

Frustration and Task Avoidance in Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Abstract

Frustration and task avoidance is often seen in classrooms that have students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of explicitly taught strategies for properly coping with frustration.

Statement of the Problem

Students with ASD often struggle to express frustration with a task and may shut down instead of asking for help. Based on previous studies for students with developmental delays, giving up on a task is an indicator of frustration (Jahromi, Meek, & Ober-Reynolds, 2012). If task refusal becomes a student's frequent reaction when the work that is presented seems too demanding, the student will quickly fall behind in academic areas. Research has shown that students with ASD do not use advanced coping strategies to deal with frustration (Jahromi et al., 2012). In order for these students to be successful in the general education classrooms, they must first be able to work independently and work through frustration on their own. Even in a classroom with paraprofessionals and extra support, the goal is for students to be able to complete their work with minimal assistance as independence is the ultimate goal. One study has shown that with interventions, students' disruptive behavior towards unpreferred tasks was decreased (Koegel, Singh, & Koegel, 2010). Once students are able to work through frustration and task refusal on their own, they will become independent and able to be successful in a general education classroom.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to describe the effects of teaching coping strategies to students with ASD in order to overcome frustration with demanding tasks. The following research question will be investigated: How effective are explicitly taught strategies for coping with frustration for students with Autism?

Literature Review

Koegel, Singh, and Koegel (2010) used a combination of positive reinforcers and child choice to increase academic motivation in students with ASD. Using parents and observations, researchers identified reinforcers that each child preferred. Within the academic task, children were also able to choose where they wanted to work and the instructional materials they wanted to use to complete the activity. With the interventions of positive reinforcers and choice within the task, the children's problem behaviors during academic tasks decreased. Their interest in the academic activities increased as well.

Keen and Pennell (2015) studied the effects that preferred items would have on learning. The researchers found that the children were more on task when their preferred items were imbedded in the academic tasks. The study did find, however, that while engagement was increased, their overall academic performance was not as high when the preferred items were embedded. "Finding ways to better engage children with ASD in learning is important, and results from this study suggest that we need to consider carefully how we measure task engagement and incorporate the child's interests and preferences during interventions" (Keen & Pennell, 2015, p. 64).

The research supports the goal of the action research. In order to stop task avoidance before it starts, students need to be provided with effective strategies and positively reinforced when using them correctly. The use of these strategies should lead to a decrease in student problem behaviors as well as an increase in instructional time for both teachers and students.

Research Methodology

This action research will take place at an elementary school in Palm Beach County. Seven students who are on the Autism Spectrum will participate in the study. All of the students are boys and are in a self-contained ASD classroom. The students range from Kindergarten to Third Grade, ages ranging from 5 to 8. Most of the students are in the self-contained classroom all day, however two go to general education classrooms for different subjects during the day, depending on their specific needs. The special education teacher, who is also the main classroom teacher, will be responsible for collecting data. The special education teacher as well as the classroom paraprofessionals will teach and facilitate the chosen strategies for dealing with frustration in the classroom.

Data will be collected on the following variables: (a) frequency of frustration/avoidance behaviors during academic tasks, (b) qualitative data describing specific avoidance and frustration behaviors and the learning environment in which they occurred, (c) students' perceptions of how to handle frustrating academic tasks, (d) amount of work completed/quality of work completed by students after frustration behaviors.

Results

Research findings will be available in time for the conference and will be presented. It is expected that results will show a decrease in frustration behaviors and an increase in the quantity and quality of student work.

Implications

Frustration and avoidance behaviors are seen frequently in classrooms of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Research has shown that these students have a harder time regulating their emotions and have less effective ways to cope with their frustration. If students are provided with proactive strategies to help them deal with frustration instead of resulting to avoidance behaviors, they are more likely to be successful in the school environment. Teachers could also benefit, as they would be able to spend less time redirecting problem behaviors and more time focusing on academic instruction.

References

- Jahromi, L. B., Meek, S. E., & Ober-Reynolds, S. (2012). Emotion regulation in the context of frustration in children with high functioning autism and their typical peers. *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 53:12, 1250-1258.
- Keen, D., & Pennell, D. (2015). The Use of Preferred Items in a Word-Learning Task: Effects on On-Task Behavior and Learning Outcomes of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Australasian Journal of Special Education*, 39, 56-66.
- Koegel, L. K., Singh, A. K., & Koegel, R. L. (2010). Improving Motivation for Academics in Children with Autism. *The Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 40, 1057-1066.