

CORRESPONDENCE TRAINING

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October 28, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *CORRESPONDENCE TRAINING*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES.
Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=65005>

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology (Clinical/Behavioral), Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Self-Management

1. Core Definition and Behavioral Mechanism

Correspondence Training (CT) is a structured behavioral intervention designed primarily for children and adolescents, focusing on establishing and strengthening the relationship between an individual's verbal behavior (what they say) and their non-verbal behavior (what they do). It is fundamentally a strategy for fostering self-management and self-regulation skills by bringing overt actions under the control of the individual's own verbal repertoire. The core premise involves differentially reinforcing instances where the verbal report or commitment matches the subsequent action, thereby increasing the likelihood that one form of behavior will predict or accurately reflect the other. This process is crucial because, in many instances of behavioral difficulties, a disconnect exists between an individual knowing what they should do (verbal rule-governance) and actually performing that action (behavioral compliance).

The intervention operates by treating verbal behavior--such as making a commitment or describing an action--as a form of operant behavior that can be shaped and reinforced. By systematically requiring and reinforcing the accurate correspondence between saying and doing, the therapy aims to transform verbal commitments into discriminative stimuli (Sd) that occasion the desired non-verbal response. Correspondence Training is thus categorized as a powerful technique for promoting generalization of skills learned in controlled environments to natural settings where immediate external contingencies may be sparse.

2. Historical Origin and Theoretical Foundation

The systematic development and formalization of Correspondence Training emerged during the mid-20th century within the field of behavioral psychology, specifically linked to the work of researchers such as Alan C. Israel and K. Daniel O'Leary in the 1970s. Their research sought methods to increase the effectiveness of behavioral interventions by incorporating the subject's own verbal reports into the reinforcement structure. This approach addressed a significant challenge in traditional operant conditioning: maintaining behavior change when external reinforcement schedules were thinned or removed. The theoretical roots of CT lie deeply in B.F. Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior, specifically the relationship between tacts (labeling/describing) and mands (requests/commitments), and how these verbal operants relate to other classes of behavior.

The initial findings suggested that merely teaching a child the rules or expectations (i.e., increasing their verbal knowledge) was insufficient to reliably produce the desired actions. CT provides the

critical link, making the verbal behavior itself a reinforced antecedent or consequence for the non-verbal behavior. The intervention capitalizes on the human capacity for self-monitoring and rule-governed behavior, differentiating it from interventions that rely solely on external prompts and immediate consequences. The creation of correspondence essentially establishes a secondary, internalized contingency manager.

3. Components of Correspondence Training

Correspondence Training is typically divided into two distinct procedural variations, depending on the sequence in which the verbal and non-verbal behaviors occur. Both types utilize differential reinforcement, meaning that the highest level of reinforcement is reserved specifically for the instances where the subject's action aligns perfectly with their verbal statement, whether that statement is a prior commitment or a subsequent account.

These two variations are known universally as "Say-Do" and "Do-Say" correspondence. While both serve the ultimate goal of strengthening the verbal-non-verbal link, they address slightly different aspects of behavioral control: the Say-Do procedure focuses on planning and commitment, whereas the Do-Say procedure emphasizes self-awareness and accurate reporting, which are critical components of self-monitoring and accountability.

4. Procedural Implementation: Say-Do Correspondence

The **Say-Do** procedure focuses on reinforcing a commitment to act, followed by the successful execution of that action. This variation is particularly useful for behaviors requiring planning, initiation, or adherence to rules. The process involves three primary steps, beginning with the individual making an explicit, verbal commitment about an action they plan to perform later. For example, a child might verbally commit to "completing three math problems during independent work time."

The second step requires the individual to perform the specified non-verbal action. The critical third step involves evaluating the outcome. If the non-verbal behavior (completing the math problems) corresponds accurately to the initial verbal commitment, the individual receives a high-value reinforcer. If the individual performs the task but failed to make the initial commitment, or if they committed but failed to perform the task, a lower level of reinforcement (or no reinforcement) is provided. By consistently reinforcing only the *correspondence* (the link between saying and doing), the verbal commitment itself gains discriminative control over the subsequent action, effectively increasing the probability of task initiation and follow-through.

5. Procedural Implementation: Do-Say Correspondence

The **Do-Say** procedure reverses the sequence, focusing on reinforcement contingent upon the

accurate verbal reporting of an action already completed. This technique is often used to foster self-awareness, accountability, and accurate self-monitoring, particularly for actions that occur without direct adult observation, or behaviors that are naturally difficult to track, such as prosocial interactions or internal emotional regulation attempts.

In the Do-Say model, the individual first performs the desired non-verbal action (e.g., sharing a toy with a peer). Subsequently, they are asked to provide an oral account or report of their behavior (e.g., "I shared my truck with Timmy"). Reinforcement is delivered if and only if the verbal report is an accurate reflection of the observed or verified action. If the individual performs the behavior but reports inaccurately, or if they fail to perform the behavior but report that they did (lying), reinforcement is withheld or correction procedures are implemented. This differential reinforcement strengthens the reporting behavior and links it intrinsically to the successful execution of the desired non-verbal action, reinforcing the act of accurate self-monitoring.

6. Target Populations and Applications

Correspondence Training is widely applied within educational and clinical settings dealing with behavioral challenges, notably in populations of children and adolescents, including those diagnosed with developmental disabilities, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and typical populations exhibiting problems with non-compliance or impulsivity. Its effectiveness stems from its utility in bridging the gap between instructional knowledge and independent performance.

Common applications include increasing academic productivity, such as completing homework or staying on-task; promoting adherence to therapeutic goals, such as committing to practice a new coping skill; and improving social behaviors, such as committing to use appropriate language or resolving conflict peacefully. By transferring behavioral control from external agents (parents, teachers) to the individual's own verbal rules, CT serves as a crucial component in teaching self-control and independent functioning, thereby maximizing the generalization and maintenance of treatment gains over time and across different environments.

7. Efficacy and Empirical Support

Numerous empirical studies have validated the effectiveness of Correspondence Training across diverse populations and target behaviors. Research consistently demonstrates that the systematic reinforcement of correspondence is more effective in increasing desired behaviors than simply reinforcing the non-verbal behavior alone or reinforcing the verbal commitment alone. The differential reinforcement schedule--where correspondence receives substantially higher reinforcement than non-correspondence--is identified as the critical variable necessary for the intervention's success.

Furthermore, CT shows promise in contexts where direct observation is impractical. For instance,

Do-Say procedures allow clinicians or educators to utilize self-report data reliably, provided the initial training phases ensure correspondence is robustly established and verified. The intervention's success is often attributed to its ability to make the verbal statement serve as a self-generated prompt (in Say-Do) or a self-reinforcer (in Do-Say) for the required action, thus internalizing the behavioral contingency.

8. Limitations and Implementation Challenges

Despite its proven efficacy, Correspondence Training presents several practical and ethical limitations. A primary challenge, particularly in the Do-Say procedure, is the possibility of inaccurate reporting or outright deception. If an individual learns that they can receive reinforcement simply by stating they performed the action, regardless of whether they actually did it, the intervention breaks down, reinforcing dishonesty rather than accurate self-monitoring. Clinicians must implement strict verification procedures, particularly during the initial training phases, to ensure the verbal report is truthful.

Another limitation involves the intensity of training required. Successfully implementing CT demands consistency, highly trained staff (or parents), and the use of differential reinforcement that is powerful enough to motivate the individual to maintain the correspondence link. The intervention may also be less effective for individuals with severe cognitive impairments or very limited verbal repertoires, as the procedure fundamentally relies on the capacity for rule-following and verbal mediation of behavior. Finally, careful planning is necessary to ensure the transition from externally managed correspondence reinforcement to naturally occurring reinforcement maintains the newly established link between saying and doing.

Further Reading

[Applied Behavior Analysis \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Israel, A. C., & O'Leary, K. D. \(1973\). The effects of verbal and tangible reinforcement on children's correspondence of saying and doing. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 6\(4\), 683-695.](#)

[O'Leary, K. D., & Israel, A. C. \(1975\). Correspondence between verbal and nonverbal behavior. In E. J. Mash, L. A. Hamerlynck, & L. C. Handy \(Eds.\), *Behavior modification and families* \(pp. 95-124\). Brunner/Mazel.](#)