

Autism-Europe Conference

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12th Annual Autism-Europe International Congress

September 13-15, 2019

Nice, France

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ABSTRACT

“Turning Behavior and Anxiety into Communication for Social Problem-Solving”

INTRODUCTION. The ability to use language to think is critical for flexible behavior and cognition, and is the foundation for effective self-regulation (Vygotsky, 1987). This internalized linguistic thinking has been labeled *inner speech*. Individuals with autism have diminished tendencies to employ inner speech Fernyhough (1996). This study presents an intervention using interpersonal conversation between therapist and the child to develop the child’s private speech, the precursor to inner speech. As in typical child development, interpersonal speech becomes intrapersonal speech, and the child is able to regulate his/her behavior by talking oneself through the situation alone. (Barkley, 1997).

METHOD. Participants were five children ages 5-7 years diagnosed with autism. Each child was randomly paired with a clinician for eight therapy sessions. Parent ratings of children seen by two clinicians, both graduate students, trained by the first author to help children develop inner speech were contrasted with parent ratings of children seen by two certified SLPs with experience working with children autism who served as our controls. The fifth clinician was the first author. Clinicians were instructed to help the child learn to ask for help. Asking for help is

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an especially complex problem-solving strategy, which requires both inner speech and *Theory of Mind*. Our dependent variable was parent ratings of their child's pragmatics skills in natural settings obtained after three weeks and seven weeks of therapy.

RESULTS. Pragmatics ratings were clustered into those requiring perspectives of others (dialogic interactions), and those reflecting talking about one's own interests or needs (monologic interactions). Children receiving the inner speech intervention received higher ratings on (1) dialogic interactions generally, (2) *Asking for Help*, and (3) *Staying Regulated in Stressful Situations*. In contrast, children working with the control condition therapists were rated higher by parents on monologic interactions.

DISCUSSION. We believe this is the first study to focus on developing inner speech in children with autism. We found that even after a short time, parents of children receiving the inner speech intervention had improved their ability to ask for help and remain emotionally self-regulated in stressful situations. The intervention appears to provide a generalizable problem-solving strategy that children can use when faced with challenges in their daily home and school environments.

Topic (from drop down list): Language and Communication

Key Words (from drop down list)

Communication

Intervention

Challenging Behavior