

Increasing Social Competence Skills in Young Children with Autism through Individualized Peer-Mediated Interventions

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Social Competence

Social competence is essential for succeeding in life as it allows individuals to carry out interpersonal goals (Guralnick, 2010). Although many children develop social competence by observing and engaging in interactions with peers, this is often difficult for children with ASD (Whalon, Conroy, Martinez, & Werch, 2015). Social competence is a significant contributor to the appropriate development of children and can support children's access and participation in general education settings (Brown & Conroy, 2011).

Peer-Mediated Interventions

Peer-mediated interventions (PMI) usually focus on facilitating high quality positive social interactions between children with ASD and peers and are an evidence-based practice (Odom, Cox, & Brock, 2013) as well as an early intervention/early childhood special education recommended practice (Division of Early Childhood, 2014). PMI are conducted during activities that promote the development of age-appropriate social interactions between children with ASD and peers (Katz & Girolametto, 2013). Therefore, PMI are an effective school-based approach to promote social competence in children with ASD and thus, increase the likelihood of them achieving full societal inclusion.

Assessment of Social Competence

Social competence is a complex skill set that is influenced by a number of factors including the people that we interact with as well as the social requirement of each social setting (e.g., schools). Therefore, a multi-step approach should be used to assess the social competence skills of children with ASD and identify the most salient and context specific social skills to target for intervention. The following steps are recommended to assess and design individualized PMI for children with ASD:

1. **Identify contexts that provide social opportunities:** It is necessary to identify contexts that provide children with ASD opportunities to interact with socially competent peers. In other words, activities and situations that are enjoyable for the children with ASD should be identified and included in PMI in order to increase the effectiveness of the intervention.
2. **Identify social materials:** In addition to identifying times or activities throughout the day that set the context for teaching social competence to children with ASD, it is also important to identify materials or topics of conversation that could increase the likelihood of appropriate social interactions between children with ASD and peers. These preferred materials or topics should be embedded within PMI.
3. **Identify socially competent peers:** It is important to identify social partners for children with ASD that will increase the likelihood of appropriate social interactions. Researchers have found that specific peer characteristics such as gender, age, familiarity, and possessing the cognitive and social abilities required for social competence, are likely to increase the chances of children with ASD engaging in appropriate social behaviors (Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2007). Furthermore, peers should be enthusiastic and motivated to work with others (i.e., adults and peers).

4. **Identify critical context specific social behaviors:** Social behaviors vary and serve multiple purposes, therefore, the type of activity and the social rules of that activity govern the type of socially appropriate behaviors (e.g., working together on a puzzle without talking to one another is a form of social interaction). To identify critical social behaviors for a particular activity, observe socially competent peers engaging in the activity and identify the behaviors that they display.

Designing Individualized PMI

Through this multi-step assessment process, teachers can gather all the data necessary to develop PMI that match the individual needs and strengths of children with ASD. The interventions should include: a) targeted social skills selected for instruction based on the students' strengths/needs and the appropriateness of the context; b) antecedent factors that are likely to increase social exchanges between children with ASD and peers; and c) consequences that serve as reinforcers and will increase the social behaviors of the children with ASD. Once individualized PMI have been developed, teachers need to constantly monitor the progress of their students to evaluate the intervention effectiveness. Because it can be difficult for teachers to observe social behaviors while providing instruction and support in the classroom, other school personnel can be a good support when working on setting new intervention goals and monitoring students' progress (e.g., school psychologists or special educators).

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