

Intervention Case Study 16

This case studies looks at an intervention in a preschool setting that aims to improve the social skills of all the autistic children in the classroom.

Introduction

Walden preschool has both typically developing children and autistic children, ranging from three years to six years old. In this program, seven of the children are autistic and eight are typically developing. The children generally get along, but the most frequent incidents of problem behavior occur during free play. During free play, students could choose from a variety of toys including books, blocks, art materials, and costumes.

Measurement

Observers recorded both negative and positive social interactions. Negative social interactions included arguing over toys, tattling, physical aggression, and name-calling. Positive social interactions included sharing, helping another child, chatting, hugging, and playing together. Observers watched the children for the 50 minutes of free play.

Functional Behavior Assessment

The researchers believe that the arrangement of the children's environment would be an important factor in preventing problem behavior. Increasing the child's engagement with the environment will help increase positive social interaction and decrease negative social interaction. Engagement can be brought about by presenting children with novel toys and activities as well as providing each child with their preferred toys and activities. The children's preferred activities were discovered by asking the teachers what each child liked to do best and also observing the child's reaction when presented with different toys. A variety of types of toys is also useful in keeping a child engaged-so that children who prefer visual stimulation versus those who prefer auditory stimulation will all be happy.

It is also important that the teachers provide attention when a child is behaving well and engaged. Teachers at Walden walk around the free play area and pay attention to the children. Children with a consistent lack of engagement receive attention on every round, while some children receive attention only every second round, and some every third round. Attention may be something as simple as a smile or brief touch.

Intervention

The goal of the intervention is to improve the social skills of the children and to see what free play arrangement maximized engagement and social interaction in the children.

The regular setup during free play consisted of 10 toys on shelves that were rotated with a different set of ten each week. Also, each child had a box out of reach that contained their favorite toys and activities. In the conventional set up condition, the toys available were picked by local preschool teachers and all the toys from the individual boxes were set up to be available to everyone. The enhanced condition contained the same materials as the regular set up (10 toys available for everyone and individual boxes), but toys were rotated twice a week as opposed to once a week.

Results

The conventional set up had the highest rates of negative social interactions with an average of 24 a day compared to 6 per day for the other two conditions. The conventional set up and the regular set up had the same average rates of positive social interaction while the enhanced set up had the highest rates of positive social interaction. The frequent turnover of toys presented new situations to the children and so more opportunities for the children to interact with one another.

McGee, G. & Daly, T. (1999). Prevention of problem behavior in preschool children. In A.C. Repp and R.H. Horner (Eds.), *Functional analysis of problem behavior: From effective assessment to effective support* (pp. 171-195). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.