Title: ‘Sometimes I want to play by myself’: Understanding what friendship means to children with autism in mainstream primary schools

Authors: Calder, Hill and Pellicano

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312467866

Lay abstract: We all know how it important it is to have friends. Indeed, enjoying stable, long-lasting reciprocal friendships is often held to be one of the hallmarks of a successful adult life. Autism is defined in part by difficulties developing friendships and peer relationships – a definition that serves to reinforce the belief that autistic people cannot, and do not want to, form friendships. The current study sought to provide an in-depth examination of the friendship experiences of a group of cognitively able autistic children educated within London mainstream schools. Using a variety of methodologies, including questionnaire, interview-based and social networking methods, and seeking the views of a range of informants, including with the autistic children themselves, their parents, their teachers and their classroom peers, we found that primary school-age children with autism can and do form friendships and are part of classroom social networks within mainstream schools. They seem to have a different understanding of what constitutes “friendship” – someone to “hang out” with rather than deeply to bond with. And while they are generally satisfied with their friendships, their motivation to make and keep friends seemed to play a key role in the extent of their friendships and social connections. We also found that some children felt overwhelmed by the expectations of having constantly to engage with other children. Although adults were sensitive to these concerns, they still felt compelled to encourage children with autism to socialise with others raising important questions about if, when and how we should intervene with these children.

Title: Adapted shared reading at school for minimally verbal students with autism

Authors: Mucchetti

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312470495

Lay abstract: This paper studied minimally verbal students with autism and their literacy skills. Shared reading is a regular practice in early education settings and is widely thought to encourage language and literacy development. There is some evidence that children with severe disabilities can be engaged in adapted shared reading activities. We looked at the impact of teacher-led adapted shared reading activities on engagement and story comprehension in minimally verbal 5–6-year-old children with autism. Four students and three teachers participated. Teachers used adapted
shared reading activities with visual supports, three-dimensional objects, simplified text and used specific strategies for increasing student engagement. Student performance during the activities was compared to performance during usual shared reading sessions. We found that all four students showed increased story comprehension and engagement during adapted shared reading. Visual supports, tactile objects, and specific teaching strategies offer ways for minimally verbal students to meaningfully participate in reading activities.

Title: Commentary - bridging the research and practice gap in autism: The importance of creating research partnerships with schools

Authors: Parsons, Charman, Faulkner, Ragan, Wallace and Wittemeyer

DOI:10.1177/1362361312472068

Lay abstract: There is quite a lot of research into different educational approaches for children on the autism spectrum. Unfortunately, very little of this makes its way into the schools where most children spend much of their time. This means that children may not be benefitting from the most effective, appropriate or up-to-date teaching techniques or programmes. We argue that teachers and researchers need to work together more closely to improve this situation and this means talking about what kind of research is necessary and relevant in the schools in which they work. As teachers and researchers, the authors of this article have worked together to decide, plan and complete research projects in an attempt to ‘close the gap’ between autism research and practice in schools. We describe who was involved, what we did, and the benefits and strengths of this partnership so far. We also talk about the things we could do to improve this way of working for the future such as making sure we include a wider range of people including parents, children and others who work with children in schools.

Title: Increasing social engagement in high-functioning children with ASD using collaborative technologies in the school

Authors: Bauminger-Zvieli, Eden, Zancanaro, Weiss and Gal

DOI:10.1177/1362361312472989

Lay abstract: The objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of a novel collaborative technology combined with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to teach the concepts of social collaboration and social conversation to 22 children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders (HFASD). A total of six weeks of intervention was provided by two computer programs: “Join-In”, using a special touch-surface table to teach collaboration, and “No-Problem”, using a multiple mouse setup to teach conversation. The outcome of these interventions were assessed using measures of social cognition and social engagement prior to treatment and following each program. Results demonstrated improvement in socio cognition with the participants becoming more able to provide active social solutions to social problems and revealing a more appropriate understanding of collaboration and social conversation. There was also improvement in social engagement but the results were more scattered. These findings demonstrate the potential of CBT-based collaborative technology intervention for children with HFASD.
**Title:** Interventions in schools for children with ASD: Methods and recommendations  
**Authors:** Kasari and Smith  
**DOI:** 10.1177/1362361312470496

**Lay abstract:** Many effective interventions exist for children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), yet these are rarely examined in the context of real-world school environments. This paper describes what we currently know about effective interventions in schools and suggests a number of research designs that would help increase our knowledge. New trends are also highlighted including modularized interventions, which organize the active ingredients of an intervention into components that practitioners can select to match the needs of an individual student, and community partnered research designs in which researchers and practitioners are on equal footing in the design and execution of the study in the community setting. The ultimate goals of these efforts are to bring the most effective interventions to contexts in which children with ASD spend the most time every day and to improve long term outcomes.

**Title:** Outcomes and moderators of outcome in a randomized trial of two classroom-based interventions for students with autism  
**Authors:** Mandell, Stahmer, Shin, Xie, Reisinger and Marcus  
**DOI:** 10.1177/1362361312473666

**Lay abstract:** This randomized trial comparing Strategies for Teaching based on Autism Research (STAR) and Structured Teaching enrolled educators in 33 kindergarten-through-second-grade autism support classrooms and 119 students, ages 5 to 8 years in the School District of Philadelphia. Students were assessed at the beginning and end of the academic year using the Differential Ability Scales (DAS; similar to measures of IQ). How well classroom staff implemented the program (sometimes referred to as fidelity) was measured through video coding and use of a checklist. On average, teachers in STAR classrooms implemented 57% percent of the program components and teachers in Structured Teaching classrooms implemented 48% of the program components. There was a 9.2-point increase in DAS score over the 8-month study period, but no statistically significant difference in outcome between the students in each program. There was a significant interaction between fidelity and whether children received STAR or Structured Teaching. In classrooms with either low or high program fidelity, students in STAR experienced a greater gain in DAS score than students in Structured Teaching (11.2 vs. 5.5 points and 11.3 vs. 8.9 points, respectively). In classrooms with moderate fidelity, students in Structured Teaching experienced a greater gain than students in STAR (10.1 vs. 4.4 points). The results suggest the need for new research to understand why teachers don't implement autism programs the way they were designed and to develop new strategies to help teachers implement programs with fidelity. It also suggests that some teachers may be using different programs of their own choosing that result in equally positive outcomes for students with autism.
Title: A play and joint attention intervention for teachers of young children with autism: A randomized controlled pilot study

Authors: Wong

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312474723

Lay abstract: Young children with autism have difficulty with symbolic play and joint attention. The purpose of this study was to test a classroom program focused on facilitating play and joint attention for children with autism in early childhood special education classrooms. Thirty-three children with autism (ages three to six) from 14 different classrooms participated in the study. The fourteen special education teachers were randomly assigned to receive the intervention immediately or to serve as a wait-list control and receive the intervention approximately one month later. In the intervention, teachers participated in eight weekly individualized 1-hour sessions with a researcher to learn how to embed strategies targeting symbolic play and joint attention into their everyday classroom routines and activities. The researcher team presented information and then helped the teacher adapt the techniques to meet the individual needs of the children and class. Data was collected through direct classroom observations and individual testing sessions with the children. Findings indicate that teachers can implement a program to significantly improve joint engagement of young children with autism in their classrooms. Furthermore, children showed significant increases in joint attention and symbolic play skills. Thus, these data emphasize the need for further research and implementation of classroom-based interventions targeting play and joint attention skills for young children with autism.