

Targeting the IEP Social Goals of Children with Autism in an Inclusive Summer Camp Setting

Whitney Ence, M.A., Ty Vernon, M.A.
Robert L. Koegel, Ph.D., and Lynn K. Koegel, Ph.D.
University of California, Santa Barbara

INTRODUCTION

The social deficits associated with autism spectrum disorders have long been considered one of the primary and debilitating characteristics of the disorder (APA, 2000; Kanner, 1943). Given that it is important for all children to develop social competence and because children with autism have social deficits, interventions targeting this core area are an integral intervention component and are linked to positive life outcomes such as having a higher positive self concept and higher quality of life (Guralnick, 1990; Janney & Snell, 2006). Conversely, deficits in social functioning put individuals with developmental disabilities at risk for social isolation, loneliness, delinquent behavior, low achievement, increase risk of job loss, and mental health problems (Williams & Asher, 1992; Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Hurley-Geffner, 1995).

Given the importance for children with autism to improve their social skills and create meaningful relationships with peers, schools have added *social-emotional* goals to the children's Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Wilczynski et. al, 2007). The unique measurable goals and objectives are collaboratively developed by teachers, school staff, and parents to address children's needs. Goals are assessed and reevaluated every year by school staff to track the child's progress.

The trend toward inclusion has resulted in an increased number of children with disabilities attending inclusive classrooms (Carr, et. al, 2002). The values of inclusion involve providing a normalized setting for children with disabilities, where opportunities for building friendships and having role models for socialization are available. Although research demonstrates having typical peer role models is imperative and behavior change has been shown to be greater in integrated settings (Strain, 1983), mere placement is not enough to improve social skills, and children need social facilitation in order to develop skills or potentially risk feelings of rejection (Chamberlain, Kasari, & Rotheram, 2007; Strain & Hoyson, 2000). While gains have been made in the educational arenas, inclusive programming must move beyond this setting to provide additional opportunities for children with autism to develop social skills and competence with typically developing peers. In addition, as academic demands increase, schools often experience a limited window to address these important social goals.

In order to meet the need of extending inclusive programming to improve social skills for children with autism, our program coordinated with a day summer camp on a university campus to create an inclusive summer camp. In addition, the support staff coordinated with the public schools to target the children's with autism IEP social goals. The purpose of the study was to examine whether an inclusive summer camp program with social intervention based on Pivotal Response Treatment strategies would lead to a rapid increase in meeting IEP social goals deemed important by the child's educational team.

METHOD

Design: Multiple Baseline Design Across Participants (Barlow & Hersen, 1984)

Baseline: Two to four days with data collected during multiple sessions on each day

Intervention: Six days with data collected during multiple sessions on each day

Generalization: One to two days with data collected during multiple sessions on each day

Participants

Four young children diagnosed with autism (ages 4, 5 to 6 years) participated in this study. All four had been receiving parent education services in PRT. Three of the four children were fully included in regular education programs and one child spent half of his day in a regular education classroom. All children demonstrated significant social needs. Children 2, 3, & 4 socially isolated themselves throughout recess and lunch periods. Child 1 played with other children with few prompts from an adult.

Setting

The inclusion program took place in a community summer day camp on a large university campus. The camp was designed for children ages 5 – 14, and the campers were divided into four age groups: Approximately 200 typical campers attended camp each week throughout the summer. The camp provided a variety of different activities (e.g., gymnastics, dance class, ropes course, swimming, art, and outdoor games) throughout the day. The campers with autism were assigned to groups in which they were the only camper with a disability. Groups had approximately 12 to 15 children.

Support Staff

In addition to regular camp staff, full-time one-on-one paraprofessional aides supported the campers throughout their day. Aides were undergraduate students who had previous experience working with children with autism. Two graduate students, supervised by faculty, trained the undergraduates in PRT and the principles behavior modification and strategies to facilitate social interaction.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

A variety of different strategies based on intervention techniques from Pivotal Response Treatment (Koegel, et. al, 1989) and Positive Behavior Support (Koegel, Koegel, & Dunlap, 1996) were used by camp support staff to encourage social interaction between campers. All the strategies delineated below had the goal to make the social interaction mutually reinforcing to both the camper with autism and his or her peer (Koegel, Klein, Openden, Koegel, 2005)

1. Provide opportunities for cooperative arrangements
2. Play mutually reinforcing games
3. Use a buddy system
4. Develop sharing exchanges
5. Facilitate social conversations
6. Encourage all campers to seek assistance from peers



DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The dependent variable was the number of IEP goals met based on the criteria specified in the schools IEP. Data were collected through multiple probes during each day for each individualized goal. The goals varied from increasing social initiations and responsiveness to peers, decreasing aggressive behavior, and increasing ability to play social games.

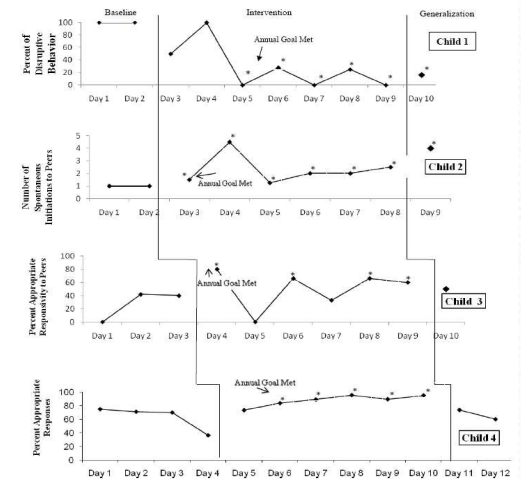
RESULTS

Percent of IEP Goals Met



RESULTS

Sample of each child's first IEP goal:



Approximately, 88% of the IEP goals targeted in this study were met during the brief intervention provided in the summer camp. The data suggest that the camp inclusion program was effective at rapidly meeting social goals; with the majority of the goals maintained and generalized to near or above their targeted IEP goal. However, some of the more difficult goals such as, increasing reciprocal interactions, may need extended intervention and increased variation in activities, in order to maintain high levels over time. These data suggest that program components used in the summer camp are effective due to their ability to quickly meet annual IEP social goals. Increased collaboration with school personnel is necessary in order to maintain results at high levels.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of the summer camp was to address the need for social intervention by coordinating with the surrounding public schools to target annual IEP social in a two week time period. Results of the study demonstrate the effectiveness of summer camp to rapidly meet IEP social goals within two weeks. These findings highlight the effectiveness of a program combining the use of social facilitation strategies, natural environments, and typical peer models. As suggested, inclusive programming should move beyond the educational arena and inclusive summer camps help meet this need by providing an additional setting to target social interaction. Finally, the benefits of this program highlight the need to have continued coordination with the school district in order to target social goals throughout the summer and school year.

In the future, it will be important to examine the methods that are needed to continue rapid social progress into the school year. Exploration of incorporating some of the camp program elements into an after school program may be helpful. Another area for continued research is to examine the key variables that make camp successful in meeting social goals. Finally, as this camp focused on younger children with autism, it will be important to expand this program to older children while concurrently examining which strategies work best with the older population.