

Parental verbal responsiveness to autistic children: when and how?

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Abstract

Background

Parental verbal responsiveness (PVR) is a verbal manifestation of intersubjectivity, demonstrating responsiveness, reciprocity, affective sensitivity, and close attention to another. It responds to a child's attentional focus or communicative acts (McDuffie & Yoder, 2010), is valuable in putting parents and children "in touch" (Bateson, 1979, p. 64), and promotes language development (Haebig et al., 2013). Particularly, it benefits autistic children who have difficulty shifting attention or responding to others' interaction bids (Tomasello & Todd, 1983). It is unclear during which points of interactions PVR is most likely to be delivered to autistic children, and under which circumstances.

Objective

Provisionally identify the conditions under which PVR is provided to autistic children in the early stages of language development.

Methods

Data was collected from two parent-autistic child pairs during 10min free-play sessions. Using a variation on the Tavistock method (Bick, 1964), the researcher observed and wrote reflective reports after the sessions. These reports were analysed in-line with theories of PVR, language development, autism, and parent-child interaction. Preliminary results will be examined further using ELAN (Sloetjes & Wittenburg, 2008).

Findings

Parents of autistic children sometimes provide non-responsive speech to initially engage their child, it appears so that they feel they are benefitting from its delivery. They engage them by mentioning things they enjoy - for one child this was talk about colours; for another, it was encouragement to participate in a routine. The children responded positively to this, which may represent a way parents engage their child that is not directly responsive yet demonstrates attunement and leads PVR provision.

Where children do not readily initiate communication with their parents or respond to their bids for attention, reference to their broader interests may provide conditions under which parents feel connected to their children and thereafter deliver responsive speech. Although PVR is thought beneficial because it does not require attention shifting by the child, the parents studied herein seemed not to provide it without children sharing their focus. Therefore, talk about a child's broader interests may help to create this connection between them and set the grounds for PVR to be delivered.