Title: Teaching the imitation and spontaneous use of gestures using a naturalistic behavioral intervention in young children with autism

Topic: Social skills, behavior

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Purpose: To determine the best strategy by which target and improve imitation and spontaneous use of gestures in children with autism.

Objectives: The research team sought to determine if Reciprocal Imitation Training (RIT) can be used to teach young children with autism to imitate the gestures and language of playmates. RIT is an Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) technique in which the therapist imitates actions and vocalizations of the child to teach imitative play and play gestures. Peer imitation is important to social skill development as children move towards associative and cooperative play.

Study: Five children (ages 34–49 months) participated in a 10-week RIT program. The children underwent training three days a week. On two of these days, the children participated in three-20 minute sessions; on the third day, they participated in two sessions. Training staff worked one-on-one with the children by first teaching recognition of imitation, then imitation of familiar actions and verbalizations, and finally imitation of new actions and verbalizations. Children received praise for imitating the behaviors and verbalizations that the staff modeled, and observers recorded the frequency of comments, response time, and completeness of imitated verbalizations and actions. The ability of the children to generalize their new skills was tested by changing the child's environment, toys, and play partners.

Results: All the children increased the frequency of their imitation, whether by gesture alone or the combination of gesture and language. These skills generalized when environment, toys, and play partner were changed, and were maintained one month after program completion. Three of the children also developed the ability to spontaneously use meaningful play gestures; these skills did not generalize to play with parents.

Significance and Implications: This study shows that RIT can be used to teach gesture and language imitation skills, which can be easily generalized. RIT is also useful in teaching children spontaneous imitative play.

Practical Relevance: The results of this study are useful for educators and clinicians. Professionals can use Reciprocal Imitation Training (RIT) to help teach children to use gestures through imitation and later generalize the use of these gestures to other settings. For children with autism, learning to use these gestures at a young age is one of the first steps on the road to becoming more effective communicators.
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