

Tolerating “No”

(...with potential fringe benefits towards Respecting “no”)

Objective: After requesting a reinforcer, and being told “no” (or something equivalent), Larry will continue to behave appropriately, refrain from problem behaviors and, as appropriate, cooperate well with teacher expectations.

Prerequisites-none of these may actually be necessary prior to teaching a student to tolerate “no”, but it is generally easier to teach tolerance of “no” to students who:

- tolerate delays in reinforcer delivery
- generally show good cooperation with “do” behaviors
- accept prompts

Many students protest when told “no” (and I don’t know anyone who likes to be told “no”). “No” is usually most problematic when a student has requested a reinforcer and is informed that he can’t have it. “No” is also frequently a problem when it means “no, that was an incorrect answer”. “No” or “don’t” are also frequently problems when they mean “stop doing what you’re doing”. (*You may also want to read about analysis and treatment for students learning to behave well when clear limits are set, item B8, pg. ____.)

If your student is ready to work on tolerating “no”, you can choose between a variety of direct and indirect interventions. Direct interventions have the benefit of precisely targeting the objective of tolerating “no”. Indirect interventions usually have the benefit of being painless. The direct and indirect interventions listed here are compatible with each other, so you can choose to implement more than one intervention, if you like.

Direct Interventions

1. Tell your student “no” at least 10-20 times per day, and put any subsequent problem behaviors on extinction (i.e., do not allow him to get what he wants out of the problem behavior). You might also follow “no” by telling him something he can have. You may also choose to offer praise or some sort of token each time he calmly accepts “no”.

2. The “no...ok” program-In this program, we modify the context in which a student hears “no”. “No” is usually problematic because it means a student can’t have what he has requested. In the “no...ok” program, we write “no” and “ok” on a board or card. We practice having the student say or sign “ok” when we point at “ok”. Then, we show the student a number of things and tell him “no”, he can’t have it. We point at the “ok” and prompt our student to say “ok”, then reinforce. (*A calm “ok” is incompatible with protest.)

We go immediately from one practice opportunity to the next. This increases the chance of student success because he has very little time to “forget” the lesson, and the density of opportunity looks very different from natural opportunities to hear “no”.

If possible, we start this practice by pointing at reinforcers and saying “no”. If necessary, we start this program by pointing at neutral items and telling our student “no”.

Students rarely fail at this simple level. If a student does protest, we follow his current behavior plan for dealing with protests. Ideally, this will involve saying “oops, that wasn’t right, let’s try again.....no cookie” and point at “ok” again.

Phase 2 -we begin to disperse opportunities for the student to be told something negative after he requests something. We’d like there to be at least 15-20 seconds in between “no’s” (or other forms of negative feedback). This is a little bit more difficult, because it is beginning to resemble natural opportunities to hear “no”.

We will still initiate “no” opportunities, but will begin to respond “no” to some of our student’s initiations, too. It tends to be more difficult for students to tolerate “no” after their initiations. Some students will try to turn this into a “Phase 1 exercise” by asking for items at a high rate.

In Phase 2, we should make the “ok” sign to our student as we provide negative feedback. We still do not reinforce whiney responses. We will correct those responses, withhold reinforcement that he would have earned for a calm “ok”, and tell him that he can ask again later.

Phase 3-opportunities to hear negative feedback after requests should occur no more than once very few minutes. We will show the student the “ok” sign as we negate his request, and reinforce pretty generously with a different reinforcer each time he calmly says “ok”.

Phase 4-the same as Phase 3, except we very rarely prompt with the “ok” sign.

Phase 5-the same as Phase 4, except now we don’t reinforce generously every time the student calmly says “ok”.

Indirect Interventions

Indirect interventions take advantage of new, sometimes fun, ways to practice tolerating (and respecting) “no”. In some cases, especially with students who already have the capacity to tolerate/respect “no”, but just don’t like it, these indirect interventions are a painless way to completely establish tolerance of, and respect for, “no”.

1. Red Light/Green Light-this can be a fun way to provide negative feedback (i.e., Red Light). I usually say “stop” instead, as this word is more functional in natural circumstances. This game is scripted in *What You Need to Know about Motivation and Teaching Games* (Ward, 2008).
2. Hotter/Colder-In this game, a prize is hidden and we say hotter/colder as our student gets further from or closer to a reinforcer. I usually say “yes/no” because these words are more functional in natural circumstances. In this game, “no” is merely informational, and it is in the student’s best interest to calmly use this information to find his prize quickly. Most students like this game, which makes “no” more tolerable and accelerates respect for “no”. Again, this game is scripted in *What You Need to Know about Motivation and Teaching Games* (Ward, 2008).

Dimensions Grid

<u>Easier</u>	<u>Harder</u>
Fun context.	Serious context.
Densely packed practice opportunities.	Dispersed practice opportunities.
Reinforcement available for tolerating/respecting “no”.	No additional reinforcement available for tolerating/respecting “no”.
Textual or gestural prompts available to say “ok”.	No prompts available to say “ok”.

Data-this will depend upon the procedures you choose for addressing tolerance of (and perhaps respect for) “no”. Regardless of intervention, you should take data on the levels of problem behaviors that follow “no”. Though more difficult, you should also gather data on successful tolerance of “no”, especially in the natural environment.

Moving forward/backward-forward movement will depend upon the procedures you chose for addressing tolerance of (and perhaps respect for) “no”. Advancement criteria for Red Light/Green Light and Hotter/Colder are available in *What You Need to Know about Motivation and Teaching Games* (Ward, 2008). Within the “no...ok” program, progress through the phases should usually follow 3-5 days of 90% success at the current level.