

CHALLENGES IN SOCIAL INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

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ABSTRACT

Social communication behaviors include understanding and using appropriate facial expressions, eye contact, and body language. It is the form of communication that needs interaction with peers, family members, teachers etc. Children with autism have deficit in social communication and it greatly influences their ability to socialize. Interaction with peers /classmates/ teachers happen with understanding of non-verbal clues and expression of appropriate facial and gestural communication. Successful school inclusion can be achieved with appropriate social behaviour of the child in the classroom and interaction with teachers / classmates. With inappropriate social behaviour, children with autism remain isolated and classroom interaction becomes challenging. This paper aimed at understanding the social communication behaviours present among children with autism in the primary age group and its impact on inclusion in school for children with autism.

Keywords: Autism, social communication, peer interaction, school inclusion

INTRODUCTION

School inclusion of children with autism requires appropriate knowledge of autism and inclusive practices. Due to complexities of the condition exists with autism inclusion of children with autism entails understanding on part of teachers and the school team. A diagnosis of autism is given when two specific areas of development are significantly affected. They are: social interaction and communication, and repetitious behaviors and so-called restricted interests (American Psychological Association, 2013, CDC, 2020). More specifically, people with Autism have been thought to be challenged by the ability to understand others' perspectives or attribute mental states to other people and have been said to display a lack of empathy.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual DSM-5 states the criteria for autism as persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts and is seen in failure to initiate or respond to social interactions. Deficit is also seen in verbal and nonverbal communication, use of gestures, adjusting behaviour to suit various social contexts. With the deficit being noted with communication and interaction the children with autism faces isolation even in inclusion and their social behaviour limits their participation with the peers.

Inclusion assumes that children with special needs are part of the regular stream and should be treated as such. Inclusion is based on Wolfersberger's principle of normalization (i.e., all persons regardless of ability should live and learn in environments as close to normal as possible). The basic idea behind normalization is that people with special needs should be viewed in the ways in which they are the same as other people rather than in the ways in which they are different. Inclusive environments provide opportunities for students with autism to increase their social interactions with same aged peers and in turn to improve their social skills and interactions with peers giving students with autism a chance to practice their communication skills, develop friendships, and see how peers behave in day-to-day classroom situations.

CLASSROOM SOCIAL COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOURS

Everyday classroom situation expects a set of communication behaviours which the children learn during the process. While considering the child with autism behaviour expected at any given moment needs to be taught to them. Few communication behaviours expected in a classroom are:

1. Requesting a desired item like "I want/need
2. Asking for help
3. Asking for a break
4. To indicate yes/no
5. Express likes and dislikes
6. Expresses feelings like happy, sad, sick, hurt

A student needs to use the above given communication behaviour in a daily classroom routine. It is so common that a student wish to express to go to recess during the class and the student raises hand and ask for permission. This social behaviour may not happen instantly for children with autism. Some children express inappropriately the need to go to toilet. Understanding the interests of peers, maintaining friendships, initiating conversation are the deficit noticed in children with autism. However, it is noted that every child diagnosed with autism need not have same level of functioning.

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION BEHAVIOUR AND AUTISM

Social communication skills include the ability to vary speech style, take the perspective of others, understand, and appropriately use the rules for verbal and nonverbal communication, and use the structural aspects of language (e.g.,

vocabulary, syntax, and phonology) to accomplish these goals. Social communication skills are needed for language expression and comprehension in both spoken and written modalities. Spoken and written language skills allow for effective communication in a variety of social contexts and for a variety of purposes. Communication challenges may range from no (current) use of language to difficulty participating in the kinds of social conversations that the neurotypical community regularly engages in. Blume, J., Wittke, K., Naigles, L. et al (2021) suggested that early spoken language is strongly influenced by elements of social communication and this predicts language development at later life. Also, the early spoken vocabulary has transactional relationship with social communication skills that supports the language development.

Children with autism have challenges with communication and social skills. They find it hard to have conversations and have difficulty to understand social cues. Some children are nonverbal and uses only gestures to communicate. Children with autism have challenges in making friends and communicating socially. A person with autism may not like changes in their schedule or changes in the way they do something. Autism can range on a spectrum from mild to severe; depending on how many these challenges affect everyday life.

In every day interaction of the classroom situation demands a lot of opportunity to communicate with peers, teachers, and other team members. Understanding the intention of the listener and getting clues from the gestures are needed for effective participation in a situation. Children with autism unable to pick up clues and hence develops an indifferent behaviour to express oneself in a social context. This is often misunderstood by peers and teachers and makes the inclusion process questionable.

Considering the prevalence of autism, it is understood that according to the Center for Disease Control, 1 in 54 children in the U.S. have been identified with autism spectrum disorder. Prevalence of Autism in U.S. children increased from 1 in 150 children in 2000 to 1 in 54 children by 2016 (CDC, 2020). Autism is the fastest-growing developmental disability and is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls (CDC, 2020).

In India, Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Kerala screened 101,438 children aimed at diagnosing most of the developmental disabilities such developmental delay, global developmental delay, autism, and cerebral palsy using simple and standardized screening tools. Nair et.al (2014) studied children in the age range of 0–6 years, which could be responsible for the observed low prevalence in this age group as the diagnostic yield is lower in the younger age group. Poovathinal et.al (2016) reported a relatively higher prevalence which could be due to the inclusion of children up to the age range of 15 years. While diagnosis has become a challenge in lower age group the prevalence is most evident in upper age range of up to 15 yrs as diagnosis is done. Considering the prevalence with school going children of autism and it is essential and right to be included into the school. Although the deficit is seen in their adaptive behaviour and in communication and interaction, appropriate inclusive practices need to be planned in schools.

LEGAL PROVISIONS AND INCLUSION

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPwD) 2016 defines inclusive education as a system of education wherein students with and without disabilities learn together and the system of teaching and learning is suitably adapted to meet the learning needs of different types of students with disabilities.

The right to inclusive education for CWDs has been recognized by the Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, the Sarva Siksha Abhyaan, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPWD Act) 2016 and the recent New Education Policy 2020; there exists rights and responsibilities of stakeholders in inclusion of children with special needs. The legal and policy commitment towards inclusive education has been motivated by the need to comply with international conventions like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

As per the results of the 76th round of the National Sample Survey 2018, 48.8 percent of persons with disabilities are literate and only 62.9 percent of those aged between 3 to 35 years have ever been enrolled in a regular school. The report also highlighted extremely low retention rates for CWDs with only 23.1 percent of enrolled children currently attending schools. There exist other disparities across gender and disability types, with children with autism and cerebral palsy and girls with disabilities least likely to be enrolled in schools.

The legislations have enabled the stakeholders, parents, teachers, and school team to positively look upon the children with autism and to be included in a regular school. Despite legislations the stakeholders' attitudes plays a major role in successful inclusion. The social behaviors exhibited by children with autism is not been understood by the school team.

INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Taneja J (2014) discussed on stake holders' perspective on children with autism spectrum in an urban Indian school context points out that the challenges exists within the social sphere and it is the main concern and in particular those arises during interactions with others and in relations to peers. Specialists stressed developing the social understanding and skills of the child development in the social sphere are to be provided by the school as part of school-based

education. Inclusion of children with autism is influenced by the attitude of the teachers. Teachers expressed positive attitude of including students with autism with no difficulties as against with children with behavioral problems. More positive attitude was shown to children with cognitive difficulties Jury, M., Perrin, A. L., Desombre, C., & Rohmer, O. (2021). Significant attention to social difficulties was expressed by parents for their children. Inclusive practice entails the student's participation in every sphere.

Looking into the strength of children with autism and developing on such skills would ease the process of inclusion. Many people on the autism spectrum are superior at what is known as systemizing, that is, "the drive to analyze objects and events, to understand their structure and predict their future behavior" (Baron-Cohen, 2005, pp. 110). This may be exhibited as an intense interest in train time-tables, for example, or an almost intuitive sense of how to program a computer. Other cognitive patterns have emerged through research. For example, people with autism tend to show an above-average awareness of details and ability to segment stimuli (e.g. Happe, 1999). The ability to do logical work, sequencing and systemizing has made them to be software developers in the information and communication sectors. The school could consider involving the students with autism in the classroom activities that demands the logical order thinking and peer interaction can be planned in the activities that involve the above. The story telling, mathematics calculations, science experiments enormously involve logical sequencing and these children are given the lead to carry out the activity with a support of the teacher or through buddy support.

A successful inclusion for children with autism happens by the suitable classroom modifications that allow children with autism to share activities and experiences with their peers. Encouraging interaction through activities can be planned in a classroom. By exerting the acceptance of social behaviour that includes nonverbal communication by children with autism the classroom inclusion become inclusive.

Student specific plans foster the development of children. Each child with autism is different with his/her unique needs. Individual students' profile that marks student's abilities in the areas of social skills, communication, repetitive behaviour, sensory issues, and other medical conditions are to be noted. Social communication behaviour varies with from simple non-verbal communication to high linguistic abilities. Hence the teacher can create personal profile of each student with their functional skills will aid other team to understand the Childs need in a classroom. Children with autism may refuse to participate in a new activity if it is uninformed. Prior information of the activities to be carried out in a school can be presented to the child visually to enhance their participation without difficulty. Incorporating their preferred activity in classroom promotes more engagement of these children. Making children with autism to be a participatory member in an academic activity is much needed than simply including them in school.

Inclusion can help to teach empathy and acceptance, and can enable children with autism to experience social interactions with similar-aged role models (French & French, 2018; Smith, 2012). Embedding interventions for students with autism into the curriculum has been recommended by several researchers as a technique to support the integration of social communication goals in the classroom context (Sutton et.al 2009)

Another way to make the children to be participatory member is through communicative activity by having a support group work where the groups are formed and supportive peers are arranged for the student with autism. The group may have academic goals or social communication behaviour goals. The supportive peer prompts the child with autism to initiate communication and make them to observe others in group. This learning in group is taken to generalization in classroom and other suitable social contexts and in real life situations. Though classroom teaching embedded with social communication takes place, it is to be noted that teaching social skills is not to make the child less autistic but to give them social understanding that enable them to interact with greater range of people or situations with more confidence.

Additionally, to discuss social communication behaviour is in the language class that would develop the social communication to a greater extent. Drama is an opportunity to explore body language and facial expression. It gives an opportunity to discuss characters' motives and feelings. Using everyday opportunity make the child with autism to develop the communication. The teacher can plan considering the functional level of the child. Playground is yet another option the teacher plan to provide opportunity to learn the social communication behaviour. As the characteristic of autism, the child may involve in isolated play or parallel play and finding it hard to follow rules in games and wait for the turn. More possibly the play should promote them to initiate communication, expressing oneself, facial expressions, and gestural communication.

CONCLUSION

Each child with autism is unique and therefore no specific practice can be decided. With teachers proactive planning and implementation of classroom activity it is possible the child become participatory member. The classroom strategies can be embedded with promoting social communication behaviour of the child especially in the language classes. There are policies to support inclusion of children with special needs and this does not mean forced participation of the child in the mainstream school. Inclusion does mean the child should experience purposeful and appropriate education. The inclusion promotes socialization as the interaction happens with peers have an impact. Deficit in social communication is noted with children with autism and developing the range of communication skills

to be part of the school activities will aid typical children also. Social communication behaviour gained during school hours does not make the child less autistic but make them to respond in an appropriate way.

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