

Research on Pre-school Autism Communication Therapy (PACT)

Recent research testing the benefits of communication therapy on pre-school children with autism has produced some interesting results.

Pre-school Autism Communication Therapy (PACT) is a series of parent training techniques aimed at improving a child's social and communication skills.

British psychiatrist Jonathan Green and colleagues believed that previous small trials had been effective enough to justify a larger trial. Their findings were published online recently in the British medical journal Lancet.

The team recruited 152 children with core autism. Of these, 77 were assigned to PACT sessions at clinics in London, Manchester and Newcastle and a control group of 75 received treatment as usual in the same centres, both for a period of 12 months.

Training took place at clinics but the goal of PACT is to encourage parents to use the techniques during play and other activities with their child in the home. The idea is to change the interaction between parent and child to enhance and encourage child communication.

The programme has six stages.

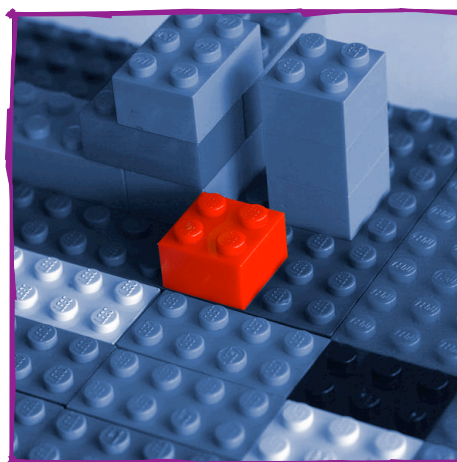
It begins with making time each day for parent and child to share attention during play. This sets the scene for communication.

The parent learns to synchronise responses and comments to balance with the child's activities.

This leads to parental use of language that matches the child's stage of development, allowing them to develop their understanding and use of spoken language.

Establishing routines and anticipation is a consolidation stage that supports the child's verbal understanding, anticipation and participation, using repetitive rhymes, routine familiar phrases and familiar interactive play. It helps to develop the child's intentional communication skills.

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Communication skills are increased by introducing situations that challenge the child to initiate communication and use language for a range of functions.

The final stage expands language and conversations through the parent repeating and adding to the child's language and making comments that encourage the child to reply.

Analysis of the PACT research and the control group showed only a small improvement in favour of the PACT intervention.

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“On the basis of our findings, we cannot recommend the addition of the PACT intervention to treatment as usual for the reduction of autism symptoms; however, a clear benefit was noted for parent-child social communication,” the researchers found.

Parent ratings of the research showed strong support for the PACT intervention.

The study found that parent-mediated interventions, like PACT, could help to improve parents’ perceptions and sensitivity to their child’s communication needs. The effect of this on parental behaviour would generally benefit the child’s environment and could generate cumulative improvements in the child’s development.

It is likely that future research will build on the positive parent-child benefits of PACT.

For further information, see:

Green, J., Charman, T. et al (2010) Parent-mediated communication-focused treatment in children with autism (PACT): a randomised controlled trial www.thelancet.com Published online May 21, 2010, DOI:10.1016/S0140-6736(10)60587-9

