Initiation of Communication in Students with Autism

Abstract

Developing communication is key to helping children with autism become more independent. This study will explore whether direct instruction using a form of the picture exchange communication system to gain attention will increase the ability of students with autism to effectively communicate with others.

Statement of the Problem

According to Hale and Tager-Flusberg (2005), language and communication deficits are a core feature of autism. Some children with autism may be completely nonverbal. Those that do have verbal language may display echolalia; that is, only repeating what they hear. Many individuals with autism never acquire spoken language that is useful or functional. "Many children with autism do not initiate communication easily, using either spoken or augmentative language" (Carr & Felce, 2007, p.724). Impairments in the area of communication can lead to a number of severe or challenging behaviors in children with autism. Developing a functional form of communication is key to decreasing behaviors, and helping the child with autism acquire skills necessary to become more independent and participate in activities at home, school and in their community with a variety of people.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this research is to explore whether direct instruction using a form of the picture exchange communication system (PECS) to gain attention before pointing to a picture or phrase to make a request will increase the ability of nonverbal students with autism to effectively communicate with others.

Literature Review

PECS targets the initiation of communication, which is a problem area for many children with autism. Within the PECS system, interactions are initiated by exchanging a picture for a desired object. The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder has adopted PECS as an evidence-based practice. Tincani (2004) found that PECS was an appropriate form of communication for nonverbal children with autism. Communication instruction should occur within the context of a child's everyday life according to Carr and Felce (2007). PECS is not intended to be taught at a table using mass trials, but instead should be introduced and used during motivating daily activities using desired items.

Carr and Felce (2007) conducted a study on the impact of mastery of PECS to phase III on the communication skills of young children with autism. The results showed significant improvements in child-initiated communications. Through the course of the study the children demonstrated increased spontaneous initiations. Studies conducted by Paden, Kodak, Fisher, Gawley-Bullington, and Bouxsein (2012) and Schreibman and Stahmer (2014) support the findings of Carr and Felce (2007) by showing that the use of PECS led to increased initiations and positive outcomes for students with autism.

It should be noted that PECS has not been found to inhibit the development of verbal language (Schreibman &Stahmer, 2014). This is a concern for many caregivers of children with autism who are trying to increase language and communication in the child. According to Bondy (2012), there is no evidence to support that PECS impedes the development of vocalizations.

Research Methodology

The action research will take place at a public elementary school in Palm Beach County, Florida. The self-contained classroom for students with autism has eight students. This action research will focus on three non-verbal students; two in 2nd grade and one in 4th grade. The autism spectrum disorder (ASD) classroom teacher will work with the paraprofessionals in the classroom to develop a unified response system and protocol for responding to the students. Data will be collected on the following: (a) communication attempts for preferred items, (b) most preferred items, and (c) total number of daily communication attempts. All data will be kept by the classroom teacher.

The teacher will gain permission from the school principals, special education coordinator and parents of the students involved before beginning the action research. One of the students responds more favorably to written words cards than pictures. Therefore, word/phrase cards will be used in place of pictures to implement PECS in this case. The main goal of the action research is to have the students initiating communication by gaining adult attention and then making a request.

Results

Results will be available in time for the conference and will be presented.

Implications

The literature shows promising outcomes when using PECS with nonverbal students with autism. PECS is relatively easy to implement and can be done in the child's natural environment with no disruptive changes. A training protocol for caregivers and all those involved with the child can make implementation easy and uniform across the child's environments. Overall, it

will give the students a functional form of communicating with others and will help reduce undesirable behaviors that arise due to frustration.

References

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