

Parents' Experiences in Using Mobile Tablets with Their Child with Autism to Encourage the Development of Social Communication Skills: The Development of a Parents' Guide

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Abstract : Autism is a lifelong condition that affects how individuals interact with others and make sense of the world around them. The two core difficulties associated with autism are difficulties in social communication and interaction, and the manifestation of restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour. However, children with autism may also have many talents and special interests among which is their affinity with digital technologies. Despite the increasing use of mobile tablets in schools and homes and the children's motivation in using them, there is limited guidance on how to use the tablets to teach children with autism-specific skills. This study aims to fill this gap in knowledge by providing guidelines about the ways in which iPads and other tablets can be used by parents/carers and their child at home to support the development of social communication skills. Semi-structured interviews with 10 parents of primary school aged children with autism were conducted with the aim to explore their experiences in using mobile devices, such as iPads and Android tablets, and social activities with their children to create opportunities for social communication development. The interview involved questions about the parents' knowledge and experience in autism, their understanding of social communication skills, the use of technology at home, and their links with the child's school. Qualitative analysis of the interviews showed that parents used a variety of strategies to boost their child's social communication skills. Among these strategies were a) the use of communication symbols, b) the use of the child's special interest as motivator to gain their attention, and c) allowing time to their child to respond. It was also found that parents engaged their child in joint activities such as cooking, role play and creating social stories together on the device. Seven out of ten parents mentioned that the tablet is a motivating tool that can be used to teach social communication skills, nonetheless all parents raised concerns over screen time and their child's sharing difficulties. The need for training and advice as well as building stronger links with their child's school was highlighted. In particular, it was mentioned that recommendations would be welcomed about how parents can address their child's difficulties in initiating or sustaining a conversation, taking turns and sharing, understanding other people's feelings and facial expressions, and showing interest to other people. The findings of this study resulted in the development of a parents' guide based on evidence-based practice and the participants' experiences and concerns. The proposed guidelines aim to urge parents to feel more confident in using the tablet with their child in more collaborative ways. In particular, the guide offers recommendations about how to develop verbal and non-verbal communication, gives examples of tablet-based activities to interact and create things together, as well as it offers suggestions on how to provide a worry-free tablet experience and how to connect with the school.

Keywords : families, perception and cognition in early development, school-age intervention, social development

Conference Title : ICA 2018 : International Conference on Autism

Conference Location : London, United Kingdom

Conference Dates : September 27-28, 2018