Teaching Emotions to Children with Autism: Identification, Demonstration, and Explanation of Occasioning Stimuli

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Teaching children to identify emotions is a common practice within the field of autism intervention. However, skills that are not often taught include identification of emotions within a situational context, and identification and discrimination of environmental events that occasion the emotions (with corresponding explanations). This article illustrates several responses measured through Precision Teaching that address these skills across several learning channels.

Leila was almost 7 years old when we began this Chart. She had a diagnosis of high-functioning autism and received 20-25 hours per week of behavior analytic intervention in both her home and school. Leila was extremely interested in others' emotions, but she had difficulty correctly identifying them and explaining the events that may have caused the emotions. Therefore, we decided to approach instruction with a heavy emphasis on pragmatic language related to emotions.

Leila worked on this skill for no longer than 10 minutes each day. Her therapist (the second author) set a daily improvement goal each day based on Leila's best previous performance. When she met her daily improvement goal, Leila earned a self-chosen reward, such as reading a book or playing a game with the therapist.

We first introduced a set of five emotions in a pure See-Say learning channel, in which the therapist demonstrated an emotion and Leila labeled it. A dot in the fourth and fifth cycles of the Standard Celeration Chart (SCC) represented a correct response. Across both SCCs, dots in the first cycle show the number of timed practices required for Leila to achieve the performance charted in the other cycles. For Leila, the timing charted in the middle cycles was the one during which her frequency of correct responding was highest.

Given Leila's rapid x5 acceleration across the first set of emotions, we moved immediately to "Hear situation-Say emotion." In this phase, Leila heard a situation described by the therapist and identified how the agent in the situation probably felt. For example, if the therapist said, "Daddy came home with a pet dog," Leila might say, "Surprised." In the third phase, Hear situation-Say emotion and why, Leila also provided an explanation of *why* the agent may have felt the respective emotion based on the events in the description of the situation that she heard. For example, if the therapist said, "Daddy came home with a pet dog," Leila might say, "Surprised, because I wasn't expecting a pet dog!" At this point, a dot on the SCC also represented a plausible explanation in addition to a correctly identified emotion.

We then introduced the second set of five emotions in a See-Say learning channel during the next phase, but again Leila's rapid x3 celeration allowed us to move quickly to more pragmatically oriented slices. Given Leila's steady growth upon introduction of the next phase, Hear situation-Say emotion, we moved quickly into Hear situation-Say emotion and why.

During the next phase, titled Hear emotion-Say situations and why, we had Leila identify multiple situations in which she may experience a particular emotion. We also had her provide a reason why she would feel that way during that situation. When Leila reached her frequency aim of 70-90 correct syllables per minute (represented by an open circle on the SCC), we had her also provide situations and explanations for the first set of five emotions in the same fashion.

During the next slice, we introduced a third and final set of five emotions. We decided that given her rapid acceleration in previous See-Say slices, we would introduce this set of emotions in a more advanced format, Hear situation-Say emotion. This slice proved more difficult for Leila, perhaps because of vacations by both the family and the therapist during this slice, which resulted in less consistency of timed practice. Therefore, we devoted the next phase to working on Leila's discrimination practice among the three emotions that caused her the most difficulty in the previous slice.

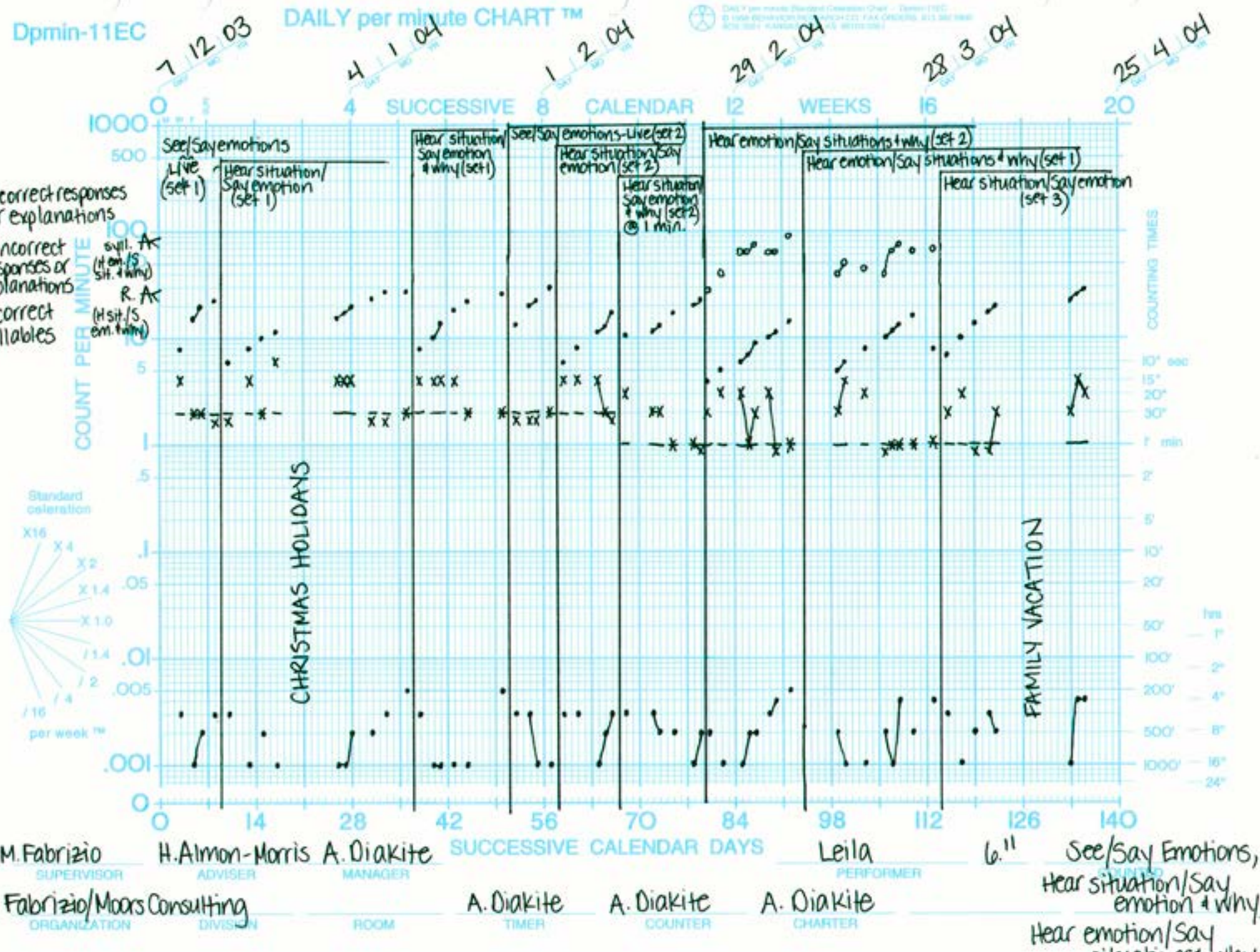
We proceeded through the next phase, Hear situation-Say emotion and why, and then moved to Hear emotion-Say situations and why with the third set of emotions. We then combined all three sets of emotions and had Leila provide multiple

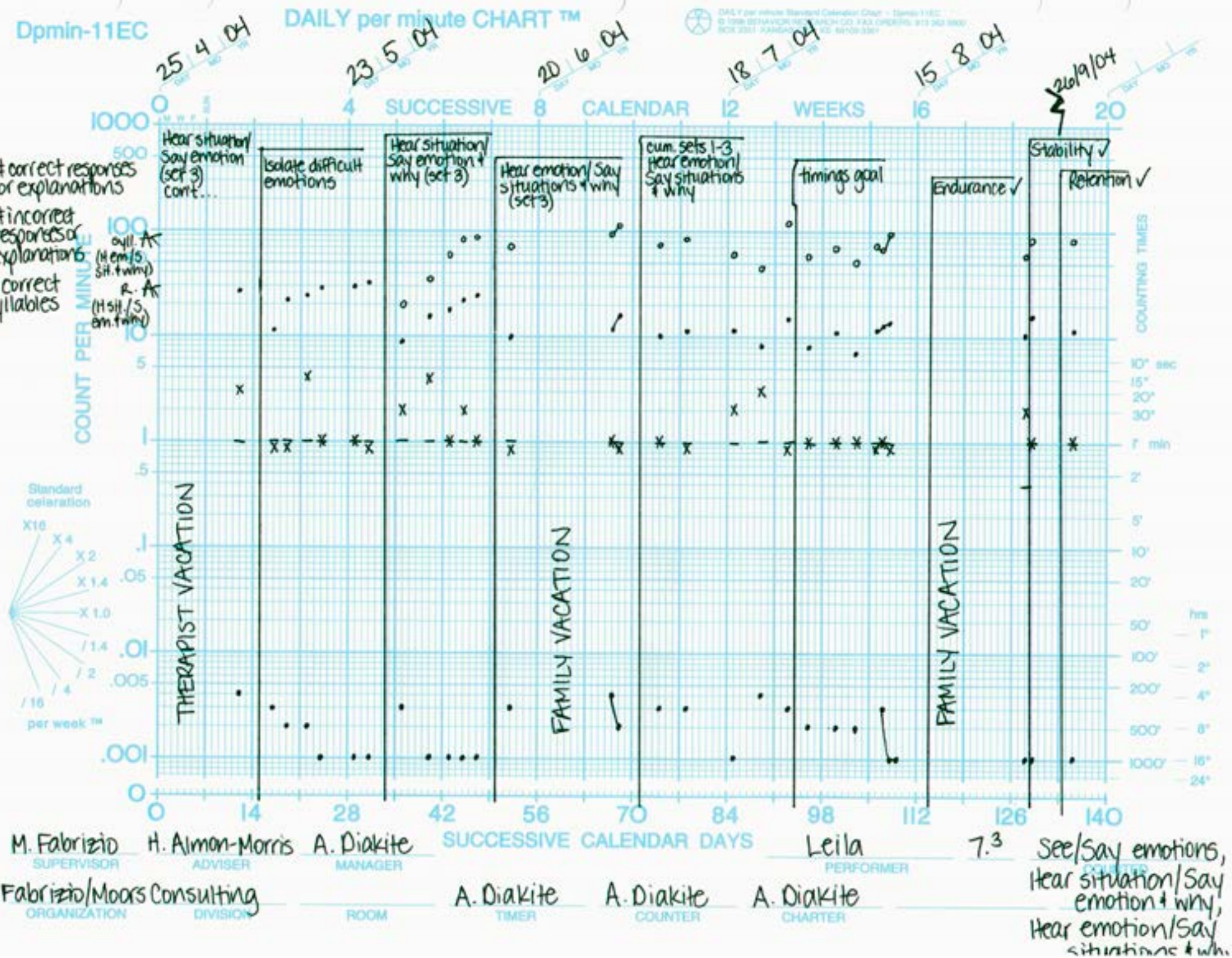
situations and explanations for all 15 emotions. Although her number of syllables per minute dropped between the second and fourth days of this phase (perhaps because of length of time between practices), her performance eventually rebounded to above her syllable frequency aim during the last session of this slice.

During the next phase, we implemented a timings goal, a common practice that has been very important for Leila historically, given that she often achieved her daily improvement goal in multiple timings due to the extra practice she received during error corrections. Therefore, to pass her outcomes checks (retention, endurance, stability, and application), we established a two-part contingency for her in which she must meet her correct frequency performance aim in one timing for at least two consecutive days. In this particular chart, it took her six sessions to achieve this two-part contingency.

Leila's endurance check performance was just slightly below her frequency aim of 70-90 correct syllables per minute, while her stability check performance was within that frequency range. She also passed her retention check after we had stopped practice on this skill for 1 month. We did not conduct an application check for this skill because every session consisted of a sample of new situations supplied by the therapist when applicable. Although emotions were taught in sets of five and did not vary within the slice, Leila's novel situations and explanations were differentially reinforced throughout the entire chart.

Now that Leila has demonstrated fluent performance when identifying emotions, identifying corresponding situations, and providing explanations for both, we plan to move on to teaching more cause-and-effect relationships involving multiple agents and their emotions, different perspectives or feelings about a single topic, and other more advanced perspective-taking skills.


Dpmin-11EC
DAILY per minute CHART ™
7 12 03
4 1 04
1 2 04
29 2 04
28 3 04
25 4 04
SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR WEEKS
COUNT PER MINUTE
COUNTING TIMES
#correct responses or explanations
#incorrect responses or explanations
#correct syllables
See/Say emotions Live (set 1)
Hear situation/Say emotion (set 1)
Hear situation/Say emotion & why (set 1)
See/Say emotions-Live (set 2)
Hear situation/Say emotion (set 2)
Hear situation/Say emotion & why (set 2) @ 1 min.
Hear emotion/Say situations & why (set 2)
Hear emotion/Say situations & why (set 1)
Hear situation/Say emotion (set 3)
CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS
FAMILY VACATION
Standard celeration
per week ™
SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR DAYS
M. Fabrizio
SUPERVISOR
H. Almon-Morris
ADVISER
A. Diakite
MANAGER
Leila
PERFORMER
6.11
See/Say Emotions, Hear situation/Say emotion & why
Hear emotion/Say situations & why
Fabrizio/Moors Consulting
ORGANIZATION
A. Diakite
TIMER
A. Diakite
COUNTER
A. Diakite
CHARTER


Dpmin-11EC
DAILY per minute CHART ™
25 4 04
23 5 04
20 6 04
18 7 04
15 8 04
26/9/04
SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR WEEKS
COUNT PER MINUTE
COUNTING TIMES
= # correct responses or explanations
= # incorrect responses or explanations
correct syllables
Hear situation/ Say emotion (set 3) cont...
Isolate difficult emotions
Hear situation/ Say emotion + why (set 3)
Hear emotion/ Say situations + why (set 3)
cum. sets 1-3 Hear emotion/ Say situations + why
timings goal
Endurance ✓
Stability ✓
Retention ✓
THERAPIST VACATION
FAMILY VACATION
FAMILY VACATION
Standard celeration
per week ™
SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR DAYS
M. Fabrizio
SUPERVISOR
H. Alman-Morris
ADVISER
A. Diakite
MANAGER
Leila
PERFORMER
7.3
See/Say emotions, Hear situation/Say emotion + why, Hear emotion/Say
Fabrizio/Moors Consulting
ORGANIZATION
DIVISION
ROOM
A. Diakite
TIMER
A. Diakite
COUNTER
A. Diakite
CHARTER