

TEACHING SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING

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In April 2000, the Behavioural Intervention Centre for Children (BICC) held its first training on social skills and social understanding. It was conducted as part of a Master's research project, with the main objective of teaching children with autism the ability to take the perspective of others, that is, to acquire a *Theory of Mind*. That many children with autism lack a *Theory of Mind* is well documented. Basically, this means that these children fail to understand that other people have their own mental states (thoughts, desires, wishes, etc.). Hence, children who lack a *Theory of Mind* also fail to make the connection that the mental states of others influence the emotions that they feel. It is hypothesised that this inability to understand the mental states of others is part of the reason children with autism lack social understanding and hence, social skills.

The training was held twice a week: once in the child's home on an individual basis and the other as a group at the BICC. The children were taught the theoretical concepts during individual training at home and practised what they learnt through role-play when they came together as a group. Four high-functioning children with autism aged six to nine years participated in this training programme.

In addition to teaching them to identify the basic emotions of happiness, sadness, anger and fear, the children were also taught to understand the concept of false belief, i.e. "what a person sees, he knows; what a person does not see, he does not know". In other words, it makes perfect sense that Susan would rummage through a toy box in which she last saw her doll, although it

was removed to a different location when she was out of the room. The children also learnt that a person's thoughts and desires influence how he / she feels about an outcome. For example, John WANTED a toy aeroplane for his birthday, he THOUGHT that he would receive a toy aeroplane. If IN REALITY, he got a teddy bear instead, he would FEEL sad.

The children were also taught other important skills, such as taking turns, dealing with anger and responding to disagreements.

Colourful pictures, videos and puppets were used to make the training as lively and interactive as possible. For example, the children role-played the appropriate way to respond to disagreements by using puppets. That thoughts and desires affect emotions was taught using a scene from Walt Disney's *The Lion King*. They also learnt about taking their friend's perspective by pretending to shop for a gift that their friend liked and / or leading a blindfolded friend through an obstacle course by giving verbal commands.

The training had a positive effect on the children. Each week, the children were asked questions that tested their ability to understand *Theory of Mind* concepts. By the end of the training, all the children were able to understand mental state concepts, such as emotions and false belief. However, in addition to an improvement in their *Theory of Mind* scores, the children also improved in their social skills. They benefited just by being together every week. Although these social skills were not targeted as part of the training, I was pleasantly surprised to see the older children of the group taking on the

role of "big brothers" and looking after the younger children. They helped the younger children to accomplish tasks that were too difficult for them. They also reminded each other of the rules of the lesson. In addition, they were able to give peer feedback to one another in terms of behavioural management. It was very encouraging to see that because of the support that they gave to one another, children who initially did not want to join the group became part of the group and enjoyed their friends' company. Children who were easily distracted at the beginning of the training became more attentive and focused because of the constant reminders by their peers to "sit down and listen".

By the end of the last week of training, the children had bonded so much that they asked for the training to be extended an additional week! Until now, they still ask about one another (I know because I still teach some of them) and whether they can play with their friends again.

We certainly need to develop more effective means of ensuring that these learnt

skills are generalised to other settings and maintained over time. As training programmes inevitably end after a certain period of time, it is all too possible for the children to practise less, and even forget their learnt skills upon cessation of the training. It should therefore be the concerted effort of parents, therapists, teachers and basically anyone who knows the children, to constantly remind them of social rules as far as possible.

The potential effectiveness of social skills training is apparent. Children with autism can learn to understand social concepts and acquire social skills if they are taught systematically. Furthermore, these children have demonstrated that they are capable of forming friendships among themselves, given an environment that constantly encourages them to work and play together in an appropriate way. Although the education system requires that children be enriched in their mental abilities, there is the need for learning in every one of us that cannot be obtained from books, but from people. ♥

Recent Publications of the BICC

The following studies conducted at the BICC were recently published in international journals. Interested professionals and parents can inquire about the production through Mrs Denise Lai at Wee Care (836-1445 or 836-1450).

Chin, H. Y. & Bernard-Opitz, V., (2000) Teaching conversational skills to children with autism, in *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 30, 6, 569-583

Bernard-Opitz, V, Kwok, K.W. & Sapuan-Nakhoda, S., (2001) Epidemiology of Autism in Singapore, in the *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research*, 24,1-6-2001

Bernard-Opitz, V. Sapuan-Nakhoda, S. & Sriram, N., (2001) Social problem solving through computer assisted instruction, in *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 31, 4, 377-384

Kok, A., Bernard-Opitz, V. & Tan, Y.K., A Comparison of the effects of structured and facilitated play on preschool children with autism, under review, in *The International Journal of Research and Practice: Autism*

Bernard-Opitz, V., Chin H.Y., Siow Ing & Tan Y.K (2000) Behavioral Intervention Center for Children (video/VCR). A 15 minute video/VCR has been produced by the BICC, which documents behavioral programs for children with autism at UCLA and in Singapore. It also documents changes of young children with autism over a brief Behavioural Intervention Program involving parents and students.