

Strategies for Supporting Social Inclusion of an Autistic Child in the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Within the health professions, autism has been traditionally defined from a deficit-based perspective focusing on impairments in social communication (APA, 2013). Accordingly, social skills strategies have focused on “fixing” these perceived impairments (e.g., DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002). Despite evidence that skills-based approaches can change individual behaviors, support for generalization and improvement in quality of life remains limited (e.g., Gates et al., 2017; McMahon et al., 2013). As a contrasting approach, distributed models of communication suggest that supporting interaction requires considering the broader contexts—including attitudes and practices of communication partners (Vidal et al., 2018s). As an example, an on-going study by Vidal (in prep) is focused on examining a supports-based approach to facilitate peer interactions involving an autistic child and five of his non-autistic classmates). This mixed method study incorporated common strategies such as direct prompts, environmental arrangement, behavioral interpretation, and scaffolding, but focused them all on *peer interaction* rather than individual behavior. Given the relative novelty of the supports-based approach to peer interaction for autistic children, the purpose of the present study was to illustrate the four clinician strategies and their potential influence on classroom dynamics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What did each of the four strategies look like within the naturalistic classroom context?
- 2) How often did the clinician and other adults in the classroom use each of the four strategies across baseline and support phases?

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METHOD

Participants	Role
John	Primary Participant - 9-yr-old autistic student - white/caucasian male - inconsistent use of speech; AAC user - comorbid diagnosis of childhood apraxia of speech and autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infections (PANDAS)
Maria	Peer - 9-yr-old white/caucasian female - non-autistic
Ethan	Peer - 8-yr-old white/caucasian male - non-autistic
Leila	Art Teacher -unspecified race/ethnicity, female
Joe	Paraprofessional -white/caucasian male

Operational Definition of Support Strategies

Direct Prompt for Peer Interaction	Verbal or nonverbal direct or suggestive request for one child to interact with another child.
Scaffolding for Peer Interaction	Therapist facilitates an ongoing peer interaction verbally or nonverbally to shape the interaction when it has already started. Therapist supports the social interaction through suggesting or showing an alternative way to communicate or interact.
Behavioral Interpretation	Verbally provided meaning for a child's behavior with the intent of informing other children rather than clarify by herself.
Environmental Arrangement	Clinician uses intentional verbal and nonverbal communication to reorganize the physical space with the objective of increasing physical proximity between child participants, changing the children's positions, and/or providing access to objects to facilitate peer interactions.

Data Set	12 semi-structured Interviews	20 classroom video observations	Examiner memos
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ 11 baseline ❖ 9 support sessions 	

ANALYSIS

Portrait Drawing (I1_S1, 4:38-5:20) John, Maria, and Ethan are sitting at their table drawing self portraits during art class. Veronica points to Ethan and asks, “Can you ask John if he wants you to draw you or Maria?” Ethan looks at John and asks, “John do you want to draw me or do you want to draw Maria?” Ethan waits a few seconds without a response from John. Veronica looks at Ethan and holds up one finger while saying, “maybe you can ask one person's name.” Ethan looks back at John and asks, “John do you want to draw Maria?” John looks at Ethan while biting his chewy, but does not give an obvious response. Ethan waits a few seconds and then says, “Do you want me to draw me or Maria?” Veronica observes John's eye gaze directed at Ethan and says, “I think he looked at you.” to Ethan.

Portrait Drawing (I1_S3, 5:14-5:16) John and Ethan as well as some other peers are working on self portraits together at their table during art class. Ethan is sitting on the opposite side of the table from John. Veronica asks Ethan, “Can you sit here today please?” while pointing at a seat that is next to John.

Clinician Strategy	Examples
Direct Prompt	“Can you ask John if he wants you to draw you or Maria?”
Scaffolding	“Maybe you can ask John if he wants you to draw you or Maria?”
Behavioral Interpretation	“I think he looked at you.”
Environmental Arrangement	“Can you sit here today please?”



Portrait Drawing (I1_S1, 4:38)



Portrait Drawing (I1_S3, 5:14)

FINDINGS

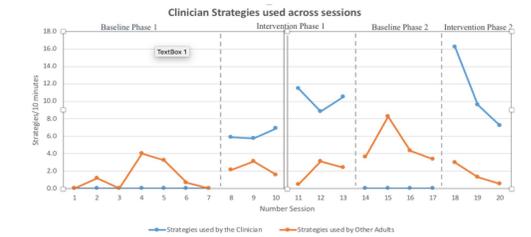


Figure 1. Number of total strategies used by clinician and other adults per 10 minutes displayed across phases (baseline, intervention)

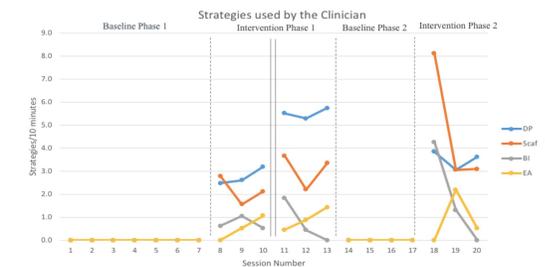


Figure 2. Number of strategies used by clinician per 10 minutes displayed across phases (baseline, intervention)

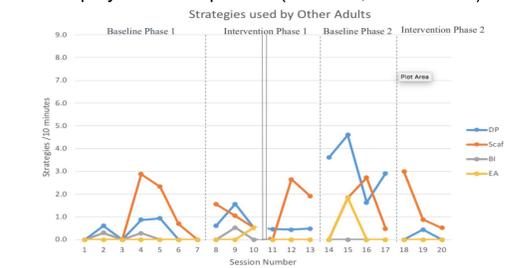


Figure 3. Number of strategies used by other adults per 10 minutes displayed across phases (baseline, intervention)

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated the feasibility and illustrated the use of the four social support strategies applied to peer interaction in the classroom. The clinician used an average frequency per 10 min/session of 3.8 direct prompts, 3.7 scaffolds, 1.3 behavioral interpretations, and 0.8 environmental arrangements during support phases. The other adults appeared to increase their use of direct prompting for peer interaction after the clinician's first supports phase, increasing from an average frequency per 10 min/session of 0.3 during the first baseline to 3.2 during the second baseline.

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