Enhancing Communication Skills in Young Children with Autism

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THE PROBLEM:

The CDC estimates that 1 in 88 children in the US has been identified as having an Autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Young children with ASD have difficulties using non-verbal communication, such as pointing, making eye contact, and smiling, in order to engage others. These skills, known as joint attention, are important to later social and language development.

WHAT IS AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)?

ASD involves a range of developmental disorders with neurobiological origins that affect the child's ability to use imagination, express feelings and ideas, and establish relationships with others.

WHAT APPROACH TO HELPING CHILDREN WITH ASD DID THIS RESEARCH EXAMINE?

Kasari and colleagues at the Center for Autism Research and Treatment, University of California, Los Angeles, focused on helping young children with ASD develop skills in joint attention and mutual engagement in play.

WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER?

- Joint attention is an important predictor of later language in children with ASD.
- Acquiring spoken language before age 5 is thought to be the single most important achievement leading to the best social outcomes for children with ASD.





RANDOMIZED CONTROL TRIAL WITH FOLLOW-UP

- 58 children with ASD participating in a hospital-based early intervention program for 30 hours per week were randomly assigned to:
  - (1) a Joint Attention Group,
  - (2) a Symbolic Play Group, or
  - (3) a Control Group
- The Joint Attention and Symbolic Play treatments were conducted for 30 minutes per day for approximately 6 weeks by skilled interventionists during the course of the regular early intervention program. Control Group children just continued their usual participation in the program.
- Children were assessed right after the treatments were completed. In addition, 56 children participated in a 6 month follow-up, 54 in a 12-month follow-up, and 40 participated in a 5-year follow-up.

FINDINGS

Immediately after participation children in the Joint Attention Group were more responsive to joint attention initiations and made more initiations. Children in the Symbolic Play Group showed more types of play and higher levels of play.

6 and 12 months afterwards children in both the Joint Attention and Symbolic Play Groups showed stronger language growth than children in the Control Group. Effects were moderate to large. Children with low initial expressive language showed the greatest language growth (if in the Joint Attention Group).

5 years afterwards children in Joint Attention and Symbolic Play Groups showed better language outcomes than those in the Control Group. Children who started treatment at a younger age showed stronger gains.

IMPLICATIONS

- Very few studies have looked at whether there are lasting effects of targeted interventions for young children with ASD. This study showed that interventions to improve Joint Attention and Symbolic Play during the preschool years had effects sustained over a five year period.
- That *both* the Joint Attention and Symbolic Play Treatments were effective suggests that a key underlying factor is mutual engagement.
- Starting these interventions at a younger age may be beneficial.

NEXT STEPS

- Not all families have access to university-based autism clinics. An important next step will be working with parents to help them learn approaches to supporting their children's joint attention and symbolic play.
- Focusing on approaches implemented by parents has the potential to "cast the net more broadly," reaching more families and children.