



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER SERIES

Using Social Stories to Teach Social Communication Skills to Preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

The purpose of this manuscript is to underscore the effectiveness of using social stories to teach and develop social communication skills for preschoolers with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Children with ASD experience challenges in two main areas: social interaction and social communication, and both of these areas can be aided through the use of social narratives. This paper also describes the importance of collaboration among families, teachers, and other professionals in improving social and communication skills to encourage the development and implementation of effective educational strategies and day-to-day activities for children with ASD.

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Several years ago, my cousin approached me at a family reunion and expressed that she was happy to hear that I am an educator. She hoped that I could help her. She explained that her four-year-old son, Ali, who had recently celebrated his birthday with friends and family, was exhibiting worrying behavior. She noticed that her son exhibited no facial expressions when the cake was brought out and the candles lit. Furthermore, he did not seem to react to the people in the room and seemed unaffected by their smiles and conversation. When asked more about her son's situation, my cousin explained that Ali typically had no interest in other children and was especially sensitive to sudden sensory changes. When friends suggested that Ali might have autism, she did not want to accept this idea; however, she asked me if I knew how we could improve his social communication skills.

My response to my cousin was that it was important to collaborate with education specialists who could provide advice regarding the proper interventions to meet Ali's social needs. Education specialists are trained to recommend the best interventions for children living with autism and other mental disorders. Because social and communication skills are difficult to teach, it is critical that children with autism learn these skills from specialists. Since this discussion with my cousin, I have become more interested in the effectiveness of education practices used to teach social communication skills to preschoolers with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Justification

The experience with my cousin and her son was an enlightening situation that exposed me to the different practices used in teaching social skills to preschoolers with autism. I have had the privilege of interacting with special education stakeholders and extensively explored the importance of collaboration among families, teachers, and the school system. This knowledge supports my philosophy that all children with autism can improve their social and communication skills if they receive effective interventions early in their lives. However, it is difficult to diagnose ASD early in life. Nonetheless, with advancements in the medical field, more accurate diagnoses are being made.

When considering the deficits and delays in the social skills development of preschool children with ASD, it is critical that teachers provide the required support for these children so that they can learn and practice social skills. Researchers have identified effective interventions and instructional methods that teachers can use for children with autism. However, teachers feel that there is insufficient evidence that these interventions are effective in improving the social skills of children with ASD and in improving their interaction with peers. Therefore, it is important to bridge the gap between research and practice to develop an understanding of the basic types of interventions and empirical evidence that exists about their effectiveness.

Statement of the Problem

An increasing number of preschoolers continue to be identified as having ASD (Barton, Lawrence, & Deurloo, 2012). Although teaching these children may be challenging, these students have the right to a free appropriate public education which means that they need different strategies to support their learning in inclusive classrooms (Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003). One of the most important skills is social communication because it affects an individual's capacity for and proficiency in interaction (Fisher & Haufe, 2009). In fact, social communication skills play a significant role in a child's development. Multiple studies (Stanton-Chapman, 2011) have shown that children with ASD have difficulty communicating with others in ways that are considered proper in a social setting. As a result of having impaired social interaction skills, children with autism may appear socially inadequate. In addition, in some cases, individuals with autism are unable to respond appropriately in social situations.

Consequently, children with autism have trouble starting and maintaining social relationships. Because of their inability to express themselves, most children with autism do not have as many friends as a typical child. For instance, children with autism sometimes avoid playing with their peers or joining group activities; they may also have trouble engaging in social activities, which later affects their interpersonal relationships. This social deficit is manifested because these children experience difficulty in adapting to conventional social cues such as establishing eye contact, altering body postures, or interpreting facial expressions (Dyksta et al., 2012).

Generally, children without disabilities acquire social communication skills simply by living life and learning along the way. In contrast, children with autism have difficulty learning and understanding and expressing body language, which makes it challenging for them to learn social skills from other people (Wilson, 2013). This trait is common in many children with autism because their ability to respond to social interactions based on observation is limited. For instance, in Ali's case, he was unable to acquire social skills by observing others. This characteristic manifested in two ways. First, Ali lacked interest in others, which made it impossible for people to engage in conversation with him. Second, Ali had trouble-expressing him-self because he had a limited understanding of body language, which explains why Ali showed no emotional expression when the cake was cut, the candles were lit, or people were joyful in response to his birthday.

Children with ASD may have difficulty learning body language and social-communication skills; for this reason, using social stories to teach and improve social communication skills for these children is important. This paper supports the effectiveness of using social stories to teach and improve social communication skills for preschoolers with ASD. This paper also describes the importance of collaboration among families, teachers, and other professionals in improving social and communication skill interventions for children with ASD.

The Effectiveness of Social Stories

Social stories can elicit moods about events and to increase or decrease target behaviors. In other words, descriptive stories are used to explain specific behaviors required during social interactions. Nonetheless, as witnessed in Ali's case, a combination of social stories with other interventions can result in overall positive social change. Several studies (Sansosti & Powell-Smith, 2008; Kokina & Kern, 2010) have demonstrated the effectiveness of using social stories in teaching preschool children with ASD. These studies have examined an extensive range of social communication skills and the disparity between these skills. For instance, Ali and Frederickson (2006) claimed that social stories were developed to help people with autism understand and interact appropriately in social settings. To achieve this goal, important points must be considered when creating social stories. A child's capabilities, strengths, and needs must be considered; thus, the stories need to be individualized for each child. As many individuals with autism face problems with language skills, using visual information in social stories is advantageous. Ali and Frederickson (2006) summarized four fundamental sentence categories used to create social stories: descriptive, perspective, directive, and affirmative. Each type of sentence has an independent function.

Social stories, designed to offer predictability to children with autism, have become a common intervention practice for children with ASD. Weiss (2013) indicated three areas in which children with autism experience difficulties: social interaction, communication, and imagination. The degree of difficulty varies for each individual depending the child's surrounding factors. In Ali's case, social stories were used to help him improve his social interaction skills. The use of social stories helped to provide Ali with cues about situations as well as appropriate responses to use when interacting with others. The following social story, which conforms to the requirement outlined by Ali and Frederickson (2006) that a child's needs, strengths, and capabilities be taken into consideration, was used in Ali's case:

"What I Should Do When I Am with People"

I celebrate my birthday once a year. During my birthday party, there are many adults and children come to my birthday party. They are all happy and talk to one another. When the cake is brought and the candles are lit, everyone is happy, and they sing happy birthday songs to me with smiles on their faces. My mom will be happy if I smile on my birthday. My mom will be happy when I learn to talk and be interested in my friends.

Additionally, social stories can play a significant role in children's acquisition of language, gender roles, and social behavior. Reynhout and Carter (2009) examined teachers who have used social stories when working with children with autism. These stories were used for two purposes: to define target behaviors and to identify specific characteristics of children displaying socially acceptable behavior. Reynhout and Carter also explained the reasons for using social stories. Teachers who were surveyed in the researchers' study believed that using social stories is efficient and that these stories are comfortable in terms of building and formulating them. The results of the researchers' social stories showed an improvement in children's expressive language and cognitive abilities. Finally, Reynhout and Carter mentioned that further research on the use of social stories by teachers who work with individuals with autism is essential in confirming the need for evidence-based practice.

Many studies (Schneider & Goldstein, 2010; Delano & Snell, 2006; Thiemann & Goldstein, 2001) have used social stories as a technique for reducing disturbing behavior and developing communication skills in individuals with ASD. Delano and Snell (2006) investigated the effects of social stories and the amount of time of appropriate social engagement in three children with autism. Their study also evaluated the effects of social story intervention on the same social skills identified by Thiemann and Goldstein (2001). Delano and Snell included three kindergarten children with autism and six able peers who displayed socially acceptable behavior as participants in their investigative study. All participants were the same age and from a rural elementary school. Delano and Snell used a multiple-probe-across-participants design to investigate the effects of social stories on the social engagement of the three children with autism.

Delano and Snell (2006) found that target social behaviors were increased for all participants. The advantage of generalization of the acquired behavior social stories as an intervention was only observed in two of the three children. This study concluded that social story intervention might lead to the improvement of social skills for individuals with autism. For instance, in Ali's case, he tended to engage in inappropriate social behavior, such as standing and speaking too close to people.

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A social story, together with multiple pictures, was used to change his behavior, especially with regard to standing too close when speaking with others. Ali's behavior improved after using the following social story:

"Standing Close"

My name is Ali. Sometimes I talk to the other children in my class. If I stand too close, other children sometimes get mad at me. What would happen if I gave children space? Some children don't like it when I stand very close to them. When I stand too close and talk, this makes my friends feel uncomfortable.

One of Ali's social problems was his inability to understand what adults, or even his peers, were communicating through facial expression and body language. To enhance Ali's communication skills, social stories were included in his preschool classes. This effective form of communication was recommended by Ali's speech pathologist. As an educator who has supported Ali's journey in learning social skills, I feel that social stories as a social skill intervention resulted in tremendous benefits for him.

Collaboration in Teaching Social Skills

Autism presents many challenges to educators as children with autism experience significant difficulty in communicating, socializing, and mastering relevant skills that are essential in laying a foundation for early education. Therefore, to adequately address the needs of preschoolers with autism, collaboration among all stakeholders is crucial in developing social skills interventions for children with ASD. Schultz, Able, Sreckovic, and White (2016) revealed some of the issues that affect collaboration in the education system for children with autism. These issues include parents who are over- or under-involved or experiencing difficulties in accepting the diagnoses of their children. "Regardless of the challenges they face in collaborating with professional teachers, parents should embrace the role of teaching their children to speak out for themselves especially in social setups" (Schultz et al., 2016, p. 348).

The researchers' study (Schultz et al., 2016) emphasized the need for early collaboration between teachers and parents with children with ASD; this helps teachers to figure out which education interventions work for a child and to remove those that are unsuccessful. In this study, teachers suggested some of the strategies that parents can use to enhance the social skills of their children. For example, parents can pair a child with ASD with a sibling who can engage in role-play to help the child with ASD in acquiring relevant social skills. From this study, it is clear that teachers' perceptions of what parent and professional collaboration entails influences the ways in which parents carry out collaboration engagements. An important element that came out of this study is the teachers' view that parents should communicate more regarding the struggles they are facing concerning their children with ASD (Schultz et al., 2016). These highlighted areas of the study are important to consider when collaborating to improve the social skills of children with autism.

Collaboration is one way of acquiring knowledge about special education providers (Blask, 2011). Inclusion programs for children with special needs in schools require that teachers acquire knowledge about how to deal with the increased needs of these students. Collaboration promotes best practices among teachers, families, and professionals with regard to developing appropriate social skills in children with autism. Blask's study emphasized the need for parent-teacher partnership. Stanley (2008) discussed ways in which schools and parents can be involved in collaborative work, including parenting, volunteering, communicating, and collaborating with the community: "It is evident that over the past few decades, parents, teachers and other special education experts are valuing the importance of collaborative decision-making" (Stanley, 2008, p. 10).

To create successful collaborative experiences, every person should be involved in the education process. Analysis Stanley's (2008) study confirms that most parents prefer face-to-face communication in matters relating to their children's education. However, the reality is that more written communication than face-to-face communication is used. Written communication focuses on addressing the daily social challenges facing students with autism. In addition, Stanley suggests different types of communication that teachers and parents can use to facilitate collaboration. Moreover, it is during collaborative meetings, in which parent-teacher communication is facilitated, that interventions for social interaction for children with autism are discussed.

Even with the challenges that accompany collaboration among parents, teachers, and other professionals, solutions exist about how to minimize the effects of these challenges.

Collaboration also provides an opportunity for teamwork. Professionals such as pediatricians and pathologists are experts in medical matters; however, these professionals need parental input. Parents have insight into the dislikes and behavior of their children, which is crucial in enhancing social skill programs for the children. Kalyva (2013) discussed the daunting process of collaboration between parents and experts and emphasized the need to negotiate and clarify every communication. Kalyva also identified some of the challenges the collaboration process brings. There is a high possibility that when individuals work together to enhance the social skills of children with autism, these individuals bring their needs into the relationship, which can result in conflicts of interest among stakeholders represented in collaborative meetings..

Discussion

There is no single approach that is most effective for teaching preschoolers with ASD. In fact, successful programs must be individualized based on the unique abilities and needs of each child. Although children with ASD have different learning styles, some educational practices are effective in teaching individuals with ASD. Specifically, using social stories is one of the best practices for teaching social communication skills to preschoolers with ASD. The results of the studies mentioned above largely support the argument that this intervention is extremely effective. For instance, Ali exhibited unique behaviors that called for the use of interventions specifically developed for him. Through the use of social stories, he was guided in choosing various topics that he could use to initiate conversations with his peers. This intervention helped him to at least try to initiate peer conversations and gave him the opportunity to generalize his social skills. Ali learned the importance of reciprocating behavior by playing with his classmates according to his terms and his classmates' terms.

The possibility exists that some children with autism will experience difficulties when applying the social skills that they have learned. For example, if a social story encourages children to interact with their fellow students, they may still find it difficult to transfer these skills to other places, such as their homes. To overcome this challenge, there is a need for collaboration among the adults who support and provide care for the child.

Nonetheless, working with Ali proved how important it is for adults to consistently provide social interaction for children with autism and help them by describing social cues and body language that they can use when in the presence of other people. In Ali's case, a number of social stories were used for various situations; however, once we noticed some improvements, we gradually withdrew supports and allowed Ali to experience applying the social skills he had learned on his own.

Ali and Frederickson (2006) stated that social stories are utilized to target a multiplicity of behaviors in children with autism. Social stories are used with students of diverse ages, language skills, and domains of cognitive capability and can be designed specifically for individual students. This aspect enables interventions to be more personalized to specific behaviors and each individual's needs. Furthermore, many studies (e.g., Delano & Snell, 2006; Hanley et al., 2010) found that social stories are beneficial in engaging individuals with ASD in the process of learning. The perceived efficacy of interventions was clarified in enhanced expressive language and cognitive capability. Moreover, social stories are important for effectively developing appropriate behaviors in children who have ASD. Although social stories are easy to create, there are important steps that must be considered when putting them into use.

Although children with autism may face challenges in the classroom, there is hope for these children. Teachers and parents are the most important factors in helping students to excel in class and elsewhere. Temple Grandin stated in Scott, Clarke and Brady (2000, p. 59), "I am a person with autism and today I am on the faculty of a major university. One of the reasons I am successful is because I had excellent teachers." Teachers must have the confidence and desire to encourage and support children with ASD in the classroom. Teachers must also realize that the same intervention cannot be applied to all children. In other words, teachers need to practice differentiated instruction, curriculum, and assessment in order to meet the needs of children with ASD. Therefore, teachers must use many different strategies that suit both the educational content and the students' abilities.

In the case of Ali, one aspect that drew my attention is that when Ali was better able to understand social situations, he could easily learn what was socially acceptable, develop ways to interact with others, and incorporate the use of stories to recognize how to behave appropriately.

One important lesson from Ali's scenario is that positive social interaction among children with autism encourages the overall positive development of other children. This occurs because the improvement of children with autism's social skills translates into better interaction with their peers. The responsibility of enhancing positive social interaction among all children for a better inclusive classroom setting lies mainly with teachers. This paper supports the effectiveness of the practice of using social stories to teach and improve social communication skills for preschoolers with ASD. This paper also describes the importance of collaboration among families, teachers, and other professionals in improving social and communication skill interventions for children with ASD.

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