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ABSTRACT

Aggression, tantrums, and self-injury can function as escape behaviors, allowing children to terminate aversive demand (teaching) situations. In one group of six psychotic children, these behaviors were frequent in demand situations, and rare in nondemand situations. Further, when stimuli correlated with the termination of demands were presented, problematic behaviors decreased dramatically. These problems were treated in two ways--by an escape-extinction procedure in which the child was prohibited from leaving the demand situation as long as disruptive behavior was occurring, and the introduction of strongly preferred reinforcers to attenuate the aversiveness of the demand situation thereby reducing the motivation to emit escape responses. Such an approach was successful in eliminating the aggressive and self-injurious behaviors of two children and the tantrum behavior of two others. (Author/PJC)

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Escape as a Factor in the Maintenance of Aggression, Tantrums and Self-injury

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Escape as a factor in the maintenance of aggression, tantrums, and self-injury

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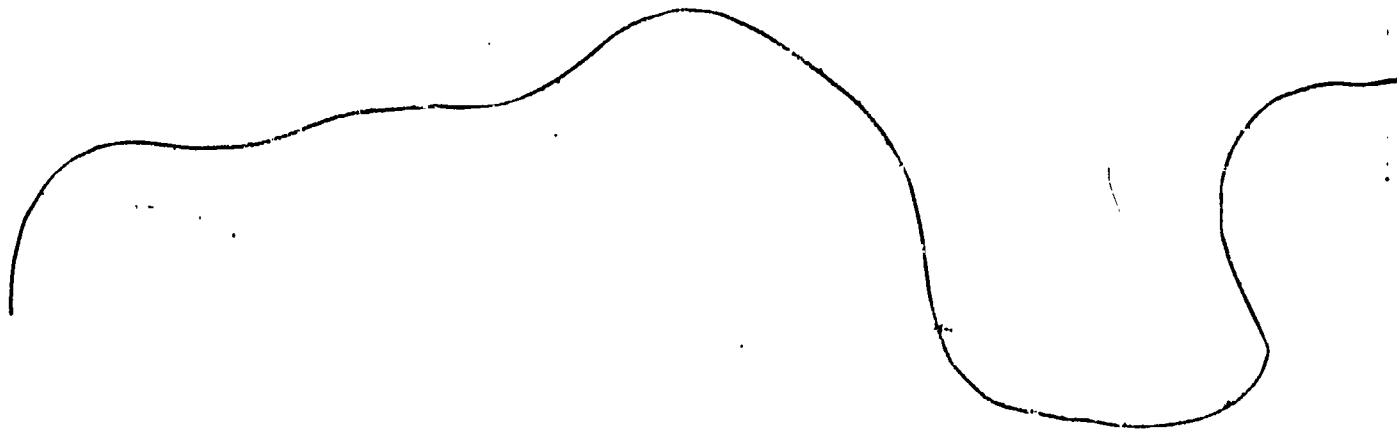
Psychotic children typically manifest a variety of severe behavior disorders which help retard the acquisition of appropriate social and academic behaviors. Foremost among such problem behaviors are aggression, tantrums, and self-injury. Traditionally, behavioral clinicians have stressed the attention-getting function of these behaviors. That is, children were said to engage in such undesirable conduct as a means of coercing social reinforcers from adults. Several recent studies in our laboratory have suggested, however, that other variables may also have an important influence on the maintenance of these problem behaviors. Specifically, it appears that under some circumstances escape factors may play a significant role.

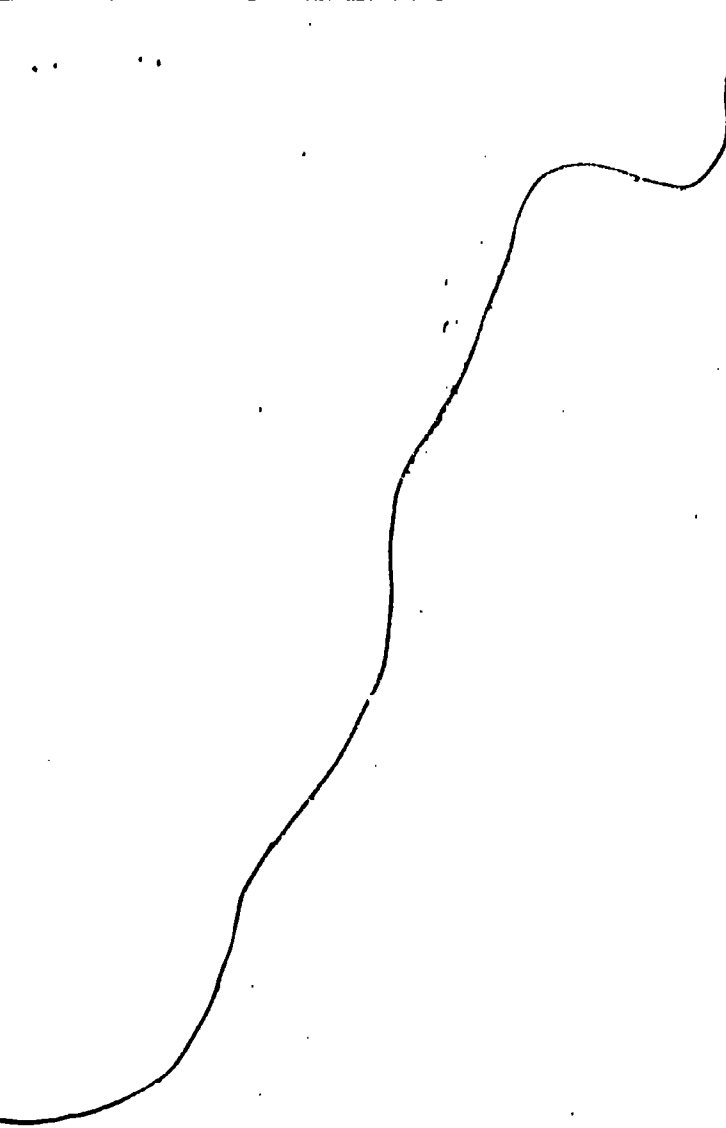
Data are presented on six psychotic children who participated in several sets of experiments using a reversal design as the method of evaluation. All children were socially withdrawn, had minimal verbal skills, and engaged in high rates of self-stimulatory behaviors. Two of the children were severely self-injurious; two were aggressive; and two engaged in high rates of tantrums.

For each child under study, the specific problem behavior which characterized that child was frequently observed in a situation containing many demands and rarely observed in a situation containing no demands. Further, when stimuli correlated with the termination of demands were presented, problematic behaviors abruptly decreased to near-zero levels. These data are consistent with the view that such problem behaviors may be functioning as escape responses which are maintained by the negative reinforcement inherent in the termination or presumably aversive demand situations.

Two treatment strategies are suggested by an escape conceptualization. First, to the extent that a problem behavior is maintained by escape from a

demand situation, one approach would be to prohibit the child from leaving the situation as long as the child was engaging in undesirable conduct. This strategy was successfully employed to eliminate the aggressive behavior of one child. A second strategy is based on the assumption that escape behaviors are produced because the demand sessions are aversive. Therefore, a plausible treatment tactic would be to reduce the aversiveness of the sessions by systematically introducing high levels of socially reinforcing activities or preferred sources of primary reinforcement into the sessions. Such an approach was successful in eliminating the aggressive and self-injurious behaviors of two children and the tantrum behavior of two other children.





Making demands on a child increases the frequency of problem behaviors over that obtained when demands are not presented. This effect is seen whether the behavior involved is aggression (Figure 1), tantrums (Figure 2), or self-injury (Figure 3).

Figure 1

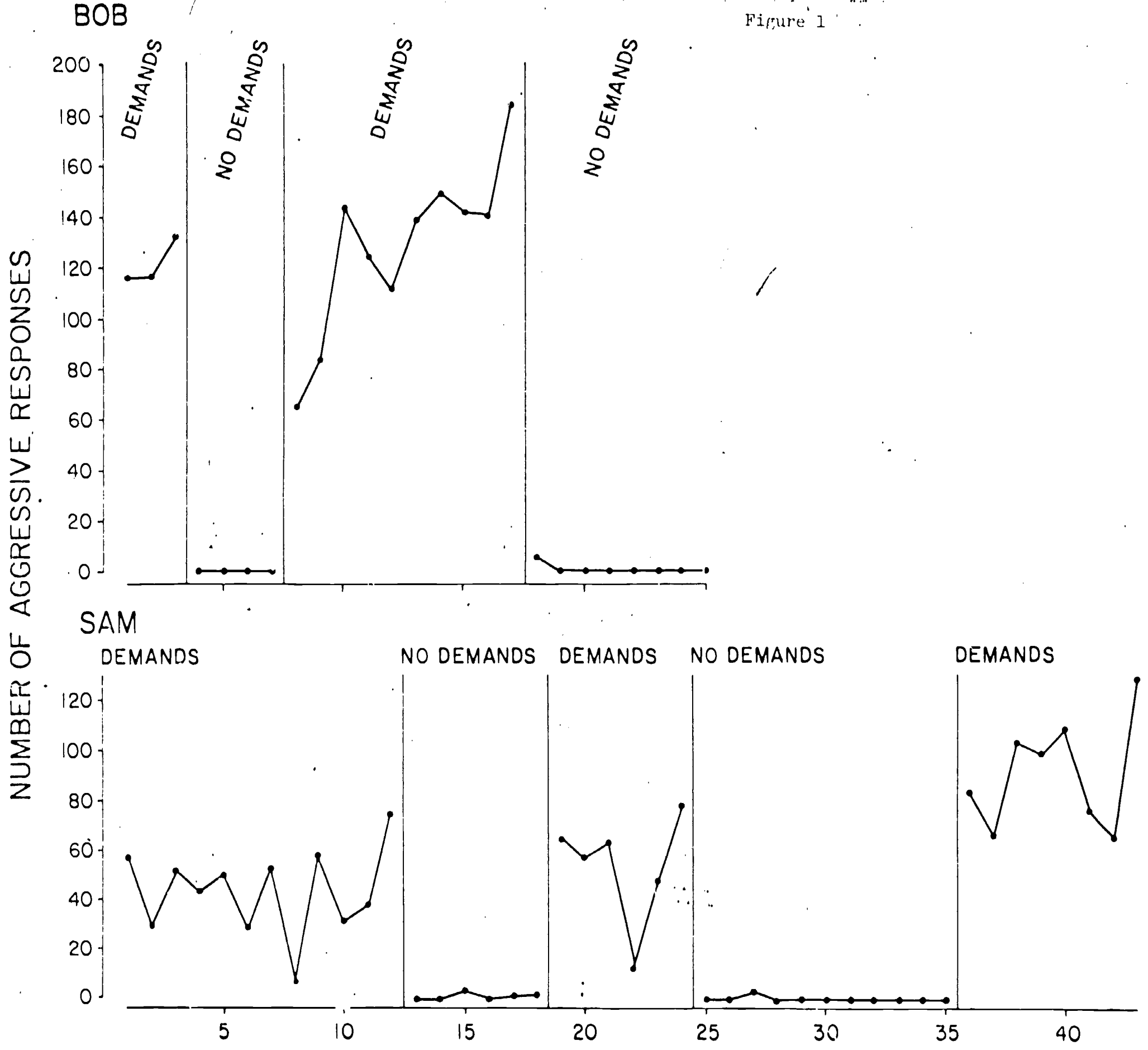


Figure 2

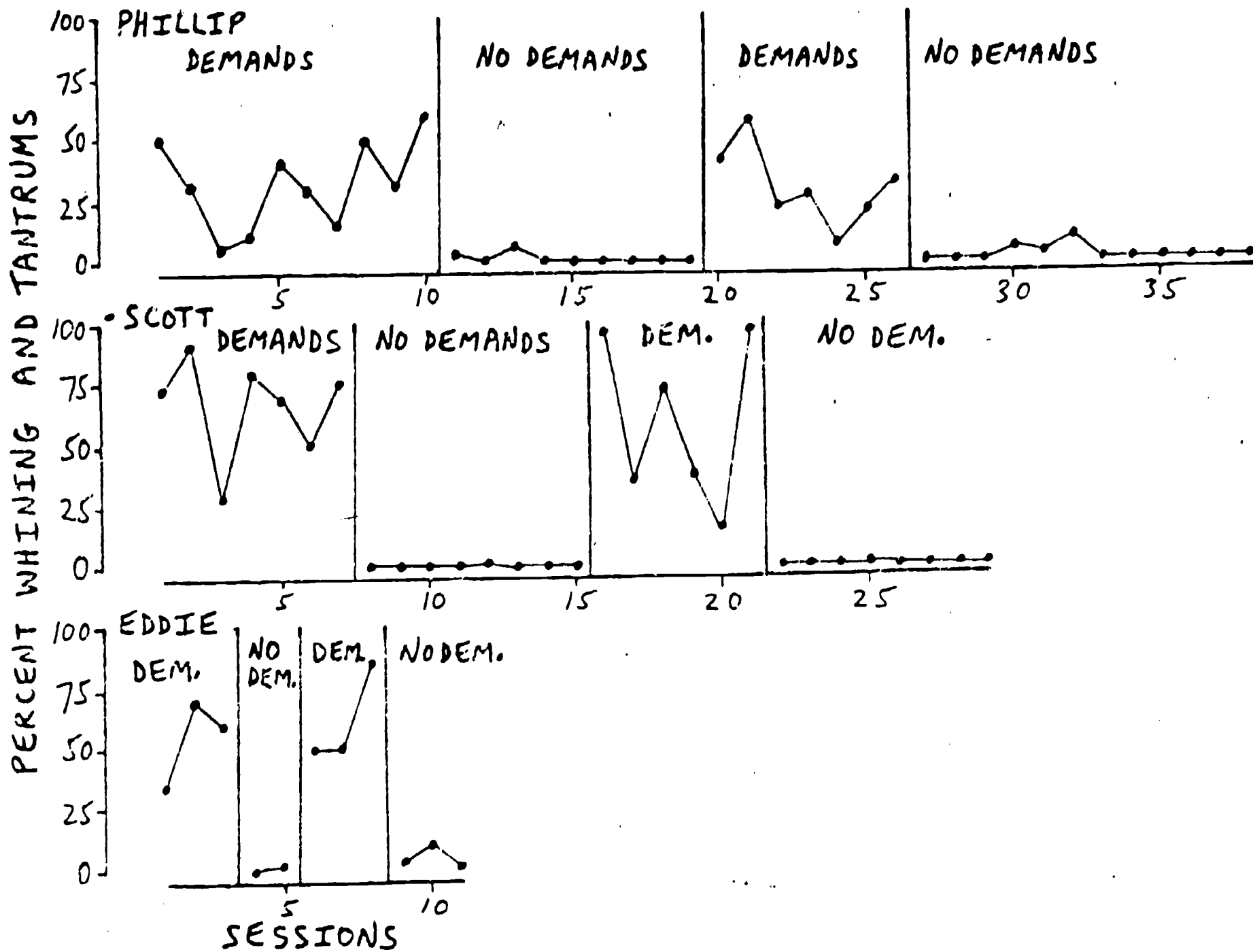
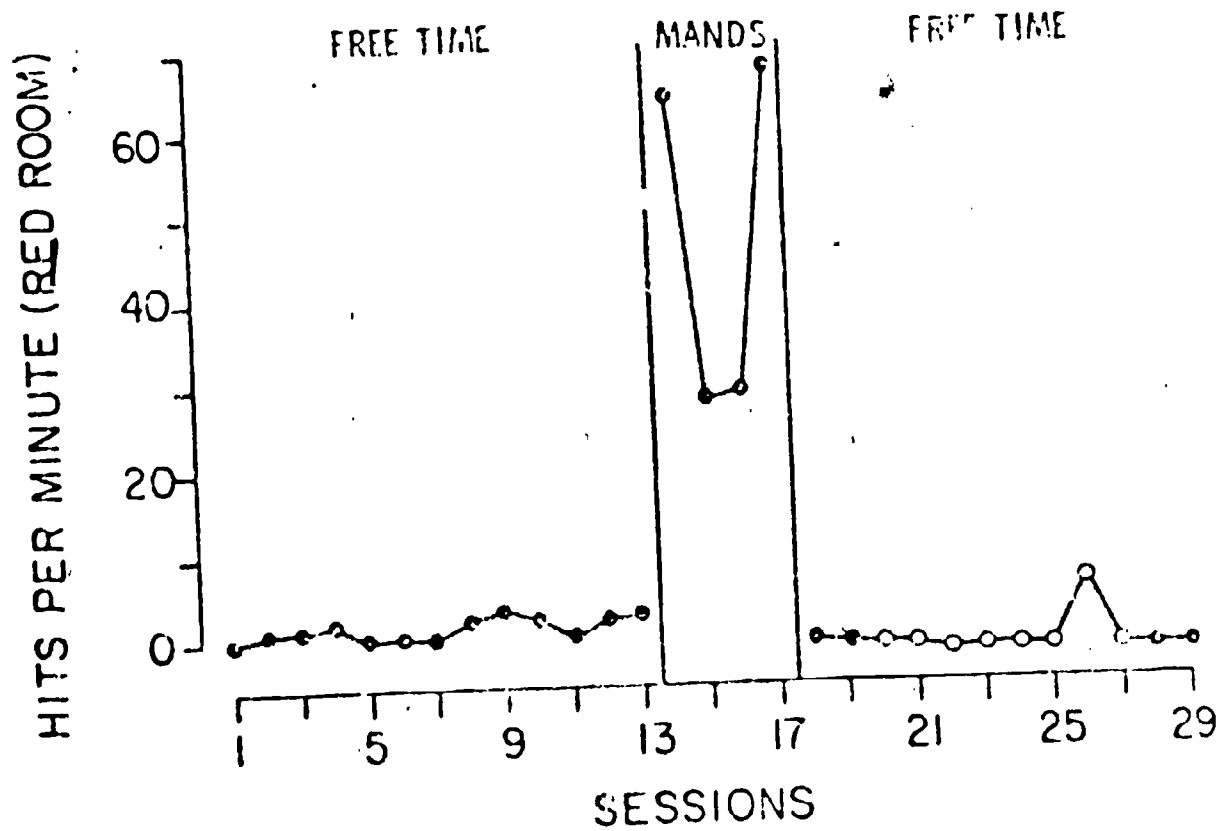
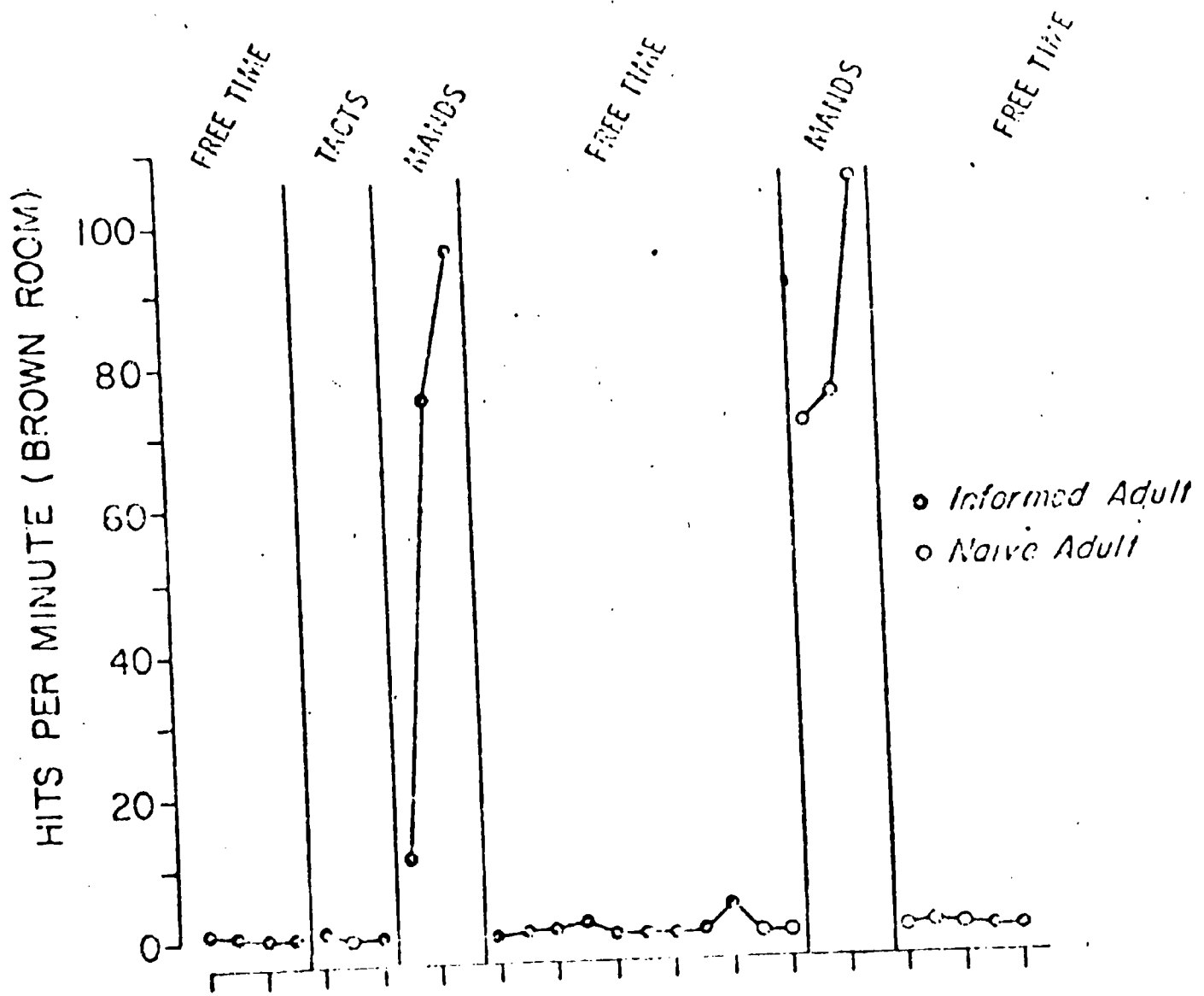


Figure 3



When a stimulus which is correlated with the termination of demands (Safety Signal) is presented to a child, problem behaviors abruptly decrease. This decrease does not occur in the absence of a Safety Signal. The effect is seen whether the behavior involved is aggression (Figure 4), tantrums (Figure 5), or self-injury (Figure 6). Note: In Figure 4, the Safety Signal was introduced after the 5th minute for Bob and after the 10th minute for Sam; in Figure 5, it was introduced after the 10th minute for both children. In Figure 6, the Safety Signal was "O.K., let's go"; "The sky is blue" was the equivalent of No Safety Signal.

Figure 4

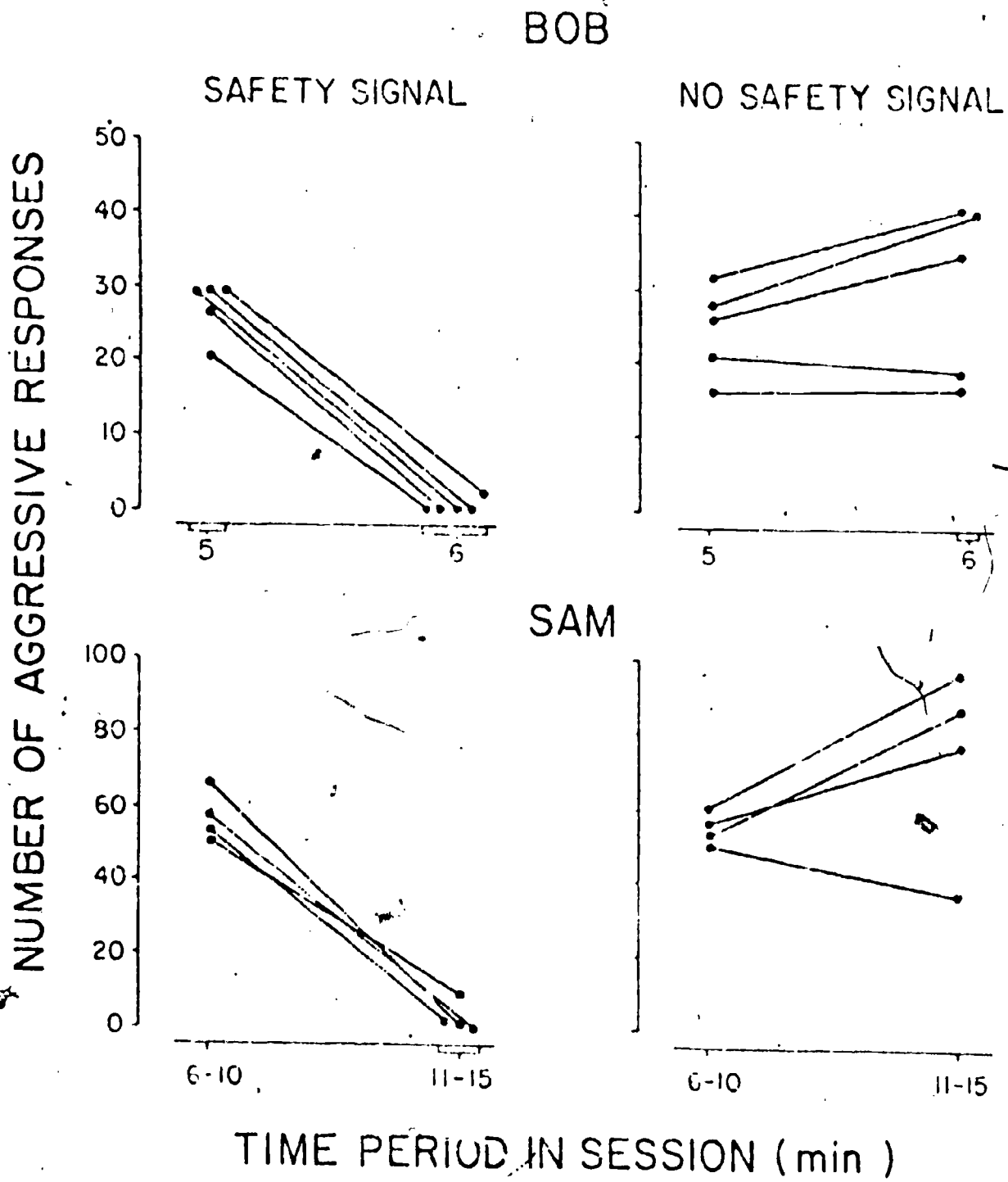


Figure 5

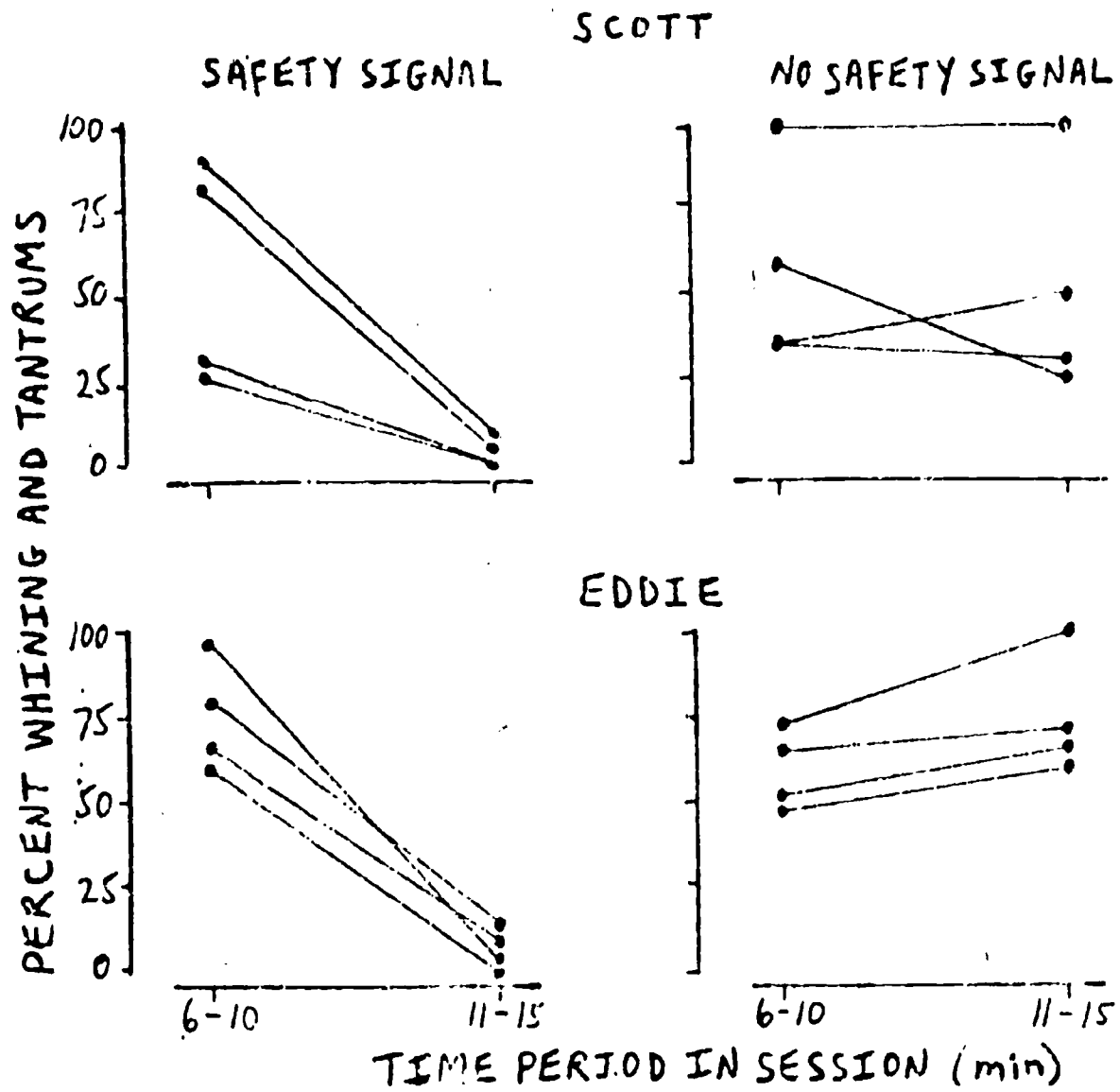
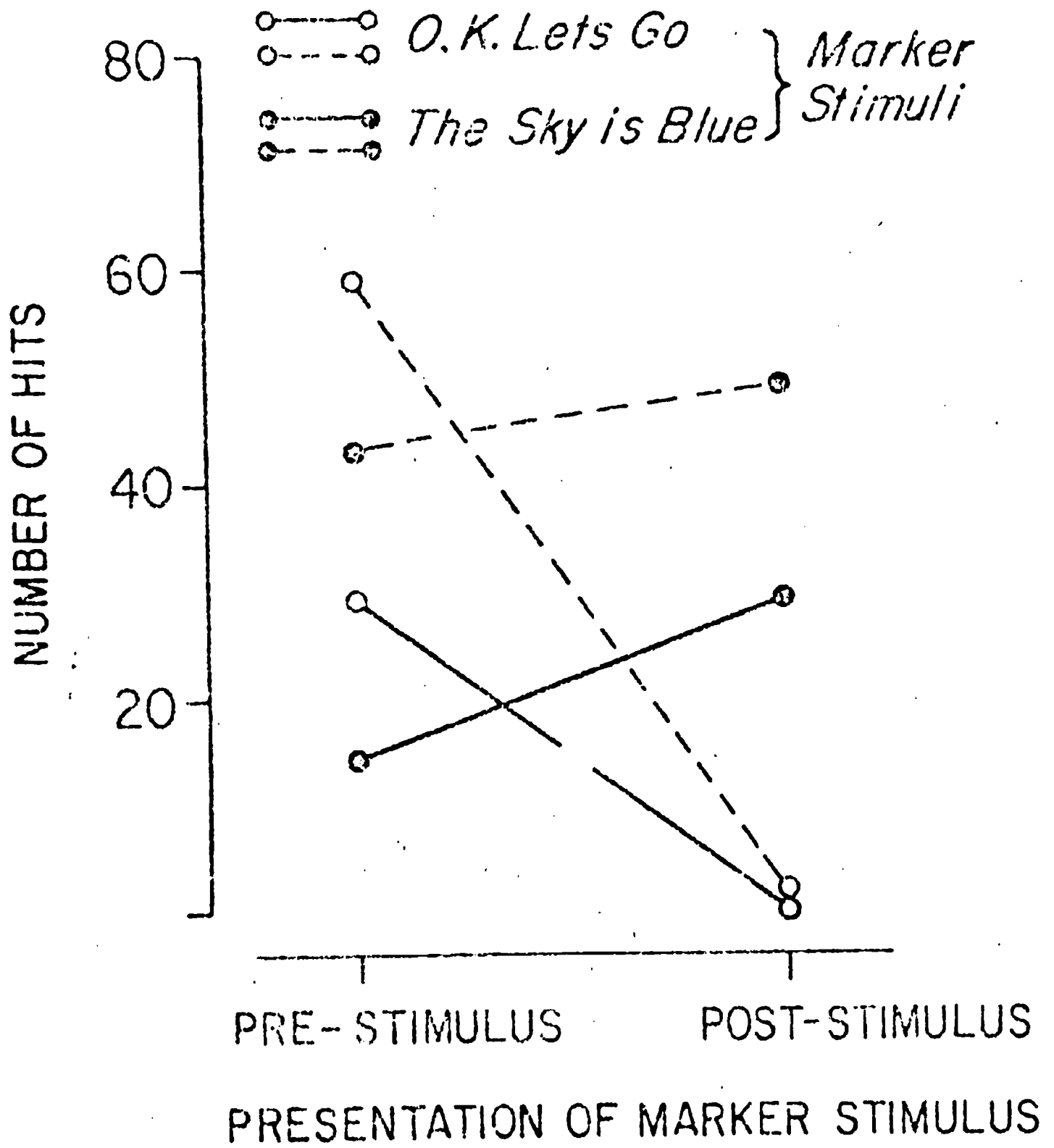


Figure 6



If these problem behaviors are viewed as escape responses (the child attempts to escape an aversive demand situation by exhibiting problem behaviors), then one treatment might be to attenuate the aversiveness of the demand situation by introducing strong positive reinforcers into that situation, thereby reducing the motivation to emit escape responses. This procedure was carried out by introducing preferred toys and foods for one aggressive child (Figure 7) as well as for three children who exhibited tantrums (Figure 8); positive (amusing) topics of conversation were used for one self-injurious child (Figure 9). Another treatment used was to prevent the child from ever leaving the demand situation as long as problem behaviors were occurring (escape extinction). This treatment was carried out for one aggressive child (figure 10). In all of the above cases, problem behaviors were reduced.

Figure 7

NUMBER OF AGGRESSIVE RESPONSES

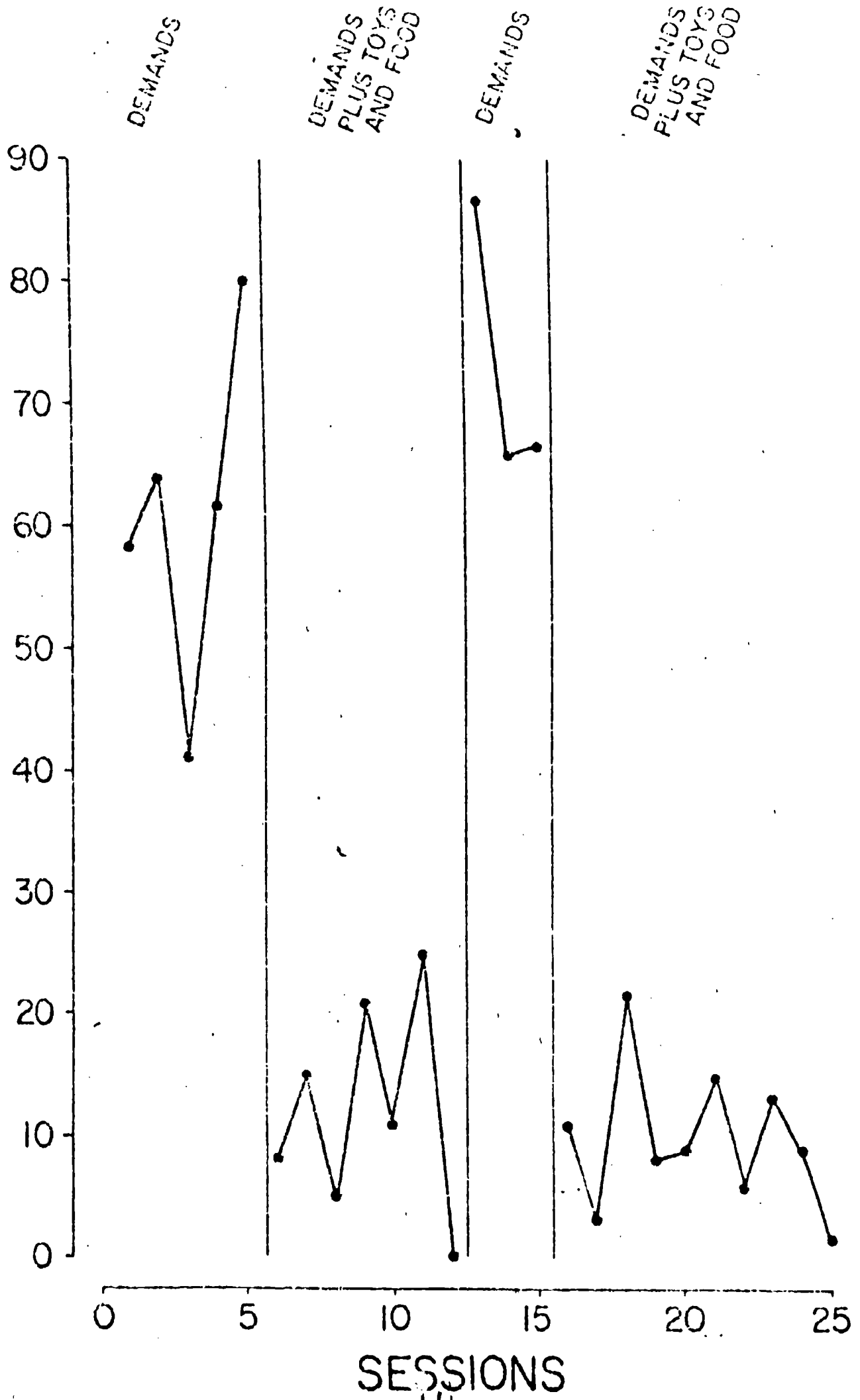


Figure 8

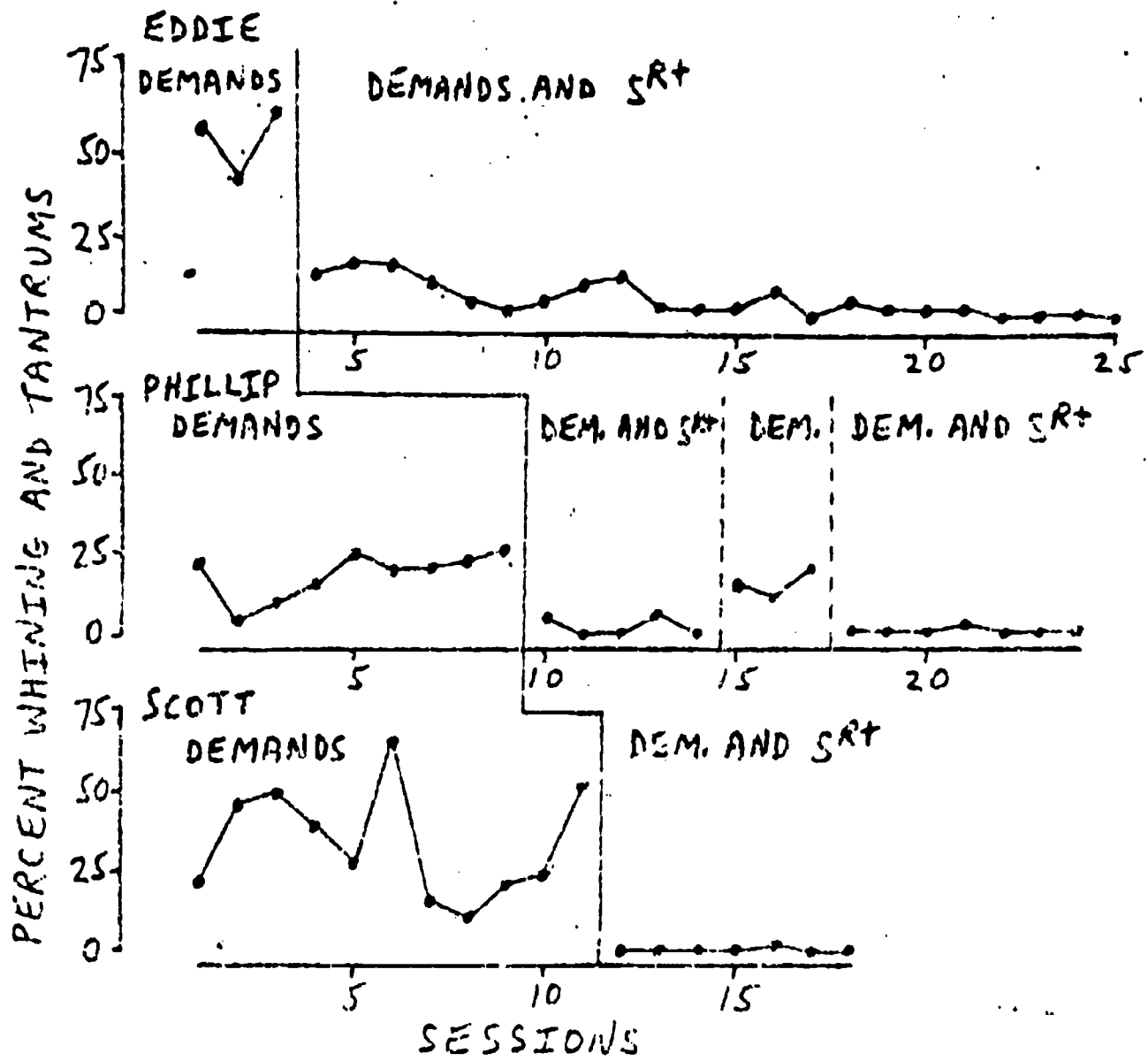


Figure 9

