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Erikson's Model of Psychosocial Development with Autistic Children and Connections  
to Evidence-based Practices for No Child Left Behind

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide information about the social difficulties of students with Autism. A review of Erikson's Theory supports why developing social skills is important. No Child Left Behind evidence-based practices are suggested to assist these students. A literature review was conducted on these topics using key words to identify appropriate sources. Metacognitive strategies enabled analysis, which resulted in several themes reported in the article. The results of this literature review concluded the following: (a) Autism is a disorder that inhibits an individual's ability to socialize. (b) The social difficulties associated with Autism involve the inability to read other people's emotions, lack of reciprocity (conversation skills), and the use of socially discouraging gestures. (c) Evidence-based practices (i.e., Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) and Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT)) are effective practices that gradually develop and build the social skills that Autistic individual's lack. Educators who utilize evidence-based practices (i.e., Applied Behavioral Analysis and Discrete Trial Teaching) can help Autistic children develop vital social skills while meeting the rigorous requirements of No Child Left Behind.

## Erikson's Model of Psychosocial Development with Autistic Children and Connections to Effective Educational Practices for No Child Left Behind

Autism is a disorder that affects an individual's social capabilities. The social difficulties that an Autistic child faces involve interpreting and communicating human emotions. Erik Erikson's model of psychosocial development explains how social difficulties can lead to identity confusion. Due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, evidenced-based practices (i.e., Applied Behavior Analysis and Discrete Trial Teaching) are highly recommended in order to effectively assist Autistic children. Erikson's model of psychosocial development helps us to understand how critical it is for Autistic children to learn the appropriate social skills; and, in doing so, the standards of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) can be fulfilled.

### Purpose

The purposes of this paper are multiple. Autism is defined, the social difficulties students with Autism experience are discussed, and these difficulties are related to Erikson's model of psychosocial development. Furthermore, evidence-based practices for No Child Left Behind that address Autistic children's social difficulties are examined.

### Methodology

The literature review method was used to address the purpose of this paper. Sources were selected using key words from the topics identified (Gay, Mills, Airasian, 2006). A number of sources were used: books and peer-reviewed journal articles (Tuckman, 1994). For example, one of the books consisted of Erik Erikson's writings and two of the journals focused on No Child Left Behind, evidenced-based practices, and Autism. Metacognitive strategies were used to analyze the literature, such as organizing

material by developing schemas (Wolfolk, 2007). This analysis resulted in the emergence of several themes, which are synthesized and reported here.

## Literature Review

### *What Is Autism?*

Autism actually has five varying degrees, which collectively are called Autism spectrum disorders (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006). It is referred to as Autism spectrum disorders due to the fact that the disorder has different degrees of affect on individuals. According to Hallahan and Kauffman, the definition of Autism spectrum disorders is that it consists of “five similar conditions: Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified; all involve varying degrees of problems with communication skills, social interactions, and repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior” (p. 398). This definition provides a very broad interpretation of the varying degrees of Autism Spectrum disorders. The best way to understand Autism spectrum disorders is by thinking about going from one extreme to the other in regard to how an individual acts in a social environment.

Autism and Asperger’s Syndrome are the main focus of this literature review. Autism is “characterized by extreme social withdrawal and impairment in communication; other common characteristics are stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences; usually evident before age three” (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006, p. 399). Autism is basically considered the extreme form of the Autism spectrum disorders, due to the fact that individuals who are diagnosed with it are characterized as the least socially

involved. These individuals have a very difficult time with being flexible and like rigid routines. However, Asperger's Syndrome can be considered "a milder form of Autism without significant impairments in language and cognition and is characterized by primary problems in social interaction" (Hallahan & Kauffman, p. 399). These individuals have higher intellect and may just need more direct assistance with school work. Their difficulties are present at a social level, and they also have a tendency to make up stories, which can be interpreted by others as lying. Individuals with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome both experience social difficulties. However, the severity of the social difficulties can vary, and this is why evidence-based practices must be utilized in order to teach social skills effectively.

*What Are the Social Difficulties of Autism and Asperger's Syndrome?*

The social difficulties of Autism are more extreme compared to Asperger's Syndrome. However, they both share some common social difficulties. The following quote from Peeters (1997) paints a picture of what it is like to live with Autism.

Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds, and sights. There seem to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything. Set routines, times, particular routes and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life. (p. 82)

"One aspect of the difficulties people with Autism have with social interactions is illuminated in the 'theory of mind' hypothesis of Uta Frith and her colleagues" (Peeters, p. 81). According to Peeters, theory of mind is the ability to read people's hidden intentions and emotions regardless of what is actually portrayed. Individuals with Autism have a difficult time with interpreting other people's emotions and have been considered

to be socially blind. The following excerpt from Peeters' work is a perfect example of how an individual with Autism is unable to understand human emotions.

I remember that after one particular awful day, I took Thomas to my room so the other children could at least do his/her homework in peace. It was all too much for me and I burst into tears. Then I saw that little Thomas spontaneously began to crawl towards me. I thought he wanted to comfort me and I started to cry even harder from happiness. Then he put his fingers to my eyes and started to laugh. It was the sparkling tears which fascinated him. (p. 84)

This type of bold reaction would be more common in an individual with Autism due to the fact that it is the most extreme degree of the Autism spectrum disorders. Interpreting human emotions and intentions is a difficult challenge for individuals with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome.

Another social difficulty that affects individuals with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome is reciprocity (Ozonoff, Dawson, and McPartland, 2002, p. 185). Reciprocity is considered to be "the back-and-forth interactions that make up all social encounters" (Ozonoff et al., p. 185). An Autistic child's lack of being able to take part in a give and take conversation can inhibit the child from developing social skills that are important in order to become an independent individual. An Autistic child's lack of social interchange can explain why "(p)arents often describe a feeling of one-sidedness in interactions with their child. Sometimes parents feel as if they must carry the whole relationship, supporting and scaffolding the interaction to establish some meaningful connection" (Ozonoff et al., p. 185). Obviously, the Autistic child does not understand how to initiate or maintain a conversation with another individual.

Another issue that plays a part in Autistic children's difficulties with social interchange is that "their eye contact may be limited, they may not smile at the other person, their posture may not convey interest and attention, and they may not use socially

encouraging gestures such as nodding” (Ozonoff et al., 2002, p. 189). These physical signs that Autistic children express can give off negative messages to the people around them. “Other problems sometimes seen in Asperger Syndrome and high-functioning Autism, such as aggression or an overly blunt communication style (sometimes interpreted as rude or offensive, although it is unintentional), can also pose a threat to social relationships” (Ozonoff et al., p. 189). Children with Asperger’s Syndrome are also “less aware of the concept of personal space” (Attwood, 1998, p. 29). This type of intrusive yet also standoffish behavior exhibited in Autistic children can be interpreted in a negative way, and this is why they have a difficult time making and keeping social relationships. Through the use of evidence-based classroom practices these negative social behaviors can decrease and positive social skills can be taught. These practices are discussed in subsequent sections of this paper.

*How Can Erik Erikson’s Model of Psychosocial Development Explain Why Social Development Is Critical?*

Erik Erikson’s model of psychosocial development consists of eight stages that all involve a developmental crisis. “Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory emphasized the emergence of the self, the search for identity, the individual’s relationships with others, and the role of culture throughout life” (Woolfolk, 2005, p. 62). This literature review focuses on Erikson’s fifth stage, which is identity versus role confusion (Woolfolk). This stage takes place during adolescence and focuses on the importance of peer relationships (Woolfolk). According to Erik Erikson (1963),

The growing and developing youths, faced with this physiological revolution within them, and with tangible adult tasks ahead of them are now primarily concerned with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with

what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the occupational prototypes of the day. (p. 261)

As Erikson explained, peer relationships during this stage play an important role in allowing the adolescent to practice certain social skills which will become a part of his/her identity. This literature review mainly focused on Erikson's fifth stage because Autistic adolescents have difficulty forming social relationships with peers. Adolescence is a critical period in social skills development; and, if these skills are not obtained, the adolescent may experience role confusion.

Forming peer relationships obviously would be very difficult for an Autistic child to experience due to his/her intrusive, yet standoffish, behavior. Autistic children may sometimes even discourage his/her peers from any interaction with him/her due to negative behaviors and body language. For example, according to Erikson (1963), "Adolescents not only help one another temporarily through much discomfort by forming cliques and by stereotyping themselves, their ideals, and their enemies; they also perversely test each other's capacity to pledge fidelity" (p. 262). Being part of a clique or a crowd is not a common characteristic of Autistic children. According to Attwood (1998), "An adolescent with Asperger's Syndrome described how he was unable to appreciate the feeling of triumph in team sports as he could not comprehend how or why one would have a sense of satisfaction in knowing that your opponents felt inferior" (p. 31). Atwood provides a perfect example of how group success and peer pressure have little effect on adolescents with Autism. Yet, these social situations are very important for Autistic children to experience in order to develop a strong identity. The use of evidence-based practices can provide Autistic children with the opportunity to overcome limitations in order to become self-managing individuals in society.

*What Is No Child Left Behind?*

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 represents the largest increase of federal government in education. Yell, Dasgow, and Lowrey (2005) wrote an article about NCLB and Autism spectrum disorders. According to the authors, “The major principles of NCLB that will have the greatest effect on teachers, parents, and administrators includes ensuring accountability for results, using scientifically based instruction, and providing highly qualified teachers and paraprofessionals” (p. 131). The three principles identified by Yell and colleagues are outlined here.

The first principle is ensuring accountability for results, which involves implementing statewide academic standards, assessing students’ knowledge of content covered in standards, and requiring schools to report an Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) to show if standards are being met (Yell, et al.). The second principle is using effective methods in the classroom. Effective methods, also known as evidence-based practices, are those that have been found effective through research using a rigorous experimental design (Yell, et al.). According to Rod Paige, former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, “NCLB demands the use of methods that really work, ‘no fads, not feel-good fluff, but instruction that is based upon sound scientific research’” (Yell, et al., p. 133). The third area, which calls for highly qualified teachers, requires teachers to have at least his/her bachelor’s degree, state certification, and display knowledge of subject matter (Yell, et al.). NCLB is demanding; however, the goal is to ensure that all children in the public school system are receiving a high-quality education.

*What Evidence-based Practices Apply to Autistic Children?*

In order to ensure that children receive a high-quality education, the following evidence-based practices are recommended for Autistic children. According to Simpson (2005), Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) and Discrete Trial Teaching (DTT) are two widely-accepted evidence-based practices that are used in teaching children with Autism. Since they are evidence-based practices, they meet the standards of No Child Left Behind.

The Applied Behavioral Analysis intervention “uses general principles of behavioral therapy to build the skills that children with Autism lack, such as language, play, self-help, social, academic, and attentional skills” (Ozonoff et al., 2002, p. 77). Teachers using this approach work with the Autistic child via one-on-one sessions and, later, gradually modify his/her learning environment to include small group settings. Clearly stated objectives are used throughout this process, and in achieving these objectives, teachers can “assess the effectiveness of the intervention” (Ozonoff et al., p. 80). In using ABA, the child is gradually developing the social skills necessary to develop a strong identity that will allow the child to become an independent individual to the best of his/her ability.

The Discrete Trial Teaching intervention “involves breaking down complex skills and teaching each subskill through a series of massed teaching trials” (Stahmer, Ingersoll & Carter, 2003, p. 402). DTT basically breaks down an intricate skill into smaller tasks that the Autistic child can complete to the best of his/her ability. The teaching environment is controlled and teacher-centered, which is conducive with the characteristics of an Autistic child. According to Simpson and Myles (1998),

Reinforcement is a major component of the discrete trial training approach. When the student performs or attempts to perform a task at any level of acquisition, immediate reinforcement should be provided. In the initial stages of skill acquisition, reinforcers may need to be edible or tangible to be powerful enough to illicit the desired response. However, the ultimate goal should be performing for social reinforcement. (p. 87)

In using DTT, the Autistic child is taught a difficult task using small steps; and, when a step has been accomplished, the action is immediately rewarded. Instant rewarding is necessary in order to reinforce the behavior and should gradually be removed so the child does not become dependent upon the reward. The goal is for the Autistic child to be able to use the social skills independently as much as possible.

Evidence-based practices (i.e., Applied Behavioral Analysis and Discrete Trial Teaching) are proven to help the Autistic child overcome social difficulties. For example, according to special education coordinator Toni Elitharp, “ABA helps children learn how to learn” (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006, p. 419). ABA helps Autistic children by clearly identifying the change in behavior to take place with the use of reinforcement and aversive techniques. The Autistic child’s progress is constantly monitored in order to ensure that the proper independent social skills are being developed (Woolfolk, 2005). A similar behavioral approach recommended for Autistic children is DTT and involves breaking down complex social skills into smaller steps. These social skills are acquired with the use of tangible reinforcers; however, the goal is for the Autistic child to be able to use the social skills independently without the use of a reinforcer.

Applied Behavioral Analysis and Discrete Trial Teaching meet the standards of No Child Left Behind because they have been scientifically proven effective through rigorous experimental research. “NCLB focuses on embracing teaching methods and procedures that scientifically based research supports as increasing student achievement”

(Yell et al., 2005, p. 137). According to Simpson, “the credibility of ABA is particularly enhanced because decisions relating to this method are data driven” (Simpson et al., 2005, p. 91). Furthermore, Simpson reports, “DTT is one of the most empirically validated interventions available for use with children with ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorders]” (Simpson, et al. p. 103). Through the use of the evidence-based practices, Autistic children can learn the proper social skills necessary to overcome limitations, thereby providing them with the opportunity to avoid role confusion and become self-managing individuals in society. In doing so, the evidence-based practices help Autistic children meet the standards of No Child Left Behind.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was achieved by defining Autism, examining the social difficulties inherent in the disorders, and using Erik Erikson’s model of psychosocial development to explain why social development is critical. Furthermore, how evidenced-based practices meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind and can help Autistic children learn social skills to the best of their abilities was presented.

Autism is a disorder that affects an individual’s ability to communicate and socialize. The social difficulties of Autism consist of not being able to interpret other people’s emotions and the reciprocity that is necessary when conversing with other individuals. Examining Erik Erikson’s model of psychosocial development and focusing on the identity versus role confusion stage explained why social development is critical. It was discovered that, in order for adolescents to find their identities, the interaction that they have with their peers plays a significant role. Autistic children have a more challenging undertaking in finding their identities due to the fact that socializing and

being part of a group is a difficult action for them to perform. If the Autistic child does not develop the proper social skills needed in order to interact with his/her peers during adolescence, this could lead to role confusion and possible isolation problems in the future.

Teachers using evidence-based practices (i.e., Applied Behavioral Analysis and Discrete Trial Teaching) can help Autistic children develop the necessary social skills to the best of their abilities. Developing social skills to address concerns described in this paper, such as social blindness, lack of reciprocity, and other social interchange difficulties, can help the child overcome the developmental crisis of Erickson's fifth stage of development. In doing so, the teacher meets the standards of No Child Left Behind by employing evidence-based practices while assisting the child to become a more independently functioning member of society.

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