The Prevalence of Praise in Interactions with Children with Autism

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a prevalent disorder in today’s society, and according to the Center for Disease Control (2012), affects 1 in 88 children. In addition, for parents of children with an ASD, it has been found that interactions between the parent and child can have implications for important domains such as joint attention and language development (Siller & Sigman, 2002) as well as social skills (Baker, Fenning, Cmci, Baker, & Blacher, 2007). It is, however, a stressful experience to parent a child with an ASD, and this stress may impact parenting behaviors and the quality of parent-child interactions (Ekas & Whitman, 2010). This heightened stress may be due to the child’s cognitive impairment as well as their motivation towards social interaction.

One way that parents interact with their child is through the feedback, for example praise, that they give them during a task. The type of feedback parents provide children can have an impact on their performance during challenging tasks. However, there are few studies of naturalistic praise in interactions with children with an ASD.

The purpose of the present study was:

1. To examine whether there are group differences between a sample of typically developing (TD) children and a sample of children with an ASD with regards to the types of feedback given during a task.
2. To examine within the autism group whether symptom severity, as reflected by the child’s cognitive and social impairment, impacted the amount of type of praise given during a challenging task.

Method

- Participants consisted of 46 parent child dyads (TD = 29, ASD = 17). The children were between the ages of 3 and 6.
- The child completed a moderately difficult puzzle with the parent being instructed to give the child any help as needed.
- Parents completed measures assessing autism symptom severity (Social Responsiveness Scale).
- Observers coded feedback following specific action on the puzzle as positive, negative, or encouraging. The feedback was also coded as generic (relating to the task), nongeneric (relating to the task), or ambiguous. This system was adapted from the work of Zentall (2009).

Results

We conducted an ANOVA to test whether there were group differences between our variables of interest. Given that there were not, all further reported analyses were done with the ASD group only.

This regression tested whether child motivation towards social interaction predicted the total amount of negative feedback given to them by the parent. The results revealed:

- There was a positive relationship between the two variables.
- When the child was more socially impaired, there was a greater amount of total negative feedback given by the parent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent Feedback Type</th>
<th>Cognition</th>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th>Total Amount of Feedback</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generic Positive Feedback</td>
<td>.488*</td>
<td>.248</td>
<td>.490*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Negative Feedback</td>
<td>-.079</td>
<td>.487*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This regression tested whether child cognition predicted the amount of generic positive feedback. The results revealed:

- There was a positive relationship between the two variables.
- When the child was more cognitively impaired, there was a greater amount of generic positive feedback given by the parent.

Discussions

Previous research has found that the experience of parenting a child with autism is a stressful experience. This study proposed that one way that this stress is manifested is in the fact that the impairments of the child might interfere with interactions between the child and the parent.

Our results indicated that this was true to an extent. It appears that different domains of impairment impacted the interaction between the parent and child as reflected by the prevalence of praise and types of feedback given to the child. We found that the more socially impaired a child was, the more parents used negative feedback. It is possible that this is a reflection of the frustration elicited in the interaction by the child not being socially motivated. Parents may be going above and beyond to elicit responses and social interactions from their child, which becomes frustrating when they are unresponsive.

The other significant domain is cognitive impairment, which seems to elicit more positive statements about the child themself. This shows that the parent is more attune to the positive aspects of their child despite cognitive impairment. Although having a child with an ASD is difficult, there is opportunity for positive interactions. It would also be interesting to further examine whether cognitive and social impairment are mutual or exclusive within a child.

Although the study failed to find group differences in the prevalence and types of feedback, it is possible that this was due to the sample size. Also, it is possible that parents of children with an ASD are doing just as well with the types of feedback given to the child as those with a child without autism.

References and Acknowledgements


CDC (2012).

