Autism and Social Skills Programs

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Abstract

Autism is a developmental disorder that impairs many individuals’ social development and ability. Children and adults with autism show difficulty functioning in everyday behaviours due to the anxiety and social impairments they possess. Social skills programs are effective in helping individuals with autism to develop necessary skills to function more normally on a daily basis and to reduce their anxieties in social situations.

As members of school and society, all children and adults need to cope with daily activities such as going to school or work. Those with autism often have difficulty functioning in common situations due to lack of social skills and high anxieties. The majority of children in the school setting, for example, pick up on behaviours that provide them with the necessary skills to interact with other children without hesitation; they are not faced with anxiety in social situations. Children and adults with autism are often not as fortunate when engaging with others. Social skills programs can provide individuals with autism the skills needed for daily social interacting and functioning. In the school environment, many children with autism are fortunate to be offered a social skills program to assist with the struggles of daily routines. Investing in social skills programs for children and adults with autism provides the opportunity for growth in many areas, such as social interactions and anxiety regulation. The benefits can be immeasurable for many children as they are given the opportunity to function more habitually on a daily basis.

Autism is a developmental disorder that includes impairments in social situations, communication skills, learning abilities, and behavioural confronts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). Children who are diagnosed with autism often show characteristics of the disorder before the age of three (Grønberg, Hansen, Nielsen, Skytte, & Parner, 2015). Intervention at an early age is crucial because connections must be made with the brain, in order to form experiences that will help the child to function better on a daily basis (Whitman & DeWitt, 2011). Social skills programs and interventions may be a natural way for children with autism to learn strategies to cope with the difficulties of social interactions and anxiety.

Social Interactions

Individuals with autism often do not have the underlying social skills for interaction with others (Bauminger-Zviely, Eden, Zancanaro, Weiss, & Gal, 2013). Children with autism spend less time interacting with their peers than children without autism (Casenhisser, Shanker, & Stienben, 2011; Deckers, Roelofs, Muris, & Rinck, 2014). Social interactions are important for all children because of daily interactions that they encounter in different environments such as school. Children with autism are all different when it comes to how well they can communicate with others (Stasolla, Damiana, & Alessandro, 2014). Some children can communicate more easily, speaking in sentences, while others can not maintain eye contact or formulate a sentence during a conversation. A social skills program that is centered on developing social interactions is an effective way to develop skills in those with autism.

Social skills-based programs have shown much promise for developing social interactions in children with autism (Radley, Jenson, Clark, & O’Neill, 2014). Social skills programs vary in the amount of time that they are delivered. Improvements in social skills can be seen with as little as 60-90 minutes of intervention per week (Milner, 2013). When children or young adults have the opportunity to avail of even one hour per week of a social skills program, the benefits are visible when observed for social competence.
There are many ways to deliver a social skills program, such as by using technology that incorporates video modelling and iPad and tablet applications. When children watch instruction on social interactions and are asked to model them back to the instructor, it instills typical social interaction behaviours (Shukla-Metha, Miller, & Callahan, 2010). The use of an iPad has been an interesting topic for social skills, as well. Many applications can be downloaded to develop social skills that children genuinely enjoy (Boyd, Hart Barrett, & More, 2015). The world is evolving rapidly in the eye of technology, and the efficiency of technology helps teachers, parents, or therapists deliver up-to-date programs at their fingertips.

Many school children diagnosed with autism benefit from social programming, and the effects are shown daily. I am fortunate to teach in a school where pervasive children with autism receive social skills support for 40 minutes each day. Children who come out for social skills programming work on many outcomes, such as how to play with other students, how to make appropriate choices when interacting in groups, and how to cope with anxiety when something does not go their way. Working on these outcomes through social stories, role-play, and videos provide students with necessary instruction for proper social interactions. Social interactions are easy to gauge while teaching, because simple observation of a child with a peer group can tell much about what they have learned. When children are successful with the outcomes of their programs, it is rewarding for me to see the social and peer interactions each day.

Social skills programs benefit adults as well as children. Adults who have undergone programming for social interactions to develop communication skills have shown tremendous growth after receiving 16 weeks of intervention (“Young Adults,” 2015). When adults receive instruction to interact properly with peers, they develop more peer relationships that were not present prior to instruction (Gantman, Kapp, Orenski, & Laugeson, 2012). Adults with autism are more socially accepted when they are can exist in society more naturally; social skills programs provide adults with autism the opportunity for more social normality (Gantman et al., 2012).

Individuals with autism lack of social interactive skills have to be developed for everyday functioning. Through the use of social skills programs, children and adults with autism can finally develop the necessary skills for everyday interaction with their peers. Through the use of programming, technology, and a teacher or program deliverer, both children and adults can begin to acquire the social normality that is necessary for positive social interaction.

**Anxiety Regulation**

Children with autism commonly experience high-anxiety behaviours (Neufeld, Law, & Lucyshyn, 2014). These behaviours are often linked to poor peer and family relationships (Neufeld et al., 2014, p. 259). Many children tend to have social difficulties due to the high levels of anxiety that they experience around their peers (Melonashti, 2013). Children with autism have different triggers for their anxiety-related behaviours. Something as small as a minor change in the school-day schedule can lead a child to become extremely anxious and upset (Gillott, Furniss, & Walter, 2001). Providing children with a social program for anxiety regulation is a successful way to ensure that children learn strategies to cope with their anxiety when triggered.

One reason that children with autism have such social impairment is their high levels of anxiety while interacting with others (Bellini, 2004b). Extreme worrying is a common trait that individuals with autism experience when in situations they are uncomfortable with — such as social interactions (Bellini, 2006). The anxiety prevents the formation of meaningful relationships, whether it is with a parent or friend (Bellini, 2006). An effective way to develop anxiety regulation is through a social program delivered by a parent, teacher, or counsellor.

I deliver social programming daily for anxiety regulation to children with autism aged 9-11. One important outcome is developing and implementing strategies for coping with anxiety when it arises. Many students develop anxiety in school when the schedule is changed that day. For example, if the library has to be used for a presentation and the class will miss a library period,
that sparks anxiety for children with autism. It is important to develop skills and strategies that students can use to cope with such situations, rather than acting out because they are unsure what will happen because of a schedule change. Working with anxiety regulation is more difficult than social interactions because, depending on the day or emotional state of a child, a schedule change may be a “big deal” one day and not so much the next. Although challenging, children need to develop strategies to help them control anxieties for a situation that may arise in their day, helping these children get through a normal school day as “normally” as possible.

Teaching social skills has been suggested to help children with anxiety develop skills to cope in a variety of situations (Bellini, 2004a). Children who have undergone extensive social skills interventions to help with emotional regulations have shown improvements with their anxiety levels (White et al., 2010). A program called Friends for Children is delivered in the regular classroom to help children cope with anxiety and has had success lowering anxiety rates (Chalfant, Rapee, & Carroll, 2007). My school just delivered a similar program called Friends for Life. It focused on developing relationships and dealing with anxiety for all of the grade 4 children in the school. Although not directly delivered to the children with autism, the effect that it had on those students was significant. The guidance counsellor of the school delivered the program while the special education teacher sat with the child(ren) of the class. The effects of the program were seen when the children with autism began doing group activities with reduced anxiety during the time of the program. A social program, whether delivered to a full class or an individual student, has tremendous influence on the way that all children function. In this case, the benefit that it had on children with autism was remarkable.

Conclusion

On a daily basis, children with autism face many challenges that normal functioning children would have trouble understanding. Individuals with autism have to learn to cope and work with the difficulties of social interactions and anxiety regulation for everyday functioning. With the work of a teacher or parents, children (and even adults) can lead lives wherein they do not feel like the world is crushing down on them just to have a conversation with another person. Social skills programs are one way for individuals with autism to develop necessary skills.

References


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**About the Author**

Nancy Caines is completing a master’s degree in special education. She is from Stephenville, a small town in Newfoundland and Labrador. In 2015-16, she taught grades 4 and 5 special education in her hometown.