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A teaching procedure to help children with autistic spectrum disorder to label emotions

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ABSTRACT

This study explored a teaching procedure designed to enable children with autistic spectrum disorder Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to label (tact) the emotions of others. Ten children, aged between 6.1 and 9.6 years, were taught the relevant vocabulary to label a set of emotions (e.g., *happy*,*sad*, *angry*), to match these tacts to illustrated situations, to generalize these tacts to novel situations, and to tact their own emotions. At baseline, participants showed no ability to match emotion cards to situations in which those emotions would occur. Participants were taught to tact these emotions by first matching-to-sample the facial expressions of *happy*, *sad* and *angry* to illustrations of situations which reflected each emotion. This was followed by a tacting phase, during which participants were taught to match emotion cards to particular situation cards. In the first of two generalization probes, participants were able to tact *happy*, *sad*, or *angry* when shown untrained situation cards (probe 1), and could choose those things that made them *happy*, *sad* or *angry* from an additional set of untrained illustrations (probe 2), showing an improved understanding of their own *emotions* and those of other, than was found during baseline.

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1. Introduction

Children disorder Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are often thought to have significant difficulty understanding emotion (Baron-Cohen, Golan, & Ashwin, 2009; Hobson, Ouston, & Lee, 1989; Uljarevic & Hamilton, 2013). In addition, learning emotion-language presents a challenge to these individuals (Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001; Lartseva, Dijkstra, & Buitelaar, 2014). The difficulties that children with ASD can face when attempting to label (tact) emotions can affect their ability to understand the emotions and private events of others (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Hobson et al., 1989). An ability to recognize and label the emotions of others is also important as it contributes to the development of a wide range of social and emotional competences in young children, such as the ability to form friendships and understand social interactions (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Losh & Capps, 2006), as well as reducing externalizing or disruptive behavior (Conallen & Reed, 2012; Koegel, Koegel, & Surratt, 1992), improving mental health and well-being (Baker, Lang, & O'Reilly, 2009), and providing an indicator of future academic success (Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Robins & Rutter, 1990).

Improvements in language ability can improve the ability of children with ASD to take the perspective of others and understand emotions (Steel, Joseph, & Tager-Flusberg, 2003), which may help to alleviate some of the associated difficulties noted above (see Koegel et al., 1992). Although children with ASD can show an ability to talk about their own emotions and

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those of others (Losh & Capps, 2006; Tager-Flusber, 1992), they are often limited by their lack of mastery of the semantics and pragmatics related to the terms for these emotional states (Baron-Cohen, 2000; Hale & Tager-Flusberg, 2003; Lohmann & Tomasello, 2003). As a result, individuals with ASD can benefit from targeted instruction to learn to talk about emotions; from naming a feeling to expressing specific feelings in words (Brown, Morris, Nida, & Baker-Ward, 2012; Capps, Yirmiya, & Sigman, 1992; Wainer & Ingersoll, 2011; Williams, Gray, & Tonge, 2012). The exploration of a procedure to teach children with ASD to label (tact) the emotions of others is the focus of this study.

Attempts to teach children with ASD emotional awareness and improve their understanding of the impact that emotions can have on social interactions have received attention in curricula for children with special needs. A number of curricula have attempted to address this need; for example, the use of social stories (Gray, 2006; Howley & Arnold, 2005), rating systems (Buron & Curtis, 2003; Jaffee & Gardner, 2006), speech and language approaches (Schroeder, 1996; Sonders, 2003), school-based peer modeling (Ingersoll & Schreibman, 2006), and interactive therapy-based approaches (Faherty, 2000). There does not seem to be a particular developmental level during which such approaches may be most appropriate, at least not one that has been clearly identified.

However, while many of these approaches attempt to enhance understanding of emotions and social situations by those with ASD, they do not always attempt specifically to teach a vocabulary for emotions. For example, while Social Stories have been used to promote emotional vocabulary for pupils who have hearing impairments (Richels et al., 2014), there are few, if any, such documented uses of this intervention for individuals with ASD. Rather, interventions for people with ASD tend to focus on nonverbal recognition of emotions in others, often using computer-based technology (e.g., Silver & Oakes, 2001; see Ramdoss et al., 2012 for a review), and not teaching a specific vocabulary for emotions. This latter skill is often thought to be missing or impaired in children with ASD (Baron-Cohen et al., 2001; Lartseva et al., 2014).

When teaching children with ASD to label (tact) emotions, it is often necessary to explicitly teach the relevant vocabulary for such emotions based on their public correlates, such as the behavioral expression or display of such emotion, before a generative use for the label (tact) for those emotions can be applied (see Conallen & Reed, 2012). In this study, children with ASD, who have been taught the relevant vocabulary to tact private events, were taught to label expression cards representing basic and commonly observed emotions (e.g., happy, sad, angry). These particular emotions were chosen as the represent some of the most basic and universal emotions (Ekman, 1989), and have been noted as important in previous research with this population (Gross, 2004). Following this teaching, participants were then taught to tact these emotions in response to situations involving other children, thereby, aiming to teach the children with ASD to tact the private event of others. The instruction was followed by two generalization probes, during which time the children with ASD were asked to tact the private event of another person in a novel situation, and name things that made themselves happy, sad, and angry. The first probe was designed to assess whether the ability to tact the private events of others, once shaped, could be easily generalized to novel situations that had not been taught. The aim of the second probe was to test whether the teaching procedure would generalize to being able to use the labels taught for others' emotions in order to label things that made the participants themselves have particular emotions. Given the paucity of data relating to teaching this skill, an individual multiple baseline design was thought to be the most effective way of studying this topic to establish the feasibility of such teaching approaches through single subject design before any group comparisons were conducted.

Table 1
Subject, age, sex, diagnosis, Gillian Autistic Index score (high scores are more severe), percentile rank (low scores mean ASD is less severe), probability of ASD, and method of communication.

Subject	Age/sex	Diagnosis	Autistic index	Percentile rank	Probability	Method of communication
1	6.1 Male	Autism & developmental dyspraxia	70	2	Below average	PECS
2	6.3 Male	Autism	85	16	Below average	PECS vocal verbal
3	7.0 Male	Autism & unspecified communication disorder	100	50	Average	PECS
4	6.5 Male	Autism & developmental dyspraxia	68	1	Very low	PECS
5	7.8 Male	Autism	80	9	Below average	PECS vocal verbal
6	6.1 Male	Autism	93	32	Average	PECS vocal verbal
7	6.1 Male	Autism	111	77	Above average	PECS vocal verbal
8	9.4 Male	Autism	110	75	Above average	PECS vocal verbal
9	7.2 Male	Autism	85	16	Below average	PECS vocal verbal
10	9.6 Female	Autism & unspecified communication disorder	110	75	Above average	PECS manual sign

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