UC SANTA BARBARA

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Sonia Fernandez

Motivation to Learn

When it comes to dealing with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), effective early intervention is key.

“With the large numbers of children now being diagnosed with ASD — one in 68 — it is critical that we find the most effective treatments that will result in the fastest gains in the shortest time,” said Lynn Koegel, clinical director of the Koegel Autism Center and the Broad Asperger Center at UC Santa Barbara.

In a pair of studies recently published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, pivotal response treatment (PRT) — a protocol developed by autism experts Lynn and Robert Koegel at UCSB — has proved to be effective in giving children with ASD that critical push that will help them as they grow older and require a greater ability to communicate and interact with others. The two studies are the first group-design studies that compare PRT outcomes with those of other available interventions, and demonstrate that PRT results in statistically significant improvements in its outcomes.

“These studies show the effectiveness of PRT in a wide variety of settings and suggest that we can develop much more effective school and home programs when pivotal areas, such as motivation, are incorporated,” said Lynn Koegel.

Based on principles of positive motivation, pivotal response treatment, as the name suggests, finds and targets “pivotal” areas of behavior, the effect of which ripples out into other aspects of a child’s behavior, as opposed to protocols that target and

drill individual behaviors and are more time-consuming.

“This results in a much faster, more efficient and cost-effective intervention,” Koegel said. “But most importantly, it speeds up the habilitation process.”

The focus of the research was motivation as the target behavior. Unsurprisingly, a motivated learner is a faster learner in virtually any circumstance. In the case of children with autism, maintaining motivation is particularly important because it enhances the learning those children need to do in the various aspects of their lives, in and out of the classroom. PRT also generates positive feedback for caregivers and teachers.

“In fact, children with ASD will let the parents or teachers know when the teaching isn’t that great by engaging in off-task and disruptive behaviors, but typically developing children — who are more likely to follow social norms — may not,” said Koegel, adding that the PRT protocol can also objectively measure and score the amount and type of responses the child makes. Additionally, PRT has been found to result in greater levels of the highly sought interaction and connection between parents and teachers and the children with ASD they care for, compared with other available interventions.

“Our research on motivation can help us improve education — through better teaching — for all children,” she said.

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