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Revista de
LOGOPEDIA, FONIATRÍA y AUDIOLOGÍA

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ORIGINAL

Assessment of pragmatic language in verbal and nonverbal autistic children

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Received 30 May 2014; accepted 18 February 2015

Available online 8 May 2015

KEYWORDS

Autism;
Autism spectrum disorder;
Language;
Language tests;
Speech and language therapy

Abstract

Theoretical background: Language abnormalities in autism spectrum disorder show diversity in their interpretation as well as complexity regarding their evaluation processes. The contribution of the speech therapist in multidisciplinary diagnostic process emphasizes the need to assess the parameters of sociopragmatic nature.

Aim: To investigate the pragmatic language field of verbal and nonverbal autistic children.

Methods: Thirty-one children, between 3 and 7 years of age, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, had their pragmatic abilities assessed by the ABFW test (the language test for young children vocabulary).

Results: The total number of nonverbal autistic patients were 27 (87%). The communicative acts total in this sample was 2.4 per minute, and the communicative mean most commonly used by this autistic sample was the gestural mean. The communicative space occupied by children within the dyad was 47.7%. There was a statistically significant difference between the use of abilities that are categorized as interpersonal or non-interpersonal functions between verbal and nonverbal autistics. The comparison of each function between verbal and nonverbal patients showed statistically significant differences in the following functions: "Performative", "Comment", "Information request", "Naming" and "Permission request" for the group of verbal patients, and "Exploratory" and "Game" functions for the nonverbal group. Use of "Self-regulatory", "Exhibition", and "Social routine request" functions was not encountered in this sample.

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Conclusion: Although the verbal and nonverbal autistic children groups displayed discrepant communicative profiles, both groups showed a greater potential for pragmatic language in the setting of a naturalistic evaluation.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Autismo;
Trastorno del
espectro autista;
Lenguaje;
Exámenes
de lenguaje;
Logopedia y foniatria

Evaluación del lenguaje pragmático en niños autistas verbales y no verbales

Resumen

Bases teóricas: Las anomalías de lenguaje en Trastorno del Espectro Autista muestran la diversidad en su interpretación, así como la complejidad en relación con procesos de evaluación. La contribución del audiólogo en el proceso de diagnóstico multidisciplinario enfatiza la necesidad de evaluar los parámetros de la naturaleza sociopragmática.

Objetivo: Investigar la esfera de lenguaje pragmático de los niños autistas verbales y no verbales.

Métodos: Treinta y un niños diagnosticados con trastorno del espectro autista, entre 3 y 7 años de edad, tenían sus habilidades pragmáticas evaluadas por la prueba ABFW (La prueba de Lenguaje de vocabulario para niños pequeños).

Resultados: El número total de pacientes autistas no verbales fue de 27 (87%). El total de los actos comunicativos en esta muestra fue de 2,4 por minuto, y el medio de comunicación más utilizado por la muestra autista fue el medio gestual. El espacio comunicativo ocupado por los niños dentro de la diada fue 47,7%. Hubo una diferencia estadísticamente significativa entre el uso de las habilidades que se clasifican como funciones interpersonales o no interpersonales entre los autistas verbales y no verbales. La comparación de cada función entre pacientes verbales y no verbales mostró diferencias estadísticamente significativas en las siguientes funciones: "Performativa", "Comentario", "Pedido de información", "Denominación" y "Pedido de consentimiento" para el grupo de pacientes verbales, y las funciones "Exploratorio" y "Juego" para el grupo no verbal. No se encontró el uso de las funciones "Autorregulación", "Exposición" y "Pedido de rutina social" en esta muestra.

Conclusión: A pesar de que los grupos de niños autistas verbales y no verbales exhibieron per-

files de comunicación discordantes, ambos grupos mostraron un mayor potencial de lenguaje pragmático en el contexto de una evaluación naturalista.

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is primarily characterized by a derangement in reciprocal social communication and social interactions, diverse patterns of repetitive behaviors, and restricted activities. These symptoms appear early in childhood, with varying intensity, according to the cognitive development of the individual and his/her environment, which reinforces the dimensional aspect of autism, currently recognized as a spectrum (APA, 2013).

The increased prevalence of ASD in many countries, with reported rates varying from 60 to 147 per 10,000 (Autism & Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 2014; Fombonne, 2003), may be due to several factors, such as the changing of concepts, the markedly increased number of scientific publications addressing this relevant public health problem, and the greater awareness of diagnostic criteria by health professionals (Wing & Potter, 2002). One single Brazilian epidemiological study was ever published and reported a prevalence of 27.2/10,000, which is the lowest rate in the literature (Paula, Ribeiro, Fombonne, & Mercadante, 2011).

In the latest revision of the DSM-V diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder (APA, 2013), language and communication remain as critical skills in understanding the disorder. The proposed changes reinforce the importance of context on the impact of deficits in the social communication of these subjects (Milher & Fernandes, 2013; Mouzinho, 2011; Prelock & Nelson, 2012).

As far as language is concerned, assessment of a child's initial speech development as inadequate requires the knowledge of typical levels of language acquisition and its dimensions, in order to consider the differential diagnosis or comorbidity between ASD and hearing impairment, intellectual disability, specific language disorders, and so forth. The divergence between these entities is obvious due to the interface of functional language use and the distinction between (1) impairment of both verbal and nonverbal skills and (2) impairment of expressive communication through verbal language despite unimpaired abilities to express his/her own ideas and wishes of interactional engagement

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