

Strategies to support children with autism within the early years

Introduction

- Critical evaluation of barriers children within the early years face, and how chosen strategies can support inclusive practice and equal opportunities.
- Strategy 1 - Social Stories
- Strategy 2 - Equine Therapy

ASD and early intervention

The National Autistic Society (2017) explained that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can have a range of difficulties that can be worked upon with regards to intervention. According to Brodzeller et al. (2018), due to an increase in identifying autism at an earlier age, early years practitioners can now adapt and provide early interventions in order to meet children's needs and provide a quality environment and support. Suma et al. (2016) and Martin (2009) both agreed that early intervention is a critical period, in which Mall and Mall (No date) related to Lenneberg's critical age theory.

Social stories

According to Kassardjian et al. (2014), social stories are used for children with ASD in order to provide intervention with regards to teaching social behaviours. However, Kassardjian et al. (2014) argued that social stories can often become a negative influence on behaviour and development if the practitioner provides incorrect information about a particular subject, which will cause the child to become upset and anxious. This is due to the fact that children with ASD need routine, and an incorrect social story will build upon the child's expectations and would then become frustrated and anxious that the experience is not the same as what was told within the social story. More (2012) agreed with this statement and added that social stories are used to assist children with autism with understanding social situations and should be individualised so that the needs of each child is met according to ability, and argued that a common misinterpretation of social stories from a practitioners perspective is that they tell the child how to act within a situation rather than just assisting the child on how to understand social situations. However, Pane et al. (2015) stated that social stories have a positive effect on children's behavioural issues, and explained that part of the reason why children with ASD have behavioural issues is due to not being able to communicate effectively or even not at all. Karkhaneh et al. (2010) agreed with Pane et al. (2015) and added that social stories also provide a positive outcome to autistic children's social development, by giving them a better understanding of situations that they may have previously found difficulty in. Qi et al. (2018) explained that social stories provide progressive development in various areas, such as memory development, empathy and literacy skills.

Equine Therapy

According to the Autism Spectrum Disorder Foundation (2018), equine therapy is used by a range of service providers, with equine therapy assisting with motor, emotional and sensory development, as well as social and communication skills, which is highly beneficial to children with autism, which is also advantageous for development within the child's educational setting. Borgi et al. (2016) stated that equine therapy has been proven to improve mental health and self-esteem of the child, resulting in a positive quality of life and functioning. According to Harris and Williams (2017), Levinson (1964) recognised the positive impact that AAI had on children with ASD, as the animal acts as a companion to the child. Harris and Williams also explained that equine therapy significantly reduces the child's stress levels, behavioural problems and the severity of the ASD. However, Srinivasan et al. (2018) argued that there is not enough research into the overall effectiveness of equine therapy, and more research is needed to be carried out in order to have feasible evidence to support the advantages of providing children with ASD equine therapy.

Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association's (EAGALA) experiential model

According to Clayton et al. (2015), the EAGALA experiential model is called Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP), which does not involve horse riding, but instead focusses on the child and horse interaction on the ground. EAP has a structured set up, requiring the child to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results. Throughout this strategy, the child is focussed and engaged within the activity, providing holistic development for children with ASD. Buck et al. (2017) stated that the EAGALA model is an exceptional strategy for children with ASD within the early years, as children are drawn to animals and research has shown that the involvement of animals within therapies have an overall positive impact on development. McLeay (2014) added that horses have a psychotherapeutic aura about them and can read people. Studies have shown that the child and horse have a connection with one another, with proven results on the positive impact this has on children's development. However, Llambias et al. (2016) argued that autistic children do not respond to others initiations and has no effect on the child's behaviour within the activity. It was also argued that due to autistic children needing routine, the visit to the equine therapy setting in itself could be upsetting for the child, as well as the unfamiliar elements that are involved within the setting.

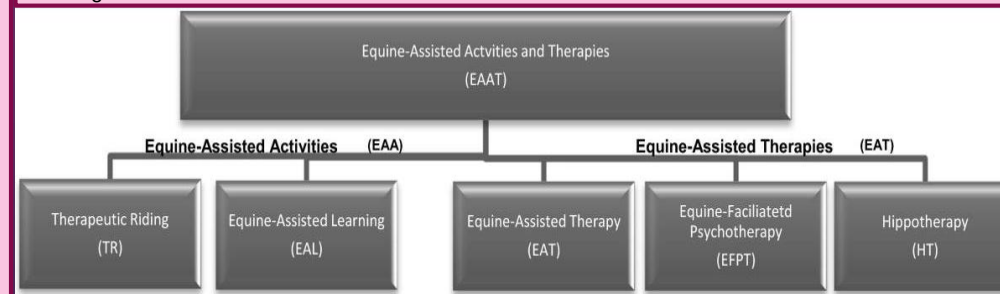


Figure 1 – (Anderson and Meints, 2016).

Conclusion

To conclude:

- Early intervention is important to assist autistic children with advancements in development.
- Both social stories and equine therapy provide children with developmental advantages, however, the child's individual needs would have to be taken into account to decide what interventions would be more effective.
- Intervention strategies support inclusive practice and equal opportunities for children with ASD.

Reading list

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