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**Social Interventions: The Importance of Considering Program Design and Instructional Methods**

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are characterized by deficits in social interaction and communication (Jordan & Powell, 1995). With scaffolded supports and specialized methods in natural settings, individuals diagnosed with ASD can develop the skills they require to function meaningfully in society (Abele, 2009). Mastering these skills can increase access to social opportunities similar to their peers. When developing interventions, it is important to identify supports that can sustain research-based practices designed to support a diverse group of learners. By utilizing a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach to teaching social skills, educators can set up a learning environment conducive to not only individuals diagnosed with ASD, but also individuals with a broad range of social communication needs.

There have been several research studies focused on both environmental design and methods of instruction when teaching social skills to individuals with ASD. More specifically, studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of parent training and peer mentoring in individuals in all stages of development; whereas, studies on the benefits of educating in naturalistic environments has concentrated mostly on young children with ASD. “Given the positive findings using these techniques with young children, future research should explore their application to older individuals” (Reichow & Volkmar, 2009, p. 159).

This article discusses how social skill programs should be designed with UDL in mind, while also utilizing research-based methods for teaching skills to students with various social skill deficits. When identifying interventions that address social communication, effective practices that can increase the generalization of social skills, Design and methodology are important to consider when selecting social skill interventions, and some areas to concentrate on include: 1) Universal Design for Learning; 2) Person Centered Planning; 3) Problem Solving Frameworks; 4) Natural Environments as a Classroom; 5) Parent Training; and 6) Peer Mentoring.

**Universal Design for Learning**

Utilizing universal design in social programs allows for the widest range of students to access and benefit from supports. The UDL approach concentrates on three cognitive areas that are important for individual learners. Specifically, UDL concentrates on: (1) the varying ways to represent information to the learner; (2) the ability of the learner to develop new knowledge; and (3) the various ways to actively learn (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014; Rose, Meyer, Hitchcock, 2005). Since individuals with social communication deficits vary in their levels of interpersonal skills, programs need to accommodate individual needs. Taking a UDL approach discourages rigid guidelines and encourages flexibility around the needs of the learner.

Person centered planning is an approach that develops and supports learning environments that place the individual in the center of the planning process. This approach of supports allows for the individual’s abilities and needs to inform the goals and design of the program (O’Brien & Lovett, 1992).

Person centered planning calls for utilizing all resources that are available, as well as developing and creating new resources that are specific to the individual’s needs. When addressing social concerns, a person centered planning approach can target behaviors that are specific to each individual in order to maximize learning.

**Problem-Solving Frameworks**

Utilizing problem-solving frameworks encourages individuals to develop systems that allow for overcoming obstacles in day to day life. Problem-solving frameworks are systems that outline a means to address problems in a sequential and scaffolded approach that can be applied across multiple situations (O’Connor, Stichter, 2011).

This approach can be used to minimize stressful social situations by identifying, analyzing, and responding to various problems that individuals may encounter. Individuals who have difficulty learning these problem solving skills through daily interactions can find direct instruction on how to manage conflict in problem solving opportunities to be helpful in future social situations. “The key is to start with concrete, hands-on projects that have meaning for the child, then slowly move into abstract problem-solving involving thoughts and creativity, in academics and social situations” (Grandin, 2008, np).

**Naturalistic Environments**

The use of the natural environment for educating individuals with regards to social skills has demonstrated great benefits in younger children; whereas, the research supporting the use in adolescents and adults is much more sparse (Reichow, Volkmar, 2009).

Naturalistic environments can provide the opportunity for generalization of social skills. Learning occurs in an environment where individuals will master skills in an authentic setting. The natural environment an approach of varying abilities to learn and apply wide ranging skills that are targeted based on person centered planning (Renzaglia et. al., 2003). Examples of skills being taught in a naturalistic setting can range from street crossing and navigation planning to negotiate more complex social interactions. The natural environment also provides opportunities for generalization by pinpointing meaningful skills needed to be successful in everyday interactions (Renzaglia, Karvon, Drasgow, Stoxen, 2003).

**Parent Training**

Parents and caregivers play an integral role in helping children to develop appropriate social communication skills. When social skill interventions are being implemented, it is important to involve parents in the development and execution of the interventions. Individuals diagnosed with ASD have demonstrated higher levels of generalization when parents are properly trained in the strategies being utilized (Hemmeter & Kaiser, 1994). When provided with the intervention process allows for individuals to continue practicing social skills outside of the intervention setting. The intervention process should continue even when the individual is not meeting with professionals. Therefore, parents can practice and utilize systems outside of the intervention setting.

**Peer Mentoring**

The National Standards Report (2009) from the National Autism Center has stated that peer-mediated interventions are an established intervention treatment for individuals diagnosed with ASD (National Autism Center, 2009). Peer mentors provide individuals with ASD a point-person who can help decipher what are appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in social settings. Peer mentors take on the role of a mentor rather than a professional, creating a different dynamic between mentor and mentee. By navigating the world together, individuals with ASD can learn and practice social skills in a natural social context, one that does not involve adults, professionals, or teachers (Zhang & Wheeler, 2011). Following the framework of inclusion, peer mentors can help students learn appropriate social behaviors in realistic models. Peer mentoring has also effectively reduced inappropriate social behaviors including unresponsiveness, changing conversation topics and inappropriate talking (Chung et. al., 2007). Reichow and Volkmar note that, “interventions that train peers to deliver treatment has much support and should be considered a recommended practice for all individuals with autism” (Reichow, Volkmar, 2009, p. 160).

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When selecting social skill intervention approaches, it is important to be aware of the design and methods being used. Each learner is different, requiring varying supports. Interventions utilizing the six factors above benefit a larger portion of the population in need of social skills development while also increasing the chances of generalization. Understanding the importance of these factors when choosing the right social skills program is critical in order to find programs most appropriate for each individual learner.

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**References**


