Research-Supported Treatment for High Functioning Autism (a.k.a., Asperger’s Syndrome)

Symposium on the Child and Family
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Autism vs. High Functioning Autism
A Spectrum Developmental Disorder
- Characterized by significantly atypical .....  
  - Impaired social communication & interactions  
  - Restricted / repetitive behavior, interests, & activities  
  - Presents in early periods of development (formerly < 3)

Autism vs. High Functioning Autism
High Functioning Autism (HFA)
- Formerly Known as Asperger’s Syndrome:  
  - Dramatic social deficits & restricted interests  
  - With intact language skills  
  - With preserved cognitive ability  
- Once Seen as Distinct Diagnosis:  
  - Was in DSM-IV-TR, not in DSM-V, still in ICD-10  
  - Was a PDD along with Autism  
  - Now a part of broader Autism Spectrum (ASD)

Autism vs. High Functioning Autism
Distinctions b/w Autism & HFA
- Problems w/ social interactions, odd behavior, and communication not like those in autism  
  - Often precocious language development  
  - Onset / recognized after age 3 years  
  - Intense, highly circumscribed interests  
  - Want & interested in social engagement  
  - Often co-occurring motor difficulty

Autism vs. High Functioning Autism
Neuropsychological Findings
- Children with HFA Show: Weak VMI, visual-spatial perception, & visual / working memory  
  - Weak gross and fine motor skills (clumsy)  
- Limited All-Encompassing Interests:  
  - Many accumulated facts  
  - But interfering with general learning  
  - But non-reciprocal or socially facilitating

Autism vs. High Functioning Autism
Neuropsychological Findings
- Children with HFA Show:  
  - Verbal skills stronger than non-verbal  
  - Language intact but verbose & one-sided  
  - Strong semantic / factual memory  
  - Socially interested w/ limited social perception  
- Executive Weakness: Disrupts social judgments and decision making
Treatment Needs of High Functioning Autism (HFA)

Treatment Needs for HFA
Not the Typical Autism for Treatment

- **HFA Strength & Needs Differ:**
  - Have historically been less-eligible for services
  - Too bright, verbal, academically successful

- **Need Targeted Intervention:** For managing novel and socially demanding situations
  - High-structure / routine-rich
  - Academically driven setting

Treatment Needs for HFA
Not the Typical Autism for Treatment

- **HFA Needs Unique Treatment Strategies:** Not exactly like / different from NVLD, ED, or SED
  - Not like the focus on verbal skills w/ autism
  - Not like placements for conduct problems
  - Not like tactics for academic LDs
  - W/ option for help w/ comorbid internalizing probs

To Maximize Adaptation & Performance:

- In unstructured social situations
- With groups same-aged peers
- To reduce disruptive behaviors
- In novel quickly-adjusting situations

Employing combination of educational, behavioral, group / individual therapies

General Treatment Strategies for HFA
Thoughtful & Consistent

- Individualized, based on empirical assessment

- **Targeting Varied Degrees Of:**
  - Concreteness / rigidity
  - Paucity of insight
  - Social awkwardness
  - Communicative one-sidedness

- Practical & commonsense clinical judgment
General Treatment Strategies for HFA

Thoughtful & Consistent

- **Problem-Solving with Behavioral Routines:**
  - Taught in explicit / maybe rote fashion
  - Using part-to-whole, via verbal instruction
  - Rehearsed & verbalized
- Especially for recurring, troublesome situations
- Also how to identify novel problems & resort to pre-planned, well-rehearsed steps as solution

General Treatment Strategies for HFA

Thoughtful & Consistent

- **Build Social Awareness & Perspective Taking:**
  - Identify relevant / essential aspects of situations
  - Show discrepancies in self / other perspectives
  - Make others perspective explicit
- **Encourage Self-Evaluation:**
  - Knowing what others do & do not know
  - Normalize frustration, anxiety & negative emotion

Social & Communication Therapies for High Functioning Autism (HFA)

Social & Communication Therapy for HFA

Enhance Communication & Social Skill

- **Raise Competence:** In baseline levels of social intuition & comprehension of societal norms
  - W/out discounting personal choice
  - W/out stifling uniqueness & individuality
- **To Function Effectively:** In specific social roles
  - Conversation partners
  - Potential friends or companions
  - Employable professionals

Social & Communication Therapy for HFA

Pragmatic Language

- **Structured Social Skills Intervention:** Behavioral
  - Expand vocabulary of emotions
  - Playing cooperative games
  - Social problem solving
- **More Availability of Pre-packaged Programs:**
  - Look for empirically supported
  - See Reynow & Volkmar (2010)
Social & Communication Therapy for HFA

Pragmatic Language

- **Social Stories™**: From school-based research
  - Easily adapted to SPED classroom
  - Focus on child’s actual experiences

- **Social Perception Skills Training**:
  - For adolescents & adults
  - Teach social skills valued by employers
  - Minskoff & DeMoss (1994)

Social & Communication Therapy for HFA

Teach Rules / Norms for Social Behavior

- **Visual Strategies for Improving Communication**:
  - Improves understanding of task-demands, imposed by social settings

- **Read Non-Verbal Cues**:
  - Setting demands
  - Body proximity, position & posture
  - Emotional expression (body, face, voice)

Social & Communication Therapy for HFA

Teach Rules / Norms for Social Behavior

- **Teach About Non-Literal Communication**: Irony, teasing, sarcasm, figures of speech, humor

- **Via Explicit Verbal Teaching & Practice**:
  - Concrete situations
  - Rehearsed in therapeutic setting
  - Mirror, recorded speech, video

Mediated Peer Interactions & High Functioning Autism (HFA)
Mediated Peer Interactions & HFA

Paul (2003)
- **Most Effective Social Skills Training:** Happens in company of typically developing peers
  - Provide a little training
  - Provide a some incentives

- **Helps Skills Generalize:** Mainstream exposure
  - Peer mentors
  - Peer skills group members
  - Peer part-time buddies

Defining Autism & Asperger’s

Kamps et al. (1992)
- **Peers As Support Networks:** Secondary school
  - Short sessions during school
  - Structured scripts & scenarios
  - Reading, lunch, game time, etc.

- **Prompt & Praise:** Typical students reinforce child w/ HFA for specific / targeted interactions

- **Create ‘Safe Room’:** For self-timeout

Academic Curriculum for HFA

Benefit from Modifications
- **Long-Term Focus:** On goals that maximize vocational potential & quality of life
  - Cultivate circumscribed interests that boost prospects for employment

- **Flex Credit-System Requirements:** Tangential classes often lead to ↓ motivation & failure
  - Taylor to HFA student’s interests

Classroom Setting
- **Ideal Program:** Small class, offers individual attention, small group work
  - W/ individual communication specialist
  - W/ individual OT specialist
  - Structured, supervised activities w/ peers
  - Focused on real-life skills
  - W/ in-school counselor as ‘safe address’

Type of School Supports
- **Both Specialized & Inclusive Experiences:**
  - In self-contained & mainstream classes
  - Combo works as long as individualized
  - Depending on what district has available
Bibliography


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Online Resources

PUBLICILY AVAILABLE ACTIVITIES


SOCIAL STORY SAMPLES:


COMIC STRIP CONVERSATIONS:


VISUAL LEARNING

www.amazon.com/Visual-Strategies-Improving-Communication-Practicalebook/dp/B01BN2SS7U/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=