

Introducing the AIM curriculum to support social-emotional development in individuals with autism

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Executive summary

This case study outlines the Accept, Identify, Move (AIM) curriculum and discusses its introduction for a Key Stage Two pupil. The AIM curriculum promotes social-emotional development in children and is based on theories of mindfulness, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA). This curriculum is in the first stages of implementation in our setting and as such results are not yet definitive. It is however a promising curriculum that has the potential to be incredibly beneficial to those pupils who have the pre-requisite skills to access it.

Introduction

Behaviour analysts are well versed in assessing the function of different behaviours and implementing behaviour plans based on these functions. This becomes increasingly complex when behaviours are affected by factors outside of the immediate environment. There may be a complex learning history, or behaviour may be affected by a range of setting events leading an individual to have difficulties regulating their emotions in day-to-day situations. This case study reviews the AIM curriculum (Dixon & Paliliunas, 2018) and how it is currently being implemented in our setting. Elements of this program are quite conceptual and as such pre-requisite skills must be considered. The AIM curriculum itself states it is suitable for individuals who can make derived relations and for those that have tendency to focus or fixate on the past or future.

Implementation has begun for one pupil in Key Stage Two. They are vocal and able to learn a range of new skills in group settings. The aim is for this pupil to transition to a less intensive setting in the near future. The functions of behaviour that can be challenging are generally escape from difficult demands and access to preferred

items. When this occurs, they tend to engage in repetitive conversation about the situation whilst becoming increasingly upset (tearful, shouting).

Method

AIM combines three evidence-based practices of intervention: mindfulness, ABA and ACT. It focuses on the development of three key areas, firstly the individual needs to learn to accept current circumstances as they are. Secondly, they must identify what is important to them. Finally, they need to engage in the action required to contact the experiences and rewards that realise those things that are important to them.

If the AIM curriculum is implemented in full this includes mindful practices, daily ACT lessons, an AIM point system, functional reinforcement and ongoing progress monitoring. Each of these elements are briefly described below.

Mindful practices: Ideally these should be integrated throughout the day in a multitude of ways. AIM provides simple mindful activities which include bringing awareness to thoughts and to the physical body.

ACT lessons: These encourage engagement with the Hexaflex - a core feature of ACT. The Hexaflex consists of six areas which when developed increase psychological flexibility. This also focuses on bringing language linked to the Hexaflex into everyday life.

AIM point system: Includes delivering and removing points based on behaviour. This is split into classroom behaviour and ACT behaviour so reinforcement can be attached both to the behaviour and the areas of the Hexaflex. Using this point system creates frequent opportunities for reinforcement and feedback as well as supporting progress monitoring.

Functional reinforcement: Functional reinforcement linked to the point system must be set up. Create a point store which covers all functions of behaviour from which the pupil can then cash in points to buy from the store. The goal is to link the concepts in ACT to behaviour in real life, and to reward when the concept and behaviour aligns.

Progress monitoring: It is recommended that data taken and monitored includes percentage of points earned per week, frequency of events including behaviour that can be challenging and frequency by antecedent.

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Results

Currently the AIM curriculum is in the first stages of implementation and has been in place for six weeks. Although in the initial stages of implementation the pupil has begun to make progress as shown through the percentage of tokens earned weekly in Figure 1.

The graph demonstrates an increasing trend overall, which suggests the pupil is earning a higher percentage of possible tokens each week over time. This is a positive start to the program. Along with this quantitative data it is important in a program such as this to consider qualitative reports too. Although the pupil engages well with the points system, the engagement with the mindfulness sessions and ACT lessons has been variable. This is in part because the concepts within these can be challenging for the pupil. For example, they are not yet able to engage with the concept of a thought, or to differentiate from past, present, future. When the concepts are difficult, they are more likely to stop engaging with the activity. These are areas which can be worked on further and may develop along with the implementation of the program. This also presents a challenge for us in adapting the way we are introducing these concepts to make them as interesting and as accessible as possible.

Alongside this it should be noted that although the initial plan was full implementation, this has been less consistent than is ideal due to some logistical issues. The first of these was that as it is a new program the class Supervisor has been leading on mindfulness and ACT sessions which should be run daily. Whilst this has been good in terms of becoming familiar with the active running of the sessions, in a setting with many pupils that require high levels of support it has been difficult to ensure it is run daily.

To improve the consistency of implementation there are some recommendations to be made. It is suggested that the Class Supervisor run training sessions with all tutors in the class, with a view for them to lead on ACT and mindfulness sessions. This would increase the possibility of being implemented daily which

will encourage greater exposure to the principles of AIM and the potential for the pupil to make faster progress in developing social-emotional regulation skills.

Progress with a curriculum such as this may take a little time, as the concepts involved are challenging and will often be working on skills that may have a complex learning history. Despite some of the challenges found along the way, the early signs are that this curriculum is having a positive impact on the pupil it has been implemented with so far.

Discussion

It has been interesting beginning the implementation of a program such as this, which brings elements of mindfulness and ACT into the classroom. The potential for this to bridge the gap that can occur between dealing with emotions and behaviour. Although implementation is in the initial stages currently there are positive signs of engagement from the pupil. As mentioned above there are considerations for further implementation. This includes working with the whole class on 'buying in' to the ACT approach in order to surround the pupil with a consistent approach and enabling them to lead on mindfulness and ACT sessions.

References

Dixon, M., Paliliunas, D (2018) Accept, Identify, Move: A Behavior Analytic Curriculum for Social-Emotional Development in Children. Illinois: Shawnee Scientific Press

Figure 1

