

Topic: Develop and use instructional strategies to meet the needs of individual learners.

Christensen-Sandfort, R. J., & Whinnery, S. B. (2011). Impact of milieu teaching on communication skills of young children with autism spectrum disorder. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 32*, 211-222. doi: 10.1177/0271121411404930

Context

A challenge exists to meet the complex communication needs of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A variety of supports have been identified to positively impact communication needs, but most have been delivered in clinical settings using one-on-one formats or direct teaching methods. Best practice indicates that supports for those with and without disabilities be delivered using instruction that is child-initiated within the child's natural environment. Milieu teaching is a behaviorally based strategy package that can be implemented within the natural routines of the classroom that incorporate child interest and motivation.

Purpose of the Article

The goal of this research-based article was to provide information on the impact of milieu teaching on the communication skills of three young children with ASD in an early childhood special education (ECSE) classroom. Milieu teaching was provided to children in three activities by the classroom teacher. Authors discussed findings and how milieu teaching can be used as a teaching strategy to support young children with ASD.

Method

Researchers recruited three children, 4-6 years of age, with ASD from a small federally funded ECSE preschool program. Teachers of the children participated in professional development on how to use milieu teaching in the classroom. For example, researchers provided teachers with an overview session, a 90-minute one-on-one training session, and two practice sessions with non-participating children over the course of a week. Milieu teaching was implemented in two activities (e.g., structured and unstructured) per day, per target. Data were

collected across those activities and one additional: structured (e.g., circle time), unstructured (e.g., outdoor play), and generalization (e.g., free play in the multiple purpose room). Researchers specifically looked at spontaneous occurrences of communication targets (e.g., use of word "bubbles"), which were child-initiated communication words or phrases previously identified based on each child's Individualized Education Plan (IEP) during those three activities. Observations were conducted twice per week for 35 sessions across the baseline and intervention. The maintenance phase was also incorporated after the intervention to determine continued impact of milieu teaching for three additional sessions.

Results

Positive change was seen in the spontaneous communication of identified children with ASD during both structured and unstructured activities. Milieu teaching was found to increase spontaneous speech for all three children during all phases, including generalization and maintenance. However, results did vary from activity to activity, which was determined to be a result of the motivation of children.

Conclusion

Researchers concluded milieu teaching to be a practical means for teachers of children with disabilities. Further, it was identified as a cost-effective communication intervention for young children with ASD within classroom environments. Several limitations were noted. First, there was limited time provided during the structured activities to use targeted responses, which therefore resulted in limited results. Second, the selection of specific targets also limited results and may have impacted spontaneous communication efforts. It was suggested that further research be conducted

using milieu teaching on communication skills of children with ASD within the context of the natural environment.

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 ACCEPT Project

The ACCEPT (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 ACCEPT Project

p: 704-687-8859

f: 704-687-3493

e: info@acceptproject.org

w: www.acceptproject.org

This Brief was prepared by Kristi Godfrey-Hurrell.