



KANSAS INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT NETWORK

Targeting Reading Comprehension Skills in Children with ASD

by Trisha Self, PhD, CCC-SLP
Associate Professor
Communication Sciences &
Disorders, Wichita State
University

**Targeting Reading
Comprehension Skills
in Children with Autism
Spectrum Disorders**



Reading involves being able to decode AND comprehend text. The processes of decoding and understanding written material are complex and interrelated. Children need to be able to do both to truly engage in the act of reading (Illand, 2011).

Many children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) learn to read (or decode) at an early age. However, despite having the ability to decode text, children with ASD often struggle to understand what they have 'read.' Unfortunately, the reading comprehension problems of children on the autism spectrum are often "masked" by their strengths in decoding. This is especially true during the early school years when the focus is on teaching children *how* to read. Still, it is not uncommon for teachers to report that their students with ASD can 'read,' but don't appear to understand anything they have read. It is important, therefore, for educators to realize that a child's ability to decode does not mean he/she comprehends text.

The ability for children on the autism spectrum to understand and relate

to written material is often affected by the core deficits of ASD (i.e., social relatedness, communication, and restrictive interests). These children face unique challenges learning to read due to these impairments. To be a skilled "reading comprehender" children need to be able to perform a number of skills such as: make connections between what they are reading, their own experiences, and the world around them; ask themselves questions and create mental images as they read; make inferences that go beyond the information provided in the text; understand the structure and vocabulary of text; and determine relevant from irrelevant material (Kluth, 2010). When children experience deficits in the areas of socialization and language their ability to comprehend what they have read can be significantly affected.

To improve the reading comprehension skills of children with ASD it is important to determine each child's developmental reading stage. According to Lanter and Watson (2008), there are **three reading stages/phases: emergent, conventional, and skilled**. Children who are at the **emergent reading phase** are developing skill sets that precede independent reading, these include: knowledge of the forms and functions of print, including book handling, awareness of environmental print, and written language terminology (Kaderavek & Justice, 2004); alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, and oral language. **Children with ASD at the emergent reading phase** may demonstrate an uneven profile when developing these abilities. That is, some

children may be able to recite the alphabet and/or be able to read a few words, but demonstrate overall language delays (Diehl, Ford, & Federico, 2005). It is important, therefore, to promote both oral language and reading skill development in children with ASD functioning at this stage. Evidence has shown that strategies such as: shared book reading, story retelling, labeling objects and pictures to promote sight word reading, and teaching literacy in natural contexts are affective instructional strategies (Lanter & Watson, 2008).

Children who perform at the **conventional reading stage** are expected to be independent readers who can draw meaning from text (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Research has shown that **children on the autism spectrum** tend to have word reading skills that are superior to their ability to comprehend (Diehl et al., 2005). Consequently, it is important to continue to target both the oral language and reading skill development of children with ASD who are functioning at the conventional reading stage. Strategies found to support readers at the emergent literacy phase should be continued. Other effective instructional methods include: promoting phonological awareness, building/linking background knowledge, and constructing meaning through dialogue (e.g., responding to comprehension questions) (Lanter & Watson, 2008).

As children progress to the **skilled reader stage** they are able to draw meaning from text accurately and efficiently (Scarborough, 2003). Many



KANSAS INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT NETWORK

Targeting Reading Comprehension Skills in Children with ASD Cont'd

children with ASD do not reach this stage due to their difficulties with interpretive language. Because many **children with ASD** interpret oral and written language literally, their ability to infer, predict, and understand the perspectives of story characters is significantly challenged. Strategies that promote oral language and reading skills of children with ASD at a skilled reader stage include: focusing on interpretive rather than surface-level questions, building background knowledge, linking texts with prior knowledge, and promoting text monitoring (Lanter & Watson, 2008).

Children on the autism spectrum can improve their ability to comprehend what they read. It is essential, however, for instructors to consider the difficulties these children have with language comprehension, communication, social relatedness, and restrictive interests, as these deficits will affect language and literacy development. Evidence shows that when these areas are targeted using evidence-based strategies designed to address the unique learning needs of children with ASD, the outcome can be positive.

References

Diehl, S.F., Ford, C., & Federico, J. (2005). The communication journey of a fully included child with an autism spectrum disorder. *Topics in Language Disorders, 25*, 375-387.

Illand, E. (2011). *Drawing a blank: Improving comprehension for readers on the autism spectrum*. Shawnee Mission, KS: AAPC Publishing.

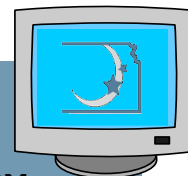
Kaderavek, J.N., & Justice, L.M. (2004). Embedded-explicit emergent literacy intervention II: Goal selection and implementation in the early childhood classroom. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 35*, 212-228.

Kluth, P. (2010). *You're going to love this kid: Teaching students with autism in the inclusive classroom (2nd edition)*. Baltimore, MA: Paul Brookes Publishing Company.

Lanter, E. & Watson, L. (2008). Promoting literacy in students with ASD: The basics for the SLP. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools, 39*, 33-43.

Scarborough, H. S. (2003). Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice, In S.B. Neuman & D.K. Diskinson (Eds.). *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 97-110). New York: Guilford.

Snow, C.E., Burns, M.S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.



CALENDAR

JAN 19, 3:30-4:15PM

Webinar Series - An Overview of the Ziggurat Model - Presented by Jane Goetz & Katie Thomas - Online

JAN, 24, 3:30-4:15PM

Webinar Series - Reading Comprehension Strategies Part I - Presented by Dr. Trisha Self - Online

JAN, 30, 3:30-4:15PM

Webinar Series - Reading Comprehension Strategies Part 2 - Presented by Dr. Trisha Self - Online

REGISTRATION STILL OPEN!

To register, please visit our Training Calendar, found on our website - www.KansasASD.com

REMINDER



Applications for Summer Institute 2012 (June 11-15, 2012) have been sent to directors - please contact your director to apply! Applications are due on or before Feb. 24, 2012.