

Precision Teaching For Children with Autism

Reported by Tan Yew Kong, Master's Student, NUS

Prof David Leach from the School of Psychology, Murdoch University, and Ms Amanda McMillian Brown, a senior behavioural and educational therapist, introduced the technique of Precision Teaching to professionals and parents from 8TH TO 13TH NOVEMBER, 1999. They also conducted a series of consultation sessions with parents of children with autism. The visit was organised by the BICC with the help of a volunteer parent.

Precision Teaching adopts a recording method that measures the rate of accurate performance of target behaviours. Ms Brown gave the analogy of constructing a building in which the setting of the foundation is critical. Training focuses on specific component skills deemed to facilitate the development of more complex skills. For example, the ability to perform "tongue poking" is said to be one important foundation skill for sound production and development of speech. The aim is to train the child to produce the target component skill accurately and fluently to ensure the maintenance of the behaviour over time. Following the acquisition of the target component skill, other behaviours with progressive levels of complexity are taught in order to facilitate application of the skills.

During the seminars, "Precision Teaching For Professionals" and "Precision Teaching For Home", the participants raised a number of pertinent issues. Some asked for guidance on how to teach their children who do not follow instructions. The speakers noted that it was important to establish compliance prior to teaching the child. They added that improvement in behaviours as depicted in their videotaped sessions required a lot of effort, and did not happen overnight.

There were concerns that the repetitive nature of the training may promote the tendency of some children with autism to engage in stereotypic, repetitive behaviours. The speakers highlighted the importance of varying the presentation of the tasks and assured that the repetitive display of the component skill would cease over time.

Professionals also sought empirical evidence to support the use of Precision Teaching over other existing intervention techniques. In spite of the anecdotal successes demonstrated in clinical cases, the speakers acknowledged that there was clearly a need for more research efforts to systematically examine the potential contributions of Precision Teaching. There was also a need to support the component skills identified for teaching.

The clinical successes demonstrated by the speakers provided some indication with respect to the potential application value of the Precision Teaching technique. However, as the individuals with autism fall in a wide spectrum of clinical symptoms, it is essential to take into consideration the characteristics of each individual in the selection of intervention strategies.

In addition, detailed documentation of behavioural changes by practitioners who apply this technique will contribute to the assessment of the effectiveness of this technique. As one participant aptly stated, it was important to remain open-minded to all potential treatment methods while being flexible and cautious in the application of intervention strategies. ❁



Prof David Leach and Ms Amanda McMillian Brown