

Education Update:

Using obsessions to foster social skills

Autistic children's obsessive behaviors frequently create problems in the classroom, but a new study shows that these same behaviors can also be the key to increasing social interactions between autistic and non-disabled students.

Mary Baker and colleagues used the obsessions of three young autistic children to design creative play activities in which both the autistic children and their peers could participate. The three activities included:

- A game of tag played on a giant map of the United States. In this game, one child would yell out the name of a state and tell the other children to hop, run, walk, or twirl to that state while the caller attempted to tag them. This game was based on the autistic child's obsession with the geography of the U.S.

- A follow-the-leader game, based on an autistic girl's obsession with Disney items. The leader of the game, wearing a Disney emblem, had to be followed and imitated by the other children.

- A tag game tied to an autistic boy's obsession with movie trivia. Ten laminated pictures of Disney movies were used as bases, and children had to run to the right bases using quotes about movies as clues.

Remember the Bettelheim Years?

Did you raise an autistic child during the 1950s and 1960s? Do you know someone—a relative or friend—who did?

J. J. Hanley is producing a documentary film about the effects of psychologist Bruno Bettelheim's once-popular philosophy, which blamed parents for their children's autism. According to Hanley, "the power of this film will lie in its ability to present the complex ways in which Bettelheim's theory directly affected the lives of mothers, fathers, and siblings of autistic children." In addition, Hanley hopes to raise awareness about autism, and the need for more research into its causes and treatment.

If you would like to participate in this project, contact J. J. Hanley, 847-256-7966. By mail: 1320 Greenwood Avenue, Wilmette, IL 60091. Email: jjh@megsinet.net.

Baker and colleagues say that all three autistic children involved in the project enjoyed the games and markedly increased their social play behavior, even in the absence of adult prompts. "Further," they say, "the appropriate social play generalized to other nonobsession games following intervention." In addition, they say, non-disabled peers joined in the games willingly, and appeared to consider the autistic children as "inherently valued members of the games" because of the autistic children's special expertise in the subjects the games revolved around. The researchers also note that the autistic children's obsessive behaviors did not increase as a result of the games; in fact, they say, obsessive behaviors decreased in two cases.

"Increasing the social behavior of young children with autism using their obsessive behaviors," Mary J. Baker, Robert L. Koegel, and Lynn Kern Koegel, *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 1998, pp. 300-308. Address: Robert L. Koegel, Counseling/Clinical/School Psychology Program, Graduate School of Education, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106-9490.

Sensory integration: positive effects seen

Does sensory integration therapy help autistic children? It's a controversial issue (see ARRI 9/2), with a new study weighing in on the side of the therapy's proponents.

T. M. Linderman and K. B. Stewart measured the effects of sensory integration therapy on two three-year-old boys with pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), a term used to describe children who do not meet the full criteria for autism. One child participated in the treatment for 11 weeks, and the other for 7 weeks.

"Both participants displayed significant improvements in the areas of social interaction, approach to new activities, response to holding or hugging, and response to movement," the researchers say. "Decreases were noted in the frequency and duration of disruptive behaviors... with an increase in functional behaviors such as spontaneous speech, purposeful play, and attention to activities and conversation."

The researchers caution that the children were also receiving other therapies, which may have contributed to their improvements.

"Sensory integrative-based occupational therapy and functional outcomes in young children with pervasive developmental disorders: a single-subject study," T. M. Linderman and K. B. Stewart, *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, Vol. 53, No. 2, March/April 1999, pp. 207-213.

Vibrating beeper cues autistic students to make conversation

A small electronic device called the "Gentle Reminder" may help autistic children verbalize more spontaneously, according to a preliminary study.

The Gentle Reminder is a programmable beeper that vibrates for several seconds and can be set to go off at specific intervals. Bridget Taylor and Len Levin used the device to prompt a nine-year-old autistic boy, mainstreamed into a second-grade regular education class, to engage in social conversation with his classmates.

The researchers began by training the boy to talk to an adult each time the beeper vibrated. Initially, they set the device on a table and put the boy's hand on it, prompting him to make a comment about his toys each time the vibrator signaled him. In later sessions, the prompts were faded, and the boy learned to respond to the beeper when it was placed in his pocket.

To judge the effectiveness of the Gentle Reminder, the researchers then counted the number of social communications the boy made to his classmates under three conditions: with the beeper turned on, with the beeper in his pocket but turned off, and with no beeper. The other students were not informed of the prompting device.

The researchers say that "significantly more verbal initiations occurred when the tactile prompt was placed in [the boy's] pocket and was activated than when the device was not activated or when no prompt was used." Furthermore, they note, the boy's classmates responded to his initiations and remained unaware that they were prompted.

"The results suggest," the researchers say, "that the device serves as an effective, unobtrusive prompt for verbal initiations during play contexts and during cooperative learning activities."

"Teaching a student with autism to make verbal initiations: effects of a tactile prompt," Bridget Taylor and Len Levin, *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 1998, pp. 651-654. Address: Bridget A. Taylor, Alpine Learning Group, 777 Paramus Road, Paramus, NJ 07652.

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