

Topic: Building student skills to promote successful social interactions.

Feldman, E. K., & Matos, R. (2012). Training paraprofessionals to facilitate social interactions between children with autism and their typically developing peers. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, (XX), 1-11. DOI: 10.1177/1098300712457421 [Online First Version of Record-September 13, 2012]

Context

“Social impairments are a core deficit across autism spectrum disorders (ASD; *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [4th ed., text rev.; *DSM-IV-TR*; American Psychiatric Association, 2000]) and place children with ASD at risk of social isolation, poor quality friendships, and loneliness. As children with ASD spend a significant portion of their day at school with peers, it seems prudent that social interventions be incorporated into their school day. Although certified general and special education teachers have the primary responsibility for students with ASD, school districts often utilize paraprofessionals to facilitate the inclusion of these students.” (p. 1)

Purpose of Study

The researchers investigated paraprofessional training in inclusive school settings using Pivotal Response Treatment (PRT) which has been demonstrated to be a promising intervention for promoting the social skill development of children with ASD.

Method

Training of paraprofessionals included a review of *How to Teach Pivotal Behaviors to Children with Autism: A Training Manual*, discussion of how to apply PRT-based social facilitation procedures, and feedback to the paraprofessionals as they facilitated social interactions between children with autism and their peers. PRT-based social facilitation procedures included:

- Child’s choice: Paraprofessionals followed the child’s lead in identifying play activities and prompted the child to engage in play with peers.
- Clear instructions and appropriate communication: If the child and peers did not

independently engage in reciprocal interactions, the paraprofessional modeled and provided prompts such as “What do you say?” or “Ask Mike to pass you the ball.”

- Contingent responsivity and natural rewards: If children did not respond to each other’s initiations or requests, paraprofessionals prompted the children to do so.
- Appropriate physical proximity: Once children were initiating and responding on their own, paraprofessionals left the immediate environment but remained close enough to monitor the children and provide instruction as needed.

The paraprofessionals included in the study worked in a public elementary school, supported a student with autism in an inclusive school setting for at least 75% of the school day, and indicated an interest in participating in the social skills training program. The children included in the study were in elementary school and included two five year-olds and one eight year-old diagnosed with autism.

Results

Once the paraprofessionals implemented the social facilitation procedures with fidelity, all the children were engaged in social activities with their peers. Not only did the paraprofessionals positively respond to training, the reciprocal social behaviors of the children with autism also dramatically improved. Before the paraprofessionals received training, the children rarely interacted with their peers, which is consistent with research documenting that inclusion alone is not sufficient (Pierce & Schreibman, 1995). However, once the paraprofessionals were trained to fidelity, all three children with autism were consistently interacting with their typically developing peers.

Discussion

As the definition of inclusion is clarified and there is a renewed focus on providing mastery level teaching for individuals with disabilities so that they can participate fully in play and learning activities with peers and adults, it is imperative that there be meaningful and effective paraprofessional training. The results of this study provide evidence for the efficacy and effectiveness of training paraprofessionals to use social facilitation procedures in inclusive school settings. They indicate that paraprofessionals can be taught how to facilitate social interactions in only two to three hours and that following training they can generalize strategies to untrained activities. Furthermore, they can continue to successfully use social facilitation procedures long after their training has been completed.

This study also underlines the fact that paraprofessional participation in student activities is not always beneficial for students with disabilities unless the paraprofessional has had training. In this study although some paraprofessionals were close at hand and providing instruction, they were not addressing the fact that students with disabilities were not interacting with their peers. After training, however, their awareness of social interactions increased as did their facilitation of these interactions. As a result, the reciprocal social behavior of students with disabilities increased in the natural setting of the classroom. These findings are particularly important given the literature suggesting that staff training programs should not be considered effective unless client improvement can be demonstrated (Jahr, 1998).” (p. 9)

About Research-to-Practice Briefs

Research-to-Practice Briefs provide summaries of key studies that inform practice related to early childhood special education. The series is designed specifically to support community college faculty who prepare candidates to work with children with special needs in the early childhood setting.

About The ACCEP Project

The ACCEP (Advancing Community College Efforts in Paraprofessional Training) Project is a federally-funded cooperative agreement between the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Education. The focus of this effort is the inclusion of special education content in the coursework and experiences provided within the associate degree program in early childhood education at targeted state-supported community colleges in North Carolina.

Contact The ACCEP Project

p: 704-687-8859

f: 704-687-3493

e: info@theacceptproject.org

w: www.theacceptproject.org