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Social Interventions for Young Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Review of Research

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Abstract

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face a variety of barriers in social, communicative, and behavioral functioning. In particular, children with ASD have deficits in social behavior that decrease opportunities to socialize and develop peer relationships (Kroeger, Schultz, & Newsom, 2006). A child's early development of social skills has been linked to successful school adjustment and academic achievement while preschoolers with poor social behavior experience peer rejection, low academic achievement, and behavior problems (McClelland & Morrison, 2003). I conducted a systematic review of research on interventions that provided positive social outcomes for young children with ASD. Results from this study exposed common research designs (i.e., multiple baseline, randomized control trial), topics (e.g., joint attention, imitation), and practices (e.g., pivotal response training, peer mediation) applied to teaching social skills to this population. Research is limited on social interventions that do not include behaviorally-based techniques, which could reveal additional components of effective social skills interventions. Rigorous and well-designed research studies are needed to determine the most efficient and effective dosage of established scientifically-based practices, as well as measures of social validity, which was lacking in many of the studies reviewed. A discussion regarding targeting pivotal skills in early intervention is included in this review.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, young children, social skills, systematic review, social competence