Emotional and Social Skills Development in People with Autism - Bottom Up and Top Down Approach

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Introduction

When we are happy, contented, calm and regulated we can experience joy, explore, experiment, learn, and build and maintain healthy relationships in which we pay attention to our own needs and those of others.

Babies are completely reliant on others to meet their every need and to give comfort. Over time the child learns how to regulate their feelings / emotions and to be social. This is done through the trusting relationships formed with the significant emotionally attuned and available adults in their lives. It is for this reason that the focus of any emotional and social skills development programme or intervention, regardless of ability and need in all areas of development, must be supported by adults who are emotionally attuned and available.

Our Approach

The fundamental purpose of our emotions is to initiate action that will restore us to a physical sense of safety and equilibrium when we are overcome by feelings. Children who are not able to make sense of their inner feelings / sensations often struggle with social engagement because they are not able to take the necessary action to self sooth when their stress response system is triggered. This means that to help children feel in control of what is happening to them and their subsequent actions, they need the opportunity to recognise and then respond proactively to subtle sensory based feelings. Similarly, in 'real' social situations we need to support children to read, make sense of and then respond proactively and appropriately when other people use different facial expressions, gestures, body positions and tones of voice.

At Options Autism, all emotional and social skills development intervention focuses on providing opportunities for learning and skills development using bottom up and top down approaches.

1. Bottom up - focus on helping children learning to recognise and make sense of physical feelings so they can learn how to self-sooth and restore equilibrium.

2. Top down – provide opportunities that activate the social engagement system and support the

development of new skills.

Working in this way increases the child's capacity to cope in social situations that might trigger the stress response system.

Experiences Build Brains

Social and emotional skills development occurs when children are provided with the opportunity to engage in fun and interesting 'doing' activities that reflect each child's developmental capacity, alongside trusted adults. Trusting relationships are built by the adult being available and continually attuned to a child's needs. It is only in the context of trusting relationships that a child's social engagement system is activated, and they feel calm and at ease enough to engage with others and learn. This entails adults being playful and supportive in activities, being accepting and not critical, being curious and encouraging and being in touch with and responding to what the child might be thinking and feeling.

Children develop new skills best when they are provided with fun, 'hands on' play and practical activities that encourage curiosity, exploration and experimentation. When supported in these activities by an emotionally attuned and available adult, children learn to work through conflict, frustration, limitations and disappointment.

Multi-Professional Working

For progress to be achieved and generalised it is important to take a multi-professional approach to the learning and skills development. This entails members of the clinical team, for example, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and clinical psychology, working jointly with members of education and care staff to develop programmes for intervention that are then delivered together, not just in sessions but across the child's curriculum.

Programmes

There are many social skills programmes available and each has its own theory and evidence base. The children at Options Autism have: learning difficulties, autism and complex social and emotional difficulties and needs. For this reason we have opted to loosely follow a variety of programmes, including strategies such as: Social Thinking (Michelle Garcia), The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills - UCLA PEERS® (Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson) and Lego Therapy.

Baselines, Goals and Measuring Outcomes

It is important before any emotional and social skills development intervention to complete assessment to establish a baseline from which to set general goals and more specific measurable outcomes. A person centred approach enables us to set individualised goals and measurable outcomes specific to their needs. Criteria for 'successful' outcomes is set prior to the intervention and at our school we use a 5 point scale.

Across our schools, at the start of any social and emotional skills intervention, the children participating are made aware of their goals / targets and are involved in reviewing their progress against these.

Progress is recorded after each session but evidence is also gained anecdotally from staff, by carrying out observation between sessions and during meetings around the individual's progress.

References

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