Chapter 12

Social Stories for Targeting Behaviors and Developing Empathy in Adolescents With Autism Spectrum Disorder: An Innovative Technology-Assisted Intervention

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contends that working with clinicians who use media technology, adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder can develop social skills that they need to transition to adulthood and gain employment. Developing empathy is a core challenge for these young people because often they have not learned how to understand others’ feelings and motives. Technology can provide a faster learning modality, even

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for developing empathy. For those adolescents showing a natural affinity for technology and media, the clinician engages them in scripting, directing, and starring in their own instructional video that tells them the steps to learning empathy and other social skills the clinician and adolescent have chosen to address in their individual treatment program. For the successful outcome of treatment, the young person learns not only empathy, but also improves other targeted behaviors such as making appropriate conversation. The mixed-method study presented here follows the progress of 16 ASD clients toward self-sufficiency. The clinicians involved present a training model for clinicians in future practice.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals with intellectual and other disabilities, particularly adolescents and young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), face many obstacles towards transitioning into independent life. ASD is defined as a group of developmental disorders that affect overall life skills including social interactions, language, social-emotional skills, intellectual development and self-regulation. This may inhibit the ability to function in the school, home, work-place and other settings (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and the symptoms range from mild to severe. Each person with ASD has a unique set of challenges, often triggered by a lack of empathy with other people.

Simon Baron-Cohen defines empathy as “an ability to identify what someone else is thinking and to respond to that person’s thoughts or feelings with an appropriate emotion” (Baron-Cohen, 2014). For Baron-Cohen, empathy results from the neurotypical person understanding Theory of Mind and processing how other people think and view the world. Autistic children lack adequate skills in Theory of Mind processing (Baron-Cohen, 1999).

Due to the lack of empathy, adolescents with ASD face specific and common challenges that impede their typical success in daily life and their transition to adulthood (Grandin, 2011). These individuals are often socially excluded rather than included in general society. According to Rimmerman, “Social exclusion is a complex concept that expresses disadvantages in relation to certain norms of social, economic or political activity” particularly where it pertains to persons with disabilities. This presents various negative outcomes for these individuals who face lifelong obstacles in all areas of success (Rimmerman, 2013, p. 33).

While young adults with ASD face many challenges, we have seen success in the application of technology to help this population reach greater inclusion that helps them participate in all areas of life. This includes, but is not limited to areas where empathy is necessary, such as in social acceptance, employment, friendship, daily living and greater opportunities for happiness. One technique that has been used to achieve this is social story videos; these are short videos created to model acceptable behaviors and strategies, and to tell simple stories to exemplify these behaviors. These are often pre-made videos that the individual watches, usually very passively and is expected to transfer and demonstrate to other settings.

Based on the principle of Constructivism, the learner takes new knowledge, experiences, and or skills, attaches it to prior knowledge and constructs or builds new knowledge (Jonassen, 1991; Jonassen, Carr & Yueh, 1998). This is active, rather than passive learning; active learning involves the individuals doing the activities so these skills are more likely to be embedded and then transferred to new settings. This approach has been shown to be effective and important to help a learner adapt and function within his/her own environment. In this study the authors hypothesized that having the participants create their own videos is far more effective than passively viewing existing ones.