Setting the stage: Creating a social pragmatic environment for toddlers with ASD and their caregivers

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Abstract Data from a 12-week randomized control trial of the Pathways Early Autism Intervention were analyzed. Pathways provides coaching to parents to facilitate early development of pragmatic skills for shared emotions with their toddlers. Thirty-four culturally and socioeconomically diverse toddlers with suspected or confirmed ASD were randomized into one of three groups: Pathways with an innovative protocol (IP) to facilitate social eye gaze, a similar intervention without the IP, and a business-as-usual group. Pre- and post-analyses of caregiver–child interactions and the Vineland Social subscale were used. A two-way mixed ANOVA tested response to treatment for the dependent variables. There was a significant group-by-time interaction for the sharing emotions measures of social eye gaze, \( F(2, 31) = 7.34, p = .002 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .321 \), vocal-verbal reciprocity, \( F(2, 31) = 3.753, p = .035 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .195 \); Vineland social, \( F(2, 31) = 3.48, p = .043 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .183 \). Social eye gaze and Vineland scores favored the Pathways group, and vocal-verbal reciprocity favored Pathways and the intervention without the IP. There was a significant main effect of post-intervention Vineland social on pragmatic diversity, \( F(1, 30) = 5.84, p = .022 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .163 \), and on rate of communication, \( F(1, 30) = 5.63, p = .024 \), partial \( \eta^2 = .158 \). The Pathways group, with its protocol for social eye gaze, was more effective at facilitating the shared emotion skills than the other two groups, suggesting that eye gaze may be a pivotal skill for the development of early pragmatic skills in children with ASD.

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Establecer el escenario: crear un entorno pragmático social para niños pequeños con TEA y sus cuidadores

Resumen Se analizaron los datos de un ensayo de control de distribución aleatoria de 12 semanas de la intervención temprana de autocuidado Pathways. Pathways ofrece formación a los padres para facilitar el desarrollo precoz de habilidades pragmáticas para compartir emociones con sus hijos pequeños. Treinta y cuatro niños con diversidad cultural y socioeconómica con sospecha de TEA o TEA confirmado se distribuyeron aleatoriamente en uno de los 3 grupos: Pathways con un protocolo innovador para facilitar la mirada social, una intervención similar sin el protocolo innovador y un grupo sin cambios. Se utilizaron análisis previos y posteriores de las interacciones cuidador-niño y la subescala social de Vineland. Un test de ANOVA mixto de 2 vías evaluó la respuesta al tratamiento de las variables dependientes. Hubo una importante interacción entre grupo y tiempo para medir las emociones compartidas de la mirada social, $F(2, 31)=7.34, p=0.002$, parcial $\eta^2=.321$, la reciprocidad vocal-verbal, $F(2, 31)=3.753, p=0.035$, parcial $\eta^2=.195$, y la subescala social de Vineland, $F(2, 31)=3.48, p=0.043$, parcial $\eta^2=.183$. La mirada social y las puntuaciones de Vineland favorecieron al grupo Pathways, y la reciprocidad vocal-verbal favoreció a Pathways y a la intervención sin protocolo innovador. Hubo un efecto principal importante de la subescala social de Vineland después de la intervención sobre la diversidad pragmática, $F(1, 30)=5.84, p=0.022$, parcial $\eta^2=.163$, y sobre las tareas de comunicación, $F(1, 30)=5.63, p=0.024$, parcial $\eta^2=.158$. El grupo Pathways, con su protocolo para la mirada social, fue más eficaz en facilitar las habilidades para compartir emociones que los otros 2 grupos, lo que evidencia que la mirada puede ser una habilidad fundamental para el desarrollo de habilidades pragmáticas precoces en niños con TEA.

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Introduction

Developmental pragmatics is a heterogeneous field that concerns a range of topics associated with the study of how young children develop the skills to use language effectively and appropriately in social interactions. Developmental pragmatics has gained importance over the last several years in studies of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) for whom pragmatic impairment is a core feature of the disorder (Landa, 2000; Rollins, 1999; Young, Diehl, Morris, Hyman, & Bennetto, 2005). ASD is a heterogeneous neurodevelopmental disorder that severely compromises the development of social relatedness, reciprocity, and social communication.

Unlike children with ASD, typical infants are socially motivated and prone to orient themselves toward socially salient information very early in life. Around 2 months of age, typical infants begin to smile in response to social stimuli (Spitz, 1965; Wolff, 1987). The onset of social smiling, coupled with an increase in gazing at the caregiver’s face (social eye gaze), is highly significant to Western culture, as it launches dyads into a new quality of shared experiences (Rochat & Striano, 1999; Sterlin, 1985). These dyadic, face-to-face interactions reflect well-balanced, reciprocal, and rhythmic exchanges of affect and emotions (Rollins, 2016, 2017; Tomasello, Carpenter, Call, Behne, & Moll, 2005) and are a precursor to later shared attention and social communication (Adamson & Russell, 1999; Rochat & Striano, 1999; Rollins, 2016; Rollins & Greenwald, 2013; Rollins, Campbell, Hoffman, & Self, 2016; Sterlin, 1985; Tomasello et al., 2005). In addition, sensitive caregivers respond to the infant as a communicative partner, and the exchanges take on a conversational quality (Snow, 1977), so much so that they have been referred to as “protoconversations” (Bateson, 1975; Trevarthen, 1979). These early developmental milestones, which comprise the phase of shared emotions (Rollins, 2016, 2017; Tomasello et al., 2005), aid our ability to forge developmentally appropriate social pragmatic interventions for children with ASD (Rollins, 2014, 2016).

Unfortunately, many evidenced-based interventions for children with ASD focus on the development of vocabulary to request, label pictures or objects, and increase the child’s utterance length without regard to a child’s early social capabilities. These linguistically based approaches do not provide the social pragmatic environment necessary to develop the social relatedness and reciprocal social interaction necessary for communication. There is now evidence to suggest that, before young children with ASD develop shared attention and intention, intervention should focus on foundational shared emotion skills, such as face-to-face reciprocal social interactions (Ingersoll & Gergans, 2007; Rollins, 2016; Rollins et al., 2016; Wallace & Rogers, 2010).

Thus, the purpose of this study was to provide evidence of a socially pragmatic intervention that facilitates shared emotions between toddlers with ASD and their caregivers. Best practice for toddler-aged children with ASD involves parents’ being coached to incorporate specific development and behavioral strategies into naturalistic interactions (Schreibman, Dawson, & Stahmer, 2015). These naturalistic developmental behavioral interventions (NBDBI) utilize daily routines and activities and encourage parents to embed intervention strategies throughout much of the child’s day...
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