

Training boys with ADHD to work collaboratively: Social and learning outcomes

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Abstract

This study examined social participation and strategic problem solving behavior of boys diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) when collaborating on a planning task with a trained peer partner. Twenty-four 9- to 13-year-old boys with ADHD who were receiving a medication intervention, were individually pre-tested to assess their initial ability to plan an errand route task. They were then observed doing an alternate planning task during collaborative sessions with a female peer partner who had received prior training in the task and in facilitating social interaction. Boys with ADHD were then individually post-tested on the original planning task. Observations of the collaborative sessions revealed significant, positive changes across three phases in the quality of social interactions by boys with ADHD, in their planning strategies, and planning efficiency. Findings suggest positive benefits of collaborative learning structures for boys with ADHD when they are placed in a collaborative learning setting with a partner who has received a prior training intervention.

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1. Introduction

Research on collaborative learning has demonstrated that interaction with peers can increase group performance under some circumstances (Tudge & Winterhoff, 1993; Webb

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& Farivar, 1994; Webb, Troper, & Fall, 1995). While peer-mediated learning can take various forms (class-wide peer tutoring, same-age, or cross age dyads), one-to-one tutoring has demonstrated a strong data base supporting its use in education (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Burish, 2000; Greenwood, 1991; Utley, Mortweet, & Greenwood, 1997). In addition, collaborative interactions with peers have shown positive effects for individual students (Rohrbeck, Ginsburg-Block, Fantuzzo, & Miller, 2003). However, while researchers concur that learning in peer-mediated dyads can direct student outcomes (Greenwood, Terry, Arreaga-Mayer, & Finney, 1992), less is known about the specific social processes and characteristics of peer interactions within collaborative settings that might contribute to these positive outcomes. This is particularly important for students who exhibit social difficulties and have poor relationships with peers and who often are expected to benefit from engaging in collaborative learning activities. The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to examine the nature of collaborative learning in a group of boys with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) who display the inattentive and impulsive behaviors that have been found to disrupt social performance (Stormont, 2001).

An identification of collaborative learning conditions that will provide the greatest benefit to children with ADHD is important for at least two reasons. First, it is widely acknowledged that many children with ADHD experience difficulties in academic performance (Pffiffer & Barkley, 1998; Platzman et al., 1992 and social functioning (Johnston & Mash, 2001; Whalen & Henker, 1991). The most consistent finding is of mild impairments in executive functioning which embodies a range of higher order self-regulatory functions including inhibition, working memory, planning, self-monitoring, verbal self-regulation, motor control, maintaining and changing mental set, and emotional regulation (Jensen & Cooper, 2002). Impairments in motor response inhibition (inhibiting a prepotent response, stopping an ongoing response, planning) are most strongly associated with ADHD and considered a core deficit (Barkley, 1997). These impairments are evident on tasks that require fast and accurate processing of information and those that require an increased demand for slow and effortful processing (Van der Meere, 1996).

Social performance deficits in children with ADHD range from disruptive, intrusive and overtly domineering interaction patterns (Clark, Cheyne, Cunningham, & Siegel, 1988; Grenell, Glass, & Katz, 1987), to deficient conversational behaviors and reciprocity skills (Guevremont, 1990; Landau & Milich, 1988; Whalen, Henker, Collins, McAuliffe, & Vaux, 1979), to deficits in attention to relevant social cues (Milich & Dodge, 1984). Moreover, the extreme social difficulties of children with ADHD are related to deficits in performance or implementation of skills rather than social knowledge (Barkley, 1997). Therefore, children with ADHD who exhibit a social interactive style which often sanctions peer rejection, are likely to be ill-suited partners in collaborative learning settings.

Second, many children with ADHD are in classrooms where collaborative learning methods are frequently employed. However, there is little evidence that providing frequent opportunities to interact relates to their development of social and cognitive skills or the quality of their participation. The research on interactions in peer dyads with ADHD samples finds that children with ADHD do not necessarily demonstrate the attentiveness, task persistence, or the social exchange skills necessary to maintain productive social negotiation and communication with peer partners in collaborative contexts (Whalen et al., 1979). Indeed, social interaction can stimulate constructive cooperative activity between partners only in so far as the peer partners have attained a level of social competence sufficient to benefit from the interaction (Perret-Clerment, 1980).

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