

The following articles summarised the student projects conducted at the BICC by Third Year and Honours Students of Psychology.

Comparison of Eye Contact Training Methods

"Look-at-me" and Interrupted Behaviour Chains

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One of the first symptoms that set children with autism apart is the lack of appropriate eye contact. It has been suggested that children with autism selectively attend to particular stimuli while ignoring other sources of stimuli, thus depriving themselves of environmental information. This may contribute to impaired development in various skill areas. They also show a deficiency in joint attention behaviour. Joint attention refers to an interaction between two people whereby one person directs the attention of the other person to a third object through establishing eye contact.

While children with autism have been observed to respond to joint attention bids, they are much less likely to initiate joint attention. On comparison to the initiation of joint attention, which requires eye contact to get the other person's attention, responding to a joint attention bid only requires the responder to look in the direction of the initiator's gaze. This key difference may explain the difference in the incidence of initiating and responding to joint attention. Hence, teaching strategies need to target eye contact and attention focus in children with autism to be successful.

This study focused on a comparison of two methods to teach eye contact to young children with autism. The operant method to train eye contact through massed drills and artificial reinforcements, the "look-at-me" (LAM) method, was compared with training through interrupted behaviour chains (IBC). The IBC method included peek-a-boo and swinging.

For the LAM treatment, participants were reinforced with praise, and tangible rewards. The child was first prompted with "look-at-me". Compliance was reinforced with access to favorite toys or activities and food. If the child did not make eye contact, the reinforcer was brought close to the experimenter's eyes so as to catch the child's attention and bring the child's gaze toward the experimenter's eyes. When this failed, the experimenter directed the child's attention physically by pointing the child's finger to the experimenter's eye, repeating "look-at-me". Contingent positive reinforcement was given when the child made eye contact with the experimenter.

For the eye contact training through IBC, reinforcements were smiles, praise and swinging which the participants enjoyed. If the child did not make eye contact, the experimenter encouraged him/her to do so by moving in line with his/her gaze, or using a pair of sunglasses, which seem to attract the children's attention towards the eyes, to play peek-a-boo. Social reinforcers of praise, smiles and other games were used in the training by IBC methods.

While both treatments were effective soon after they were implemented, improvements were more consistent for training through the LAM method. Results showed some carryover effects for both treatments. Differences between the two methods and the relevance of the results are discussed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the LAM treatment resulted in more generalisation of eye contact. ❄

Comparison of the two Training Methods

