

Increasing Conversational Interactions Between Verbal High School Students with Autism and Their Peers Without Disabilities

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Reviewed by Ted Wormeli

In this article Hughes et al. describe an experiment in which a very “low-tech” device (a bound paper booklet) was used to enhance the frequency of oral communication between six high school students with either a diagnosis of autism or characteristics of autism and general education classmates. The six students included individuals with mild intellectual disability to average aptitude; reading ability ranged from grade three to grade six. Two students were visually-impaired. All students had the ability to speak and to listen.

The booklets contained conversation starters on a variety of topics that the students were trained to use by a learning-disabled student who was himself first briefly trained by the researchers. The starters were written in Braille for the two visually-impaired students; for two of the other students, text was supplemented with Picture Communication Symbols. The researchers recorded base-line data on the number of verbal interactions the students had with general education peers before the intervention-training and then observed them in a structured setting with general education classmates, using the communication books after the intervention. They also recorded students’ responses to questions that were intended to elicit interest in communication and satisfaction with communication with their classmates.

The results of the study indicated that this very low-cost intervention was successful in substantially increasing (in a very careful fashion) both the frequency of communicative exchanges and satisfaction with social relationships. Researchers also found that general education peers were accepting of the booklets.

Hugh et al. described some limitations to their study. The circumstances were controlled; the general education partners were deliberately selected. Although an attempt was made to assess reciprocity, the researchers wondered how to deepen the oral exchanges between the students and their partners beyond the conversation starters. They speculated:

It may be that communication books initially may be required to prompt conversation between verbal students with autism and their peers without disabilities but that, over time, students may be able to maintain extended conversations with peers without such aids when opportunities to interact in school are provided (p. 253).

This is an interesting article, well worth reading; the results demonstrate the power of a structured and very low-cost intervention to enhance initiation of oral communication in students with ASD. The reader

might ask if other structured interventions would be needed to assist in deepening a conversation. Would, for example, certain kinds of game-playing deepen conversations? I note that two staff members at POPARD are working on the creation of an app (see POPARD Current Projects) that appears to increase and deepen oral exchanges as students with ASD talk among themselves and with others about the app and how it might address some of their needs. The app itself is intended to enhance socialization by encouraging the conceptualization of friendships. And while it is not so low-cost as a paper book, the ubiquity (and social acceptance) of devices on which it might play is a strong argument in its favour. The social context is different in their project (the students are part of a working group, rather than participants in casual conversation), and it seems reasonable to ask if that context might be an experimental variable to consider as we seek to deepen conversation and conversational skills among students with ASD.