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The role of executive functions and ICTs in anxiety management of children with ASD

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Abstract

The role of executive dysfunction in autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is critical for guiding diagnosis and intervention. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder defined by deficits in social communication and interaction and restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior. Evidence show that ICTs contribute to the reduction of stress in children with ASD because of their adaptive, playful and predictable digital environment. Mobile apps and robots have been found to work beneficially by helping with stressful situations.

Keywords: executive functions, ASD, autism, anxiety management, ICTs, mobile devices, mobile apps, robots

Introduction

The role of executive functions in anxiety management of children with ASD

EF refers to physical, cognitive, and emotional control and regulatory processes necessary to plan and maintain effective goal-directed behavior (Pennington & Ozonoff, 1996; Corbett et al., 2009). Executive functioning (EF) deficits are prevalent in children with ASD (Wang et al., 2017; Corbett, Constantine, Hendren, Roche, & Ozonoff, 2009). EF consist of a wide range of skills, including inhibition, mental flexibility, self-control, shifting of attention, initiation, impulsivity, working memory and planning (Garon et al., 2008; Gioia et al., 2002; McLean et al., 2014).

Moreover, EF deficits are related to developmental disorders, including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Intellectual Disability (Barkley & Murphy, 2011; Happé et al., 2006; Memisevic & Sinanovic, 2014).

In addition to social-communicative deficits and repetitive/restricted behaviors and interests, individuals with ASD often have executive functioning (EF) impairments (Hill, 2004).

EF have been found to relate to Theory of Mind (ToM) and emotion-recognition. Dorsolateral pre-frontal cortical regions include faculties of inhibition, planning, working memory, behavioral monitoring, and cognitive flexibility (Sivaratnama, C., L. Newmanb, C. , Rineharta, N., 2018). In particular, anxiety has been noted to have a strong association with poor EF performance in ASD populations. (Demetriou et al. ,2018).

Anxiety and behavioral disorders are among the most common psychiatric comorbidities in ASD (Simonoff et al., 2008). In ASD, anxiety was also shown to correlate with impaired performance on neuropsychological measures of inhibition, mental flexibility, and shifting (Demetriou, DeMayo, & Guastella, 2019). Previous studies of TD children and young adults have found strong associations between poor EF and externalizing and internalizing behaviors. Furthermore, several studies indicate that early EF difficulties predict later internalizing and externalizing problem behavior (Riggs et al., 2003; Martel et al., 2007), and social competence (Vogan et al., 2018).

Anxiety is one of the most common co-occurring disorder in individuals with ASD, with 40 % meeting criteria for at least one anxiety disorder (Van Steensel, Bögels, & de Bruin, 2012). According to a meta-analysis, people with ASD show more anxiety symptoms and have higher rates of anxiety disorders than their typically developing peers, suggesting a prevalence rate of ~40%. Furthermore, anxiety in ASD may be driven by difficulties in executive, top-down control of attention. In addition, the severity of anxiety symptoms in people with an ASD has been associated with the extent of both restricted interests and repetitive behaviors (Gotham et al., 2012; Rodgers, Glod, Connolly, & McConachie, 2012).

For instance, Toren et al. (2000) found that children with either overanxious disorder or separation anxiety performed more poorly on WCST, a test of executive functioning. Problems with verbal working memory have been identified in depression but not anxiety, and possible problems with attention and executive functioning have been found in those with OCD. Evidence suggests that social skill deficits and perhaps social cognitive deficits may relate to elevated symptoms of anxiety in individuals with ASD.

On the other hand, neuropsychological studies in people with anxiety disorder and/or depression indicate problems with attention and executive functioning compared with controls. (Hollocks, Jones, Pickles, Baird, Happé, Charman, & Simonoff, 2014). Executive functions play an important role in the mental health of young people with ASD, with reported prevalence rates as high as 84% for anxiety (White, Oswald, Ollendick, & Scahill, 2009) and 38% for depression (Magnuson & Constantino, 2011).

Also, increased EF deficits and greater levels of comorbid anxiety symptoms was found in a large group of adolescents with ASD. In this study, poorer performance on neuropsychological measures of inhibition, cognitive flexibility, and attentional shifting, specifically the Opposite Worlds Task and the

Trail Making Task was differentially associated with anxiety, but not depression. (Hollocks et al., 2014). Comorbid anxiety is associated with depression, self-injurious behavior, parental stress, interference with social interactions, and worsening of core symptoms of ASD (Dieckhaus, Hardy, Gutermuth, Verbalis, Kenworthy, & Pugliese, 2021).

Children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) present higher levels of co-occurring anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and intellectual disability than neurotypical children. For example, social skills interventions both improve social skills and reduce social anxiety due to practice or exposure. Anxiety is correlated with reduced EF in autism (Hollocks et al., 2014). Therefore, anxiety may directly affect negatively EF skills like attention, shifting, and working memory and potentially inhibit learning. (Edmunds et al., 2021).

The role of ICTs in anxiety management of children with ASD

Students with autism benefit from the use of ICTs, as they learn to manage the stress for inclusion into society, develop their reading and social skills, and help with their communication. (Ntalindwa, Soron, Nduwingoma, Karangwa, White, 2019). A virtual intervention program leads to improvements in emotion recognition (Papoutsis, Drigas & Skianis, 2021).

It is obvious that activities with social robots effect children positively and encourage them to interact freely, limiting any fear or anxiety in a safe environment (Bakola & Drigas, 2020).

Juan Pablo Hourcade et al. (2013) evaluated weather tablet apps can encourage social interaction in children with autism spectrum disorders. The set of apps - Drawing, Music, Untagle and Photogoo – which are all from Open Autism Software helped children with ASD associate social face-to-face interaction with playing. In fact, children expressed positive feelings when they initiated with tablets because they were not anxious. In particular, the apps have very simple user interfaces with little or no use of words to better appeal. Children can explore the apps, express themselves freely and also reduce anxiety.

Also, the HANDS project strives to develop a set of software components based on Persuasive Technology, which improve social skills and self management skills in order to reduce anxiety of children with ASD (Schärfe, Øhrstrøm & Gyori, 2009).

Research shows that the involvement of children with ASD with robots is accessible and attractive. It creates a predictable environment that allows the children to repeat, reducing the stress and emotional insecurity created by communication with humans. Due to their predictability, computers have a positive effect on reducing stress and self-stimulatory behaviors, improving their concentration and communication.

The applications of mobile digital technologies and tablets contribute to the development and adaptability of people with ASD. In this way, they observe, control, regulate their behavior, and reduce their stress.

Mobile applications can be one of the most satisfying forms of intervention, as they improve communication, language, emotional, and social skills and enrich vocabulary. Furthermore, mobile phones are an attractive learning tool, as they have applications with animation, video, and graphics that entice the interest of children with ASD. Robotics is proven particularly effective in the cognitive, social, and emotional education of children with autism, as they reduce stress by creating a visually appealing, stable, and predictable learning environment.

The use of robots in the learning process seems to alleviate the cognitive and sensory deficits of children with ASD. At the same time, children, through their involvement with robots, develop social-emotional skills such as self-regulation, attention control, and, consequently, consciousness, which are really important for their self-image. (Bamicha & Drigas, 2022). In addition, another study introduced the ParentGuardian application, which provides behavioral strategies for parents of children with ADHD to support them in managing stressful situations. The ParentGuardian system uses changes in skin conductivity by an electro-dermal activity bracelet, to calculate a parent's stress level. When a high level is detected, the application sends a reminder of the use of control strategies to the parent's device. (Anagnostopoulou et al., 2020).

The Mind Reading program aims to identify emotions in people with high-functioning autism. Therefore, these programs seem to help children with autism to improve the recognition of their emotions and develop new skills in a more accurate, interesting and effective way (Vakola, Rizos, & Drigas, 2019).

Moreover, a study in 170 children using the Kaspar robot in children with ASD. From the children's interaction with the robot helped them to develop communication skills and recognition of their emotions as well as to better harmonize with the environment (Zorcec, Robins, & Dautenhahn, 2018).

Discussion

It is a fact that new technologies contribute to the development of the emotional intelligence of children with ASD, as well as the function of cognition. They also contribute to the rise of the knowledge-consciousness pyramid which refers to working memory, personal abilities and self-realization.

Also, it is important to create applications that will focus on making people with autism aware of their emotions and their body language in order to develop their emotional intelligence and cultivate their social interaction.

Thus, teachers and counselors can play a major role in identifying and minimizing stressors before any medication intervention implemented. It is currently impossible to subscribe anti-anxiety medication to children in autism spectrum disorder. In fact, natural products can be used as supplements to improve behavior. (Sideraki, & Maradou, Papageorgiou, Tsiava, & Drigas, 2022).

Conclusion

Concluding we underline the importance of the digital technologies in education domain and anxiety management which are very productive and successful, facilitates and improves the assessment, the intervention and the educational procedures via Mobiles which brings educational activities everywhere [40-57], various ICTs applications which are the core supporters of education [58-114], AI, STEM & ROBOTICS which raise educational procedures into new levers of performance [115-132], and games which transforms the education in a very friendly and enjoyable interaction [133-150]. Additionally the enhancement and combination of ICTs with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation and emotional intelligence cultivation [151-223] as well as with environmental factors and nutrition [34-39], accelerates and improves more over the educational practices and results, especially in the anxiety management domain and its practices like assessment and intervention, both in general and special education.

More specifically developmental differences in comparison with typically developing children are evident in the domain of executive functions (Girault & Piven, 2020). Knowing what developmental areas need additional professional attention and support may help in creating more efficient individualized support programs for children with ASD. (Memisevic & Pasalic, 2021). In conclusion, ICTs are very appealing to children with ASD, who prefer playing with a portable device. In fact, predicted responses from a mobile device do not cause anxiety to these children. On the contrary, children with ASD adopt a gamesome attitude and feel more secure in their daily environment. (Ntalindwa et al., 2019).

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