

Teaching Social Skills

Students more social when spontaneity is encouraged

Autistic and retarded students' social behaviors improve quickly when teachers encourage spontaneous communication, according to a study by Charles Peck.

Peck studied eight children, ages ten to 14. The children's teachers used standard behavior modification techniques emphasizing high levels of adult prompting and reinforcement of specifically targeted behaviors.

Peck instructed the teachers to:

1) Offer more choices and other opportunities for communication – for instance, by asking a child, "Do you want juice or milk?", or by placing a desired object out of reach so a child would need to ask for it.

2) Increase teacher responsiveness to, and compliance with, student-initiated social behavior – for instance, by getting a toy or cookie for a student spontaneously requesting it.

3) Imitate and expand on students' remarks. For example, if a student spon-

aneously said "juice", the teacher would reply, "yes, want juice."

These techniques resulted in an immediate increase in spontaneous social and communicative behavior by all eight students, according to Peck. In addition, teachers rated the techniques as enjoyable for both teachers and students.

Peck feels his findings may support the contention that typical special education classrooms are "over-programmed" and provide too few opportunities for social interaction and student control.

"Increasing opportunities for social control by children with autism and severe handicaps: effects on student behavior and perceived classroom climate," Charles A. Peck; *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1985, pp. 183-193. Address: Charles A. Peck, Department of Counseling Psychology, Washington State University, Pullman, WA 99163-2131.

High school peers teach socialization

Retarded students behaved more appropriately and socialized more often with non-disabled students following an innovative training program on a high school campus (Chin-Perez et al.).

The researchers recruited and trained 30 non-disabled students at the school as "peer tutors." The peer tutors – most of whom received career development credits for participating in the program – helped the disabled students follow schedules, assisted in teaching them new skills, and created opportunities for the students to socialize with non-disabled students.

Peer tutors assisted the disabled students in classes (including academic classes, physical education, cooking, drama, crafts and typing); at assemblies, rallies and other non-class activities; and at off-campus sites where daily living skills were taught.

A survey conducted one year after the program started showed that regular and special education faculty members, parents of the disabled students, and non-disabled students participating in peer training all saw significant improvement in the retarded students' social behavior. Particular progress was seen in dressing and grooming, initiating conversations, greeting others, speaking clearly, and paying attention in class.

To provide additional socialization training for three of the retarded students, the researchers instituted "Project Peer", selecting three non-disabled students to be paid research assistants. These students 1) identified appropriate and inappropriate social behaviors in their retarded peers; 2) targeted three problem behaviors in each trainee; and, 3) helped the teaching staff devise and implement training strategies to correct these problem behaviors.

Two of the three retarded students participating in Project Peer showed much better social skills afterward, and two had fewer negative behaviors.

"Maximizing social contact for secondary students with severe handicaps," G. Chin-Perez, D. Hartman, Hyun Sook Park, S. Sacks, A. Wershing and R. Gaylord-Ross; *Journal of the Assoc. for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1986, pp. 118-124. Address: Robert Gaylord-Ross, Department of Special Education, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94132.

Workers, students learn social skills

Four autistic men in a California study have been taught to initiate and carry on social exchanges with non-disabled peers at their workplaces.

The students learned a "chain" of social behaviors in sessions with volunteer trainers from a local high school. The chain of behaviors included:

– Getting a cup of coffee and sitting down at the break table.

– Asking a co-worker, "How are you?"

– Asking the co-worker, "Would you like a cup of coffee?", and bringing him a cup of coffee if requested.

– Asking, "What's new?"

– Responding appropriately to the co-worker's question, "What have you been doing at work?"

– Responding appropriately to the co-worker's statement, "Take it easy," and then returning to work.

The students were prompted when necessary, and praised for correct responses; prompts and praise were thinned gradually.

Two participants learned to generalize their newly learned behaviors to co-workers after practicing with only one trainer, while two other participants learned to generalize their social skills only after working with three trainers.

In a separate study by the same researchers, autistic students were taught to use several items popular with non-handicapped peers (hand-held video games, gum, and a radio with headphones), and then learned to initiate and continue social conversations revolving around these items.

The researchers recommend using such nonverbal activities as a way to "promote elaborated social encounters...reinforcing to both the autistic and non-handicapped student."

"The training and generalization of social interaction during breaktime at two job sites in the natural environment," *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 1985, pp. 41-50; and "The training and generalization of social interaction skills with autistic youth," *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, Vol. 2, No. 17, Summer 1984, pp. 229-247; both articles by Catherine Breen, Robert Gaylord-Ross, Thomas Haring, and Valerie Pitts-Conway.

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