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Incidental Teaching and Its Impact on Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

The title of our research-based inquiry is Incidental Teaching and Its Impact on Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder. The purpose and reason for doing this inquiry is to determine if incidental teaching is an applicable evidence-based program for teaching children with Autism Spectrum Disorder appropriate communication skills and social interactions. The main question driving our inquiry is if “incidental teaching is an effective program for helping students with Autism Spectrum Disorder communicate and further develop their language abilities?”. Our hypothesis/assumption regarding this question is that if educators and interventionists use incidental teaching to teach children with Autism Spectrum Disorder appropriate communication skills/habits then the child will progress and have enhanced communication abilities. Having our findings, in mind we believe and recommend that incidental teaching be implemented in all children with Autism Spectrum Disorders intervention plan. We feel this way because we found that despite it being under-researched that there is some merit to it being an effective evidence-based program when it comes to teaching appropriate social and communications skills to individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Background

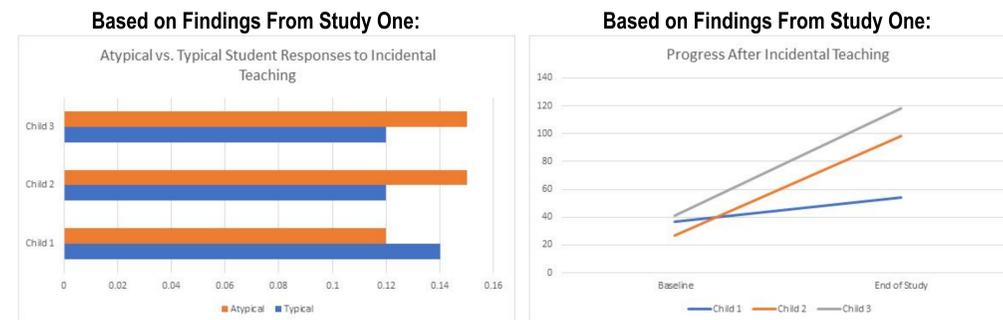
Autism, as defined by the text, is “a complex developmental disability that is characterized by significant problems with social interaction and communication” (Kuder, 2018, p.119). These characteristics of autism more specifically include impairments in communication, repetitive activities, and the need for sensory input. Regarding the causes of autism, the required textbook for this course lists many possible theories such as genetics, a possible nervous system disorder, and even the level of nurturing given by the parent (Kuder, 2018, p.121). Having these traits and theories of autism in mind we believe that incidental teaching is an appropriate evidence-based program for elevating some of the struggles that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder face. The theory behind incidental teaching is that the “behavior is viewed as amenable to change by arranging the type and timing of physical and social environmental events” (Leaf, 2017, p.172). Incidental teaching “involves physical or social events in the child’s natural environment with natural interaction partners and events specific to the child’s interests” (Leaf, 2017, p.172). Incidental teaching as described by its founders Hart and Risley has four key components that need to be implemented in order for the program to be successful and work as intended. The first component that they stated is that it is important for teachers to put age-appropriate learning materials at a reachable distance for the student to interact with in the classroom. The second component is that students need to be allowed to request the desired learning material. The third component is that once a student requests a learning material the teacher can then elaborate on this material and its use. The last component that Hart and Risley outlined is that the teacher needs to provide access to the learning item requested by the child upon request. Having this theory of incidental teaching and its many components outlined researchers believe that some of the other target populations that this evidence-based program can help besides those with Autism is children who have Intellectual Disabilities or Emotional and Behavioral Disorders to name a few.

Method

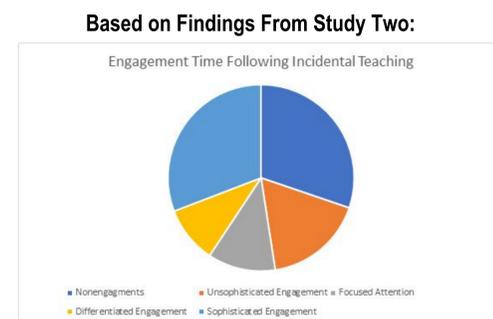
- **Research question:** Is incidental teaching an effective program for helping students with Autism Spectrum Disorder communicate and further develop their language abilities?
- **Hypothesis/assumption:** If educators and interventionists use incidental teaching to teach children with Autism Spectrum Disorder appropriate communication skills/habits then the child will progress and have enhanced communication abilities.
- **Procedure (1)** reviewing the program incidental teaching, and **(2)** reviewing the two research studies *Incidental Teaching of Age-Appropriate Social Phrases to Children With Autism* by McGee and Daly and *Contributors of Incidental Teaching, Developmental Quotient, and Peer Interaction to Child Engagement* by Casey, McWilliams, and Sims.
- **Include the location of the studies (e.g., in the USA, or any other countries):** Both studies were conducted in the USA.

Results

After extensively reading study one we found that its purpose was to “evaluate an incidental teaching approach” with “age-appropriate social phrases by three preschool-aged boys with autism” (McGee, G. & Daly, T, 2007, p 11). Having that been said, all three preschoolers underwent the five phases of incidental teaching to learn the phrases “you know what” and “all right”. From this research on three preschool-aged boys with autism, they concluded that they performed better than their typically developing peers after receiving intervention from the incidental teaching approach.



The second research study’s purpose was to determine if the researchers were right in their prediction that incidental teaching could be a good predictor of student’s interactions or lack thereof in the classroom (Casey, McWilliam, & Sims, 2012, p.122) With that being said, the researchers conducted a study on 61 preschoolers with varying disabilities who attended 31 different early childhood classrooms to see if incidental teaching had any effects on a child’s level of sophisticated or absence of engagement (Casey, McWilliam, & Sims, 2012, p.122). At the conclusion of this study, researchers felt confident in suggesting that “teachers need to be using incidental teaching and promoting high-quality peer interactions” as this is an effective-evidence based program for children with social engagement delays (Casey, McWilliam, & Sims, 2012, p.133).



Discussion

After intensely reading study one we came to the conclusion with the help of the researcher’s work that incidental teaching played an undeniable role when it came to increasing the three preschool aged boys with autism social interactions to levels even beyond their typically developing peers. As you can see in the line graph below results all three boys’ social interactions positively correlated to incidental teaching and as a result increased as the method was being used. Similar to study one study two’s results also concluded that incidental teaching was an effective means for teaching students with autism how to effectively communicate and participate in social interactions. More specifically the researchers found after conducting a study on 61 preschoolers with varying disabilities who attended 31 different early childhood classrooms that the effects of incidental teaching were irrefutably positive and played an important role in these students increased social success (Casey, McWilliam, & Sims, 2012, p.122). In fact, the researchers of the study concluded with the statement “teachers need to be using incidental teaching and promoting high-quality peer interactions” as this is an effective evidence-based program for children with social engagement delays (Casey, McWilliam, & Sims, 2012, p.133). From these findings and after some reflection we feel confident in our belief that incidental teaching is an exceptional evidence-based program that can help children of all ages and disabilities learn to interact more positively with those around them. In addition to the research proving incidental teaching as an effective evidence-based program we also see it as such because after reflecting on our own experiences, we see the value in the naturalistic approach that incidental teaching encompasses.

Recommendations & Future Directions

After reading the available research articles on this evidence-based program we feel confident in saying that special educators and those that work with students who have been diagnosed with disabilities even beyond Autism Spectrum Disorder should be trained in incidental teaching. We feel this way because incidental teaching is an effective program for remedying some of the common communication/social deficits that individuals with disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder may face. In addition to training, we also feel as though the program could be improved by some technological enhancements. Having that been said, we believe that if incidental teaching is converted to a format that can be used online it will be more widely available to all persons who may benefit. Regarding our future recommendations, for researching this program we feel as though the research currently offered is limited and because of that researchers need to continue to follow the journey that interventions and educators have while using this program. With that being said, we believe that if the benefits of incidental teaching were more widely expressed through evidence-based research more educators would utilize this program as an effective means of teaching their students who are diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder how to appropriately communicate and participate in social interactions.

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