on the West Coast. An active center of research and training, May Institute maintains affiliations with more than 40 universities, hospitals, and human service agencies worldwide.

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