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"I hope this can be shared with everyone in lots of schools": A novel intervention to improve social skills of peers of children with autism

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Abstract

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are lifelong developmental disabilities characterised by marked difficulties in social interaction, impaired communication, restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours, and sensory sensitivities (Aspect 2009). While there is considerable debate as to prevalence, Centrelink data shows an estimated prevalence of 62.5 per 10,000 for 6-12 year old children (McDermott et al. 2007). While young children find social situations aversive and prefer to play alone, as these children reach their teens many desire social contact with their peers but lack the ability to form and maintain friendships. Observations in schools demonstrate peer interaction in children with ASDs is of lower frequency and poorer quality than peer counterparts (Aspect 2012). The standard approach has been to work on social skills development with the ASD child and/or to educate teachers and support workers in social interaction facilitation. However, these approaches ignore the central element of peer relationships - the need for both parties to better understand each other and develop skills in communicating in a way that is acceptable and understandable to the other. There is a small body of evidence that disclosure of an ASD diagnosis and peer education can increase acceptance by peers (Dowjotas, 2009) although there are no published studies on interventions in schools (Keane, 2007).

Keywords

peers, children, autism, this, can, be, shared, everyone, lots, schools, hope, novel, i, intervention, improve, social, skills

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“I Hope This Can be Shared with Everyone in Lots of Schools”: A Novel Intervention to Improve Social Skills of Peers of Children with Autism

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Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are lifelong developmental disabilities characterised by marked difficulties in social interaction, impaired communication, restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours, and sensory sensitivities (Aspect 2009). While there is considerable debate as to prevalence, Centrelink data shows an estimated prevalence of 62.5 per 10,000 for 6-12 year old children (McDermott et al. 2007). While young children find social situations aversive and prefer to play alone, as these children reach their teens many desire social contact with their peers but lack the ability to form and maintain friendships. Observations in schools demonstrate peer interaction in children with ASDs is of lower frequency and poorer quality than peer counterparts (Aspect 2012). The standard approach has been to work on social skills development with the ASD child and/or to educate teachers and support workers in social interaction facilitation. However, these approaches ignore the central element of peer relationships - the need for both parties to better understand each other and develop skills in communicating in a way that is acceptable and understandable to the other. There is a small body of evidence that disclosure of an ASD diagnosis and peer education can increase acceptance by peers (Dowjotas, 2009) although there are no published studies on interventions in schools (Keane, 2007).

Social marketing (Andreasen 1995, Kotler & Lee 2008, Donovan & Henley 2010) is ideally placed to inform the development of appropriate interventions in this under-researched area. We seek to influence the behaviour of a target audience (peers of students with ASD) to improve the welfare of the children with ASD (by providing a supportive environment), the target audience (by facilitating more positive interactions with their peers with ASD) and the wider community (by increasing opportunities for young people with ASD to integrate into and contribute more fully to their 'neurotypical' community). Importantly, this requires more than an 'information' campaign; we need to engage the target audience in a mutually beneficial exchange ("what's in it for me if I'm nicer to those kids?"), using the full marketing mix – positioning supporting peers with autism as a desirable *product*, at an affordable *price* (addressing barriers and providing skills), in the right *place* (the school environment where skills learnt can immediately be practiced), with the right *promotion* (communicating messages in a way that is relevant and engaging to this discerning audience).

Methodology

The aims of this study were to: (1) develop a resource that was informative and interesting to students; (2) develop a 'presenters' manual' to enable those who adopt the resource to be able to deliver it with confidence; (3) test the acceptability of the resource by engaging local schools in the delivery of the materials; and (4) demonstrate the effectiveness of the resource in increasing students' awareness and understanding of ASD, and their willingness to interact with and assist these students. We reviewed existing ASD resources and interviewed experts in the field to develop a 13-minute presentation (utilising software tools Prezi and i-movie); an accompanying manual for presenters with additional ASD information; and a set of exercises to reinforce the presentation and concepts. We also developed a pre- and post paper based survey for the students and teachers in order to evaluate the acceptability of the materials and the feasibility and effectiveness of the intervention. The materials were trialled at two high schools with students in Year 7 (12-13 years old). This age group was seen as the key target for such an intervention as (in NSW) this is the first year of secondary school; the

transition to high school with its change to single-subject teachers and class cohorts, complex timetabling, and increased demands on social skills is the point at which children with ASD are most vulnerable to peer rejection. School one has an in-house ASD unit with dedicated teachers; the ASD students attend classes within the unit but are integrated into the school for a wide range of activities. School two does not have a dedicated ASD unit or specialised teachers, but has students with ASD in approximately the same ratios as other government high schools. In school one the intervention was delivered over 2-3 sessions in the MAC class (an 'open' class where teachers can present on topics of interest to the student body); and in school two the intervention was delivered in a single session in PDHPE classes. At both schools only one teacher took on the role of presenter.

Results

A total of 282 students completed the pre-intervention surveys. Approximately half claimed to know what Autism/ASD is; the majority of their open-ended descriptions suggested their understanding was faulty or limited. Comments included 'people with autism generally don't understand things the way we do' and 'I think it is a disorder where you can go sort of crazy'. Two thirds (68%) stated that they did not know what the issues for ASD students were; many correctly identified issues such as communication, bullying, and interaction with others, but there were some misnomers, such as 'You have to eat white bread'. Only 45% of students said they felt comfortable around ASD students, and 28% said they did not know how to act.

A total of 250 students completed the post-intervention surveys. Overall the presentation was viewed positively with 93% of students finding the information helpful; and 86% finding the exercises useful. The majority (54%) reported in the pre-intervention survey that they could not have helped a student with ASD; whereas following the presentation 92% felt they could help a student with ASD. This was further supported by their open-ended responses, such as:

- *'Thankyou I had no idea what it was and the symptoms. This has really helped and I will be able to help someone in the future. Hope this can be shared with everyone in lots of schools'*
- *'This was great! I knew someone with ASD and I found sometimes it was a bit hard to communicate. I know what I can try for him to be more comfortable...'*

Both of the teachers endorsed the presentation and manual, and suggested the inclusion of more detail on the issues ASD students have and what they (teachers and peers) can do to help, as well as the addition of music or YouTube clips. Students similarly suggested the inclusion of music, but also wanted to hear voices of 'someone with ASD to talk to the class.

Discussion

This was a pilot study, designed primarily to test the acceptability and feasibility of a small-scale social marketing intervention to increase the capacity and willingness of secondary students to provide support and friendship to their peers with ASD. Given the limited budget (and consequent limitations on the production quality of the intervention materials), the variation in delivery styles of the two teachers, and the short duration of the intervention, the outcomes of the intervention – based on the qualitative and quantitative feedback from the students and teachers – exceeded our expectations. The results of this pilot study confirm that utilising the 4Ps of social marketing can result in a mutually beneficial exchange. Peers of ASD students are willing to improve their understanding of autism and would like to be provided with the skills to enable them to be more effective in interacting with and assisting their peers with ASD. There is clearly a role for the development and evaluation of larger scale social marketing interventions to facilitate the integration of students with ASD into the

social environment of secondary schools, bringing about substantial improvements in the wellbeing of adolescents with ASD, their peers, and the wider community.

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