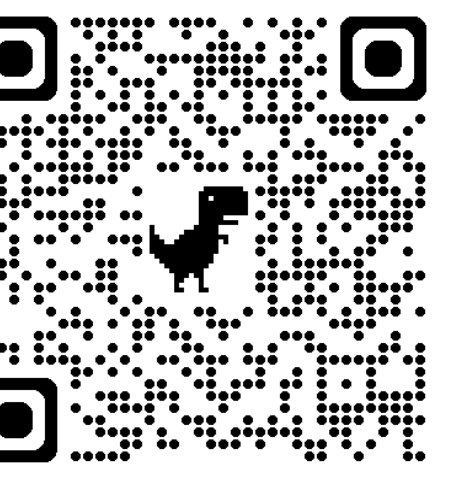


The Work Can Stay, But You Can Go: Social Avoidance Masquerading As Escape From Demand

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INTRODUCTION

Functional analyses (FAs) are the standard for determining functions of problem behavior (Beavers et al. 2013). However, FAs can occasionally lead to false-positive outcomes which can contribute to ineffective treatment planning (Harper et al., 2013). Harper, Iwata & Camp (2013) assessed 4 participants whose initial FAs suggested escape from demand to be the function of aggressive behavior. However, follow-up FAs indicated that social avoidance was maintaining aggressive behavior. Within the present study, an FA was conducted to assess the aggressive behavior of a nineteen-year-old male diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The results of the initial FA suggested that the participant's aggression was maintained by socially-mediated negative reinforcement in the form of escape from demands. However, an analysis of a treatment package consisting of FCT for a break and extinction did not result in consistent reduction of the target behavior. Results from a follow-up FA demonstrated that the target behavior was maintained not by escape from demands but by social avoidance of physical touch. A treatment consisting of the omission of physical prompting, FCT in the form of requesting space, and extinction contributed to a reduction in aggression.

METHOD

Participants and Setting: The participant in this study was a nineteen-year-old male diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The participant attended a private school for children diagnosed with ASD. Functional analysis sessions were conducted in a 10' x 20' breakout room in the school with a two-way mirror for observation. Functional Communication training sessions were conducted in the classroom after school hours with data collectors in the classroom.

Data Collection: The dependent measure for this study was frequency of aggressions during the functional analysis and frequency of independent and prompted responses during functional communication training. Frequency data were collected via paper and pen.

Procedures

Functional Analysis (FA): The initial FA (Iwata et al., 1982) was conducted in a multielement design and each session was 10 minutes. The conditions alternated between a control condition (play), demand condition, tangible condition, and attention condition. One trial of a divided attention condition was utilized, however as no target behavior was evoked during this session this condition was terminated.

Functional Communication Training (FCT): A multiple baseline across listeners was conducted for FCT sessions. The participant's augmentative and alternative communication (ACC) device was placed in front of him with one visible cell that had a break icon. Work demands were then presented to the participant, who was then immediately gesturally prompted to activate the "break" cell. A progressive prompt delay was utilized to increase independent responding. Once the "break" cell was activated, the participant was granted a 30 second break from his task. Aggression was placed on extinction.

Test-Control Functional Analysis: A test-control FA was conducted in a multielement design, alternating between control (no physical attention) and test conditions. Social avoidance and escape from demands were assessed during the test conditions.

Figure 1
Initial Functional Analysis

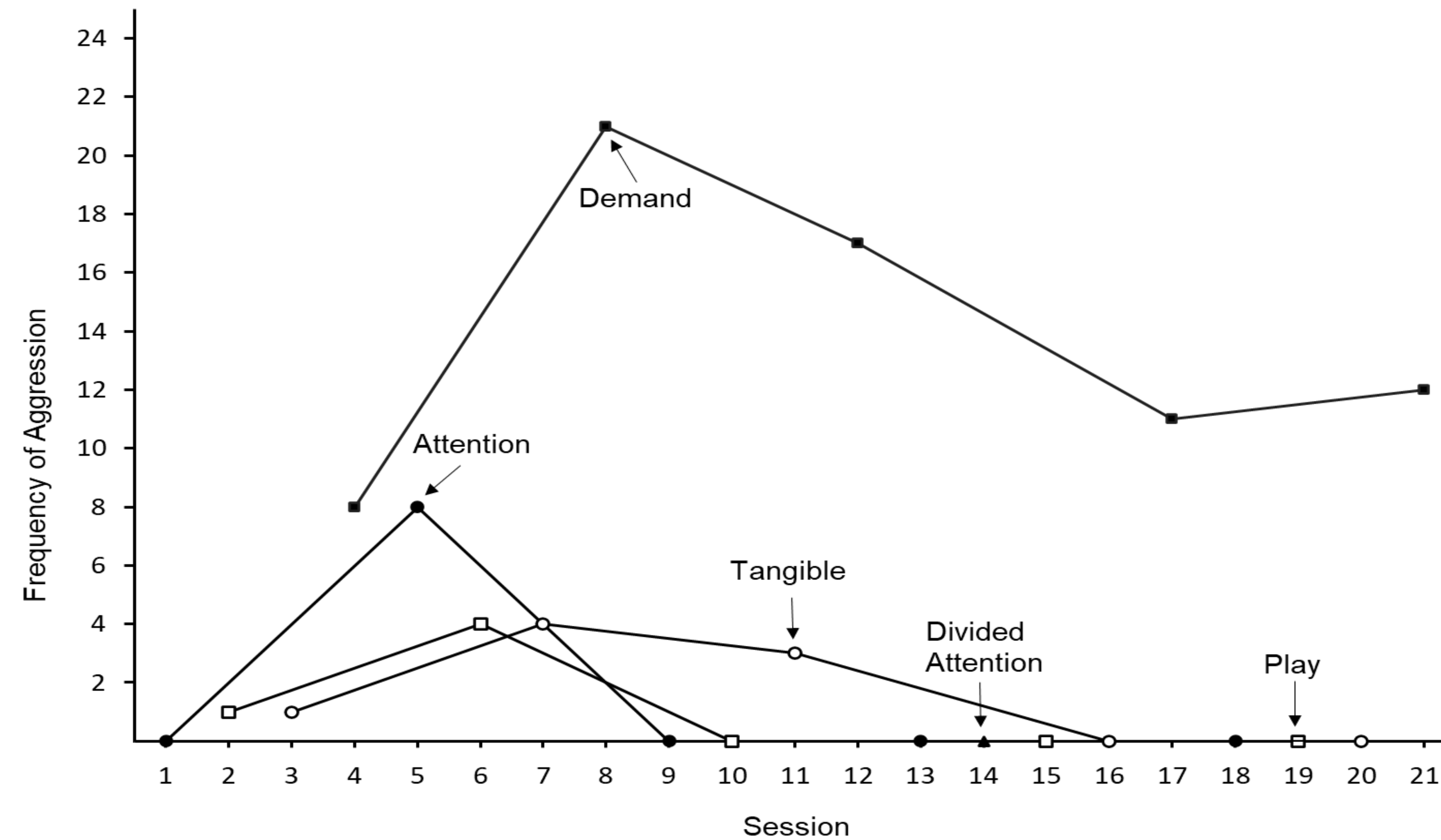
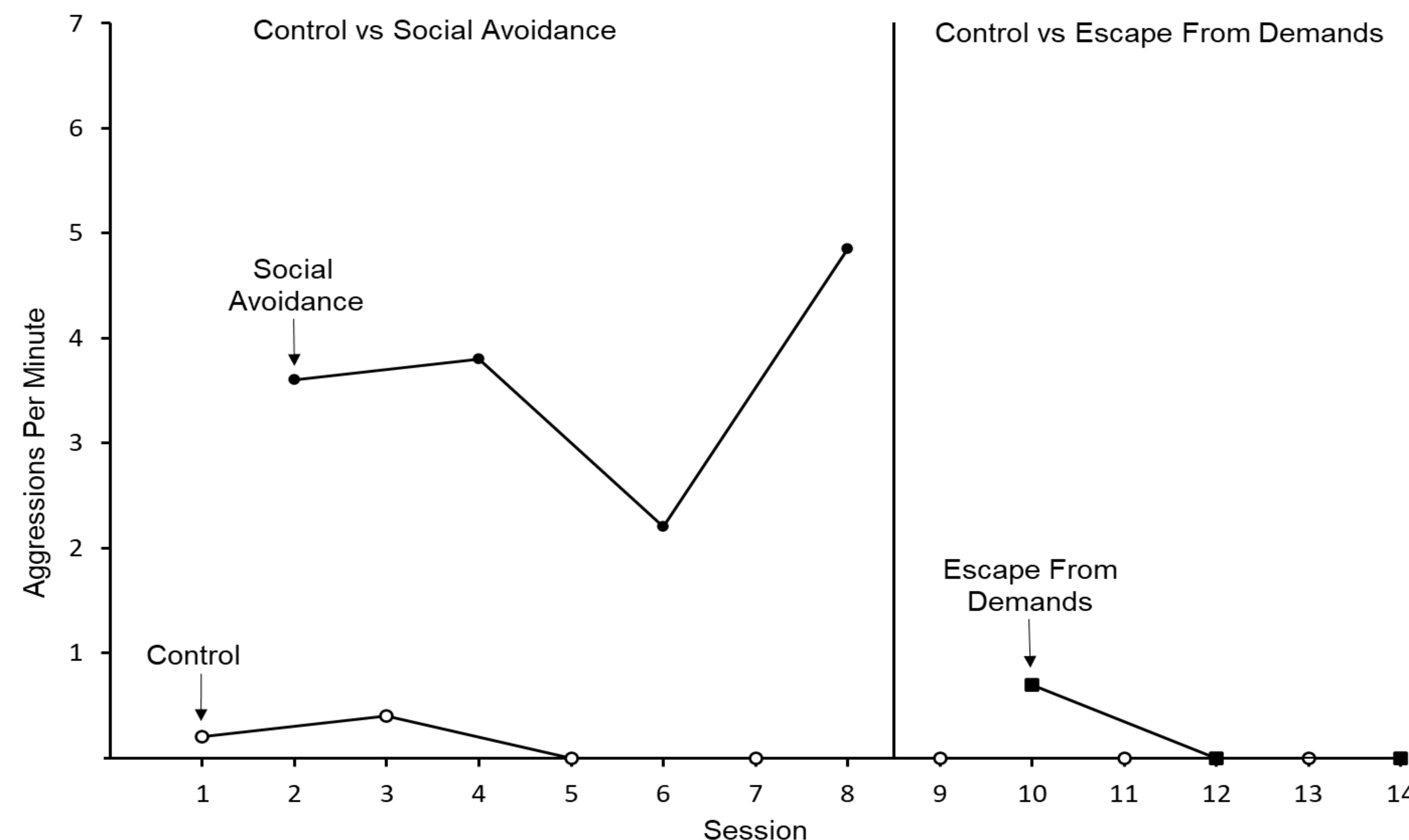


Figure 2
Test-Control Functional Analysis



RESULTS

- Initial Functional Analysis:** Figure 1 illustrates that the participant engaged in aggression during all conditions except divided attention. The participant engaged in target behavior in all conditions, however responding decreased to zero levels in the attention, demand, tangible and control (play) conditions. Target behavior maintained high and stable levels during the demand condition at compared to the control condition.
- Functional Communication Training (not pictured here):** During FCT sessions, aggressions followed an increasing trend while independent requests for breaks showed a decreasing trend with the first listener. Aggressions showed an increasing trend while independent requests for breaks showed a slight increasing trend with the second listener.
- Test-Control Functional Analysis:** Figure 2 illustrates that the participant engaged in target behavior during all conditions. Rates of responding were high and stable in the physical attention condition compared to the control condition. Rates of responding were low in the demand condition and only occurred during a single session.

DISCUSSION

- Initial FA:** The initial FA suggested that the target behavior was being maintained by social negative reinforcement in the form of escaping demands.
- Functional Communication:** During FCT sessions, the participant engaged in aggression towards the prompter when the prompter was close enough to prompt him to touch the "break" icon. The participant also engaged in aggressive behaviors after work task were removed. When the experimenter would move out of arm's reach, the participant would stop engaging in aggressive behaviors. This led to the evaluation of physical proximity a contributing variable to the participant's aggressive behavior.
- Test-Control Functional Analysis:** A follow-up test-control FA indicated that aggressive behavior was being maintained by social negative reinforcement in the form of avoiding physical contact.

Limitations:

- Since only a single session of divided attention was run in the initial FA, no trend was available for accurate analysis
- IOA data was not collected for FA or FCT sessions
- After the follow-up FA, the participant had a medication change which could be a contributing factor to his decrease in aggressive behaviors
- Results of this assessment may be idiosyncratic to the learning history of the participant within this study

Future directions:

- Further research should be conducted on how we can screen for social avoidance in efforts to avoid failed treatment assessments

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