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Communication Opportunities Provided to Children with Special Needs: Preliminary Data

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Abstract. Five toddler classrooms were observed two times each to gather information about communication opportunities provided to children with developmental disabilities. 288 10-second blocks were observed during four types of activities. Data collected indicated that communication opportunities were provided in fewer than 30% of the observation intervals across contexts of activities. The number and types of communication opportunities provided by the teachers, and the children's responses following the opportunities across the classrooms were documented and discussed. Potential barriers to effective communication interactions in classrooms serving children with developmental disabilities were considered from the perspectives of the classroom teachers and children with developmental disabilities. A variety of different trainings for teachers and interventions for children was also highlighted.

Introduction

Communication is a critical skill for all human beings for the purposes of meeting needs/wants, transferring information, fulfilling social closeness, and fulfilling social etiquette [1]. However, some children with developmental disabilities may not be able to express their basic needs and wants, or need to expend significant physical effort to do so. These children may need to utilize augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems to support their communication in school or at home. Without using AAC systems, these children do not have opportunities to participate in classroom activities or to express their basic needs. Often these children are not given opportunities to communicate because there is no expectation that they might be able to respond meaningfully.

Sigafoos, Roberts, Kerr, Couzens, & Baglioni [2] indicated that maintaining communication skills in children with language developmental disabilities can be facilitated by teachers in the classroom, and there is a strong positive correlation between children's existing communication skills and the number of communication opportunities received.

Method

The study was conducted in a private non-profit agency that serves hundreds of children in both home-based and center-based programs. This study has involved observing teacher/children interactions in toddler classrooms to measure communication opportunities provided by the teacher and classroom assistant in the classrooms and children's responses. Observations were completed in five classrooms serving children with developmental disabilities,

The observation procedures were adapted from the work of Sigafoos, et al. Each classroom was observed twice, on separate days. Three activities were selected for observation: 1:1 play; small group, and whole group. Each daily observation consisted of 288 ten-second blocks for 48 minutes total.

Any opportunity for communication provided by the teachers or classroom assistants during the 10 seconds was recorded by type. If more than one opportunity was provided during a 10-second block, only the first was recorded. It should be noted that this recording method might underestimate the number of communication opportunities provided by the teacher, but the rationale is that any more communication opportunities would leave little time for the child to respond. Only the first response that a child made was recorded following the communication opportunity provided as well. That is, once the communicative opportunity provided by the teacher or classroom assistant was recorded, the children's responses were observed within the same 10-second block. The operational definitions used in this study were also adapted from Sigafoos, et al. (1994). Communication opportunities provided by teachers or classroom assistants were recorded in five categories: request; naming or commenting; answer;

imitation; or N/A which means that no communication opportunity provided. The children's responses were recorded into four types: appropriate, inappropriate, prompted, or no response.

Results

Results indicated that fewer than 30% of the observed 10-second blocks provided a communication opportunity for the children, and the children did not respond to a communication opportunity provided by the teachers in 42.3 % of those blocks where an opportunity was provided, regardless of the context being observed (Table 1). The more verbal children were most typically those who responded, and those with developmental disabilities rarely responded without prompting. The present data compared to the work of Sigafoos, et al. (1994) showed the teachers provided more communication opportunities to the children; however, the children did not show a higher number of responses to the opportunities provided. The possible explanations are that children with disorders frequently did not have appropriate means with which to respond, or were not provided sufficient time in which to respond. Different communication strategies (e.g., simple communication boards) to enhance communication responses by children with disorders, and training potential communication partners for these children should be developed and implemented.

Table: 1
Comparisons of numbers and types of opportunities for communication provided by the teachers, and the responses from children to the opportunities provided during the observation intervals

	Current Study	"Comparison" Data ^a
TEACHER Communication Opportunities		
No opportunity provided	72%	87%
Opportunity provided	28%	13%
Requesting	10%	25%
Naming/Comment	68%	55%
Answer	1%	15%
Imitate	21%	5%
CHILDREN Response		
Response given	58%	70%
Appropriate	48%	39%
Inappropriate	3%	9%
Prompted	7%	22%
No Response	42%	30%

^a Sigafoos, Roberts, Kerr, Couzens, & Baglioni (1994)

Conclusions

No data has been reported that would specifically suggest the required number and types of opportunities for communication necessary for classroom teachers to provide children with developmental disabilities in order to facilitate their development of communication skills. Further research must be attempted to investigate whether increasing the numbers of opportunities provided along with provision of an appropriate means of response would improve the communicative interactions of children with developmental disabilities. Research also has to investigate more efficient in-service training programs and compare different existing training programs used in classrooms in order that the teachers and classroom assistants can have a better understanding of how to facilitate communication opportunities for these children.

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References

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- [2] Sigafoos, J., Roberts, D., Kerr, M., Couzens, D., & Baglioni, A.J. (1994). Opportunities for communication in classrooms serving children with developmental disabilities. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 24, 259-279.