Research Summary: 'Learning to speak their language'. Intensive Interaction in a school for children with severe and complex needs.

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Introduction

Intensive Interaction is an approach which aims to develop the social and communication skills of children and adults who have autistic spectrum disorder and/or severe learning difficulties (Kellet, 2000, Kellet, 2004, Nind, 1999, Barber, 2008, Watson and Fisher, 1997, Fisher 1994; Taylor and Taylor, 1998). The approach was developed in the 1980s by Dave Hewett and Melanie Nind, following the work of the Psychologist, Geraint Ephraim. Intensive Interaction puts the child at the centre of teaching practice using communication techniques developed from 'infant-caregiver' transactional models in order to engage with learners in 'their own world'. The fundamentals of communication which precede and encourage speech development have been summarised to include the following:

- Learning to give brief attention to another person
- Sharing attention with another
- Developing shared attention into 'activities'
- Turn taking in exchanges of behaviour
- Using and understanding eye contact
- Using and understanding non-verbal communication such as facial expression, gesture, body posture and position
- Learning to use and understand vocalisations.
  (Nind and Hewett, 1994).

Adults use behaviours and vocalisations which are familiar to the child in order to create interest and prompt a reciprocal exchange. Through this exchange, adults can support the learner to develop their social and communication skills. In addition, through responding to the child's emotional state, adults can convey empathy and calm or prevent distressed behaviour (Caldwell, 2002).

Present study

The present study was undertaken within the Isobel Mair School in East Renfrewshire (school for children aged between 5 and 18 years who have severe and complex needs). The support of the Educational Psychologists was requested to run a project in the school which sought to introduce the approach to all staff and measure its impact.

Research Aims

1) To encourage greater communication between children and adults
2) To support the development of children's social skills
3) To provide a further strategy to allow adults to prevent and/or respond to challenging behaviour

Research Method

One member of staff from each class was asked to be directly involved in engaging in Intensive Interaction with one child in their class on a daily basis. The Intensive Interaction approach was used by staff in the school over a period of 24 weeks. All members of staff from the Isobel Mair School attended a half day training session which was devised and delivered by the psychologists and two members of staff from the Isobel Mair School. Educationalists from another specialist resource and social work professionals also attended the training. Two follow-up workshops were provided for staff to allow for reflection on the use of the approach. A training session was delivered by the Educational Psychologists to a large group of parents of children who attend the school. A follow up workshop was also provided for parents.

Measures

Nominated staff members were asked to complete a pupil selection sheet in order to outline the pupil's needs and the desired outcomes following the use of the Intensive Interaction approach. Following each Intensive Interaction session a record sheet was to be completed to provide information on the quality of the interaction and the responsiveness of the child. It was intended that the completed record forms would serve as a measure of progress made by the children in the areas outlined within the record form (e.g. turn taking, vocalisation, eye contact, responsiveness).

Due to pressures of time, school staff had difficulty completing the observation and record forms. Insufficient numbers of these sheets were completed to allow for valuable analysis and interpretation. However, qualitative information was gathered from a range of sources. Individual interviews with various members of school staff were held by the research assistant. In addition, staff provided feedback through the completion of 'reflection sheets'. Telephone interviews with parents were conducted by a research assistant.

Key Findings

Parents and staff generally found the use of the approach to be rewarding as they enjoyed the children's positive responses. It was felt that staff were enabled to develop a better understanding of their pupils' likes and dislikes. Relationships between adults and children were therefore said to have further developed:

Helps you to bond, communicate and engage with the pupils. It is a way of building trust which then leads to improvements in other educational areas because they bond with you.

Staff found it an extremely useful way of engaging the children and suggested that, since the project began, the children had shown a general increase in their use of language/communication skills to request, respond and interact.

I've used it with a child with communication difficulties. I've noticed a really positive impact on the child. X has now started to initiate interaction with me. His eye contact has improved and he really enjoys engaging with me in this way. I actually think it has improved his verbal communication.

Staff and parents highlighted that the approach was particularly successful in calming and settling the children if they were upset or distressed. Parents indicated that they found the approach particularly useful as a preventative measure for calming the children/young people down prior to undertaking activities that they might dislike or get frustrated by, such as activities involving personal care. Parents referred to increased confidence in their ability to deal with their child's difficulties:

I now feel more that there is something I can do, which is great! It's really, really helped me.

It has helped me to feel more confident that I can actually do something.

Challenges

The paperwork was found to be time consuming and difficult to complete during or immediately following the intensive interaction session. It would seem that there is a need to revise the system in place for recording practice and monitoring progress. In terms of staff feelings in relation to the use of the approach, certain staff members stated that initially they felt self-conscious when using Intensive Interaction. However they explained that over time they became very comfortable with the approach and highlighted that the Intensive Interaction style had become normalised. Staff highlighted that a 'trial and error' approach alongside perseverance was required for the success of the approach for certain pupils.

Conclusions

The current project yielded positive findings which suggested that continued use of the Intensive Interaction approach within the Isobel Mair School would be beneficial for pupils and an effective use of staff time. In general it is felt that the Intensive Interaction project was a positive experience for all those involved. The ecological approach which was taken appears to have resulted in positive impact on staff, parents and pupils of the Isobel Mair School. Involvement of other East Renfrewshire professionals within training events and workshops appears to have secured a wider impact within the community. The positive experience of those involved has encouraged greater awareness of the approach within the authority and a growth in popularity. For example, the Educational Psychologists were asked to deliver the Intensive Interaction training to the Social Work Department 'Sure Start' team and a core group of parents being supported by the team. Following this, a training session was delivered within a specialist family centre. The Psychological Service is

committed to the maintenance of the approach and further staff training is planned for the new school year.

Further information

Further information can be accessed through the Psychological Service. A copy of the full research article is available on request.