Title: Parents’ Behaviors Facilitate Competent Social Behavior in Children with Intellectual Disability

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Introduction: Children with intellectual disability are at high risk for peer rejection and victimization due, in part, to limitations in social and interpersonal skills compared to their typically developing peers. It is important to identify how to best promote these skills in children with intellectual disability in order to support their social adjustment. Parent-child interactions may be one crucial context in which these children cultivate important interpersonal skills and behaviors when parents facilitate their child’s initiative and social engagement (Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Connor, 2007). The present study examined associations between parental behaviors and children’s competent social behaviors during family interactions in the home.

Method: 213 families in total participated in the present study: 163 families with a child with intellectual disability (mild or moderate) were examined as well as 50 comparison families with typically developing children. The children were 6-18 years old. Families were video-recorded completing a 50-minute unstructured interaction session. Observers who encoded specific behaviors throughout the session also reported at the end of the session whether the mother and father used various positive ways of eliciting, modeling, and rewarding positive social behaviors, whether the child initiated activities, and the amount of prosocial behavior by the child toward each parent.

Results: Regression analyses evaluated how the occurrence of parent behaviors predicted the initiation and prosocial behaviors by the children. Some parent behaviors predicted both types of child responses (initiation and prosocial behavior), and some were specific to only one type of child competency. Also, the parent behaviors predicted child behaviors more strongly in the intellectual disability group than in the comparison group. First, mothers’ use of rationales and fathers’ physical affection toward the child with intellectual disability predicted both child initiation and child prosocial behaviors towards mothers and fathers. Additionally, mothers’ and fathers’ pinpointing of the child’s infraction and fathers’ non-hostile teasing also predicted child initiation. In contrast, parents’ verbal reinforcement of the child’s work behavior, fathers’ modeling of positive behaviors, and mothers’ verbal reinforcement of the child’s positive social behavior also predicted child prosocial behavior. Overall, the parents’ behaviors accounted for 10 to 16% of the variance in child initiation, and 27 to 32% of the variance in child prosocial behaviors.

Discussion: The findings are consistent with recent research indicating that parents can create a context in which children with intellectual disability can learn and practice effective social behaviors (e.g., Fenning & Baker, 2012). There was consistency across mothers and fathers in the types of behaviors predictive of children’s competencies. The pattern of the predictions suggested that the parents’ behaviors focused on engaging the child in the family activity specifically predicted initiation of an activity by the child, whereas the parents’ reinforcement of social and work-related behavior specifically predicted the child’s prosocial actions. The parent behaviors identified in the present study can be targeted as potential tools for the development of socially competent behavior in children with intellectual disabilities, thus fostering their positive peer-related adjustment.

References/Citations: