Title: Improving Social-Communication and Engagement of Elementary Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Topic: Communication

Grant Year: 2013

Principal Investigators: Jessica Dykstra, Ph.D.

Funding: $30,000

Institution: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Duration: One Year

Purpose: To improve the social-communication and engagement skills of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Objectives: To examine the effects of the Advancing Social-Communication and Play (ASAP) intervention on elementary school-age children who are severely affected by ASD, specifically in the areas of social-communication and engagement

Methodology: The study uses the Advancing Social-Communication and Play (ASAP) intervention with four children ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade. All four participants meet the criteria for an ASD diagnosis and have documented difficulties with social-communication and engagement. Led by trained elementary school teachers, ASAP focuses on a set of target objectives in the areas of communication (e.g. social interaction, joint attention, requesting) and play (e.g. exploratory, functional, relational, symbolic). Each 40-minute session involves a combination of individual instruction and group interaction.

Before the intervention, the researcher will collect baseline data on each participant by videotaping their interactions with the instructor. Participants will then receive eight weeks of the ASAP intervention, during which time the researcher will collect observational data during each week’s 10-minute group activity. The researcher will then determine each child’s level of engagement using a coding system with six categories of increasingly desirable outcomes: unengaged, onlooking, object only, person only, supported joint engagement and coordinated joint engagement.

Expected Outcomes: By the end of the eight-week intervention, the researcher expects that participants will show notable increases in social-communication and engagement. This can have a “cascading” effect on other areas, such as language and peer relationships, thereby creating additional learning opportunities that can lead to a better quality of life. Because ASAP was originally designed for preschool children, the researcher also expects that the results of this study will offer insight into how to continue adapting the curriculum for other age groups. During the ASAP intervention, parents and caregivers will receive handouts with recommendations for how to practice targeted skills, with the hope that children will be able to apply concepts and strategies learned in the school setting to different places, such as the home.

Practical Relevance: Social-communication and engagement are pivotal skills for future behavioral and cognitive development. They have been linked to increases in language capabilities, adaptive functioning, academic achievement, and positive social outcomes. Engagement is also an important skill for younger students; being able to engage with others at

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“normal” levels can lead to academic gains and more developed language skills. The ASAP intervention can also help elementary educators become better equipped to address the core needs of students with ASD, and even prompt school systems to change the way they provide instruction (and overall support) for children with significant social and communication needs. Offering ASAP in public schools also means increased access to critical instruction for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.