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Research exercise: Communication and Students with Autism

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Autism and Communication

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Why Study Autism and Communication?

One of the defining characteristics of the Autism Spectrum Disorders is deficits in the development of communication skills. Children with autism can be nonverbal, be verbal but struggle with speech, and also have deficits in auditory processing. These developmental deficits not only make communication difficult for children with autism, they also make communication stressful. When educators are more aware of the communication abilities of the students with autism who spend time in their classroom, they will be better able to instruct these student in academic content areas. More importantly, they will be better prepared to understand each individual student and help him or her learn how to communicate with others more effectively.

Characteristics of Communication in Autism:

- ❖ Echolalia is the behavior of repeating/echoing words and phrases out of context and without understanding of their meaning.
- ❖ Pronominal Reversal-The inability to connect pronouns with their meaning and therefore to use them properly in communication- often a direct result of delayed echolalia.
- ❖ Focus on the literal- this behavior is evident in echolalia and pronominal reversal. Often, students focus on the “surface forms of speech,” meaning the concrete forms that can be seen, heard, and/or touched, without connecting these words to their underlying meaning (Oller, 2010, p.37). Because of the inability to comprehend abstract concepts, many students will be unable to realize and understand that other people have different perspectives.
- ❖ Joint attention- “When the child can respond to the gaze of another person and use his gaze to direct the attention of others” (Schreibman, 2005, p.113). Most students with autism are deficient in this behavior because they cannot communicate using eye contact.
- ❖ Auditory processing- The autistic brain processes auditory information more slowly and with greater difficulty than a typical brain. Because of this, the rapid pace of conversation and the expectation that they are able to listen, comprehend, form an opinion/reaction and respond in a short time period is stressful.

Implications for Educators:

- ❖ Speak in simple concrete terms. Create a relaxed classroom atmosphere.
- ❖ Depending on the severity of the specific student’s autism, encourage them to say the sentence correctly and model for them.
- ❖ Use concrete examples and manipulatives. Do not use a lot of figurative language or humor in speech. Many general education teachers rely on discussion and the sharing of ideas in learning. This will not be appropriate for students with autism because they will struggle to understand that other students have a different perspective.
- ❖ Do not attempt to get students’ attention through eye contact. Many of the students will be uncomfortable making eye contact with their peers and teacher; do not expect it of them.
- ❖ Teach with a lot of visuals. Speak slowly and allow more time for students to process and respond. Many nonverbal students will communicate via sign language or picture communication systems, so instruction with many visuals will be appropriate.
- ❖ It is important to work with the families of students with autism to maintain consistency for these students and to provide them with adequate support.
- ❖ Other important information: Get to know each individual student and their needs. Recognize that what may seem like inappropriate behavior is an attempt to communicate, and instead of punishing the student and discouraging behavior, work with them to develop an appropriate method of communication.

Major References:

- ❖ Oller, J., & Oller, S. (2010). *Autism: the diagnosis, treatment, & etiology of the undeniable epidemic*. Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, LLC.
- ❖ Schreibman, L. (2005). *The science and fiction of autism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.