

Looking at the impact of attending BeyondAutism's Early Years' Service on the confidence, resilience, and overall outlook of a parent

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Executive summary

This case study will look at one family who have attended BeyondAutism Early Years' Service between January 2020 and present. Whilst the child has made significant progress within the areas of communication, behaviour, play skills and social skills; this case study will look specifically at the impact on the mother, and how attending sessions has increased her confidence, resilience, and outlook on life. The case study compiles self-reported data taken by the mother each session, end of term questionnaire data, and quotes from the mother shared via email. The case study shows that for this family attending BeyondAutism Early Years' Service had a positive impact on more than just the child.

Introduction

Typically, ABA programmes are focussed around the child or person with autism, and whilst parent training may be a feature, it is not the core feature. At BeyondAutism Early Years' Service our focus is on empowering the parents to build skills, knowledge and confidence to support their children in developing communication and language, and to better understand and respond to their child's behaviours that challenge and learning needs. Each family has an individualised programme tailored to their needs and beginning from their own starting point, with specific targets for both the parents and the child. Additionally, parents attend group training and discussion sessions focussed on common topics of interest, including behaviour, communication, and mental health.

There is an abundance of research which highlights the importance of incorporating parent training within ABA programmes (Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2006) and involving

parents with the implementation of the programme is longstanding within the field (Schopler & Reichler, 1971). In addition to benefiting the progress of the child, parent training has also been shown to be beneficial for parents in increasing their skills and confidence (McConachie & Diggle, 2007), reducing their stress levels (Koegel, Bimbela, & Schreibman, 1996) and increasing their optimism about their ability to influence their child's development (Koegel et al, 1982). Group sessions have also been shown to facilitate mutual support between families (Baxendale, Frankham & Hesketh, 2001; Symon, 2001).

This case study will look at the impact of attending BeyondAutism Early Years setting on one parent: focussing on their confidence, resilience and outlook on life.

Method

The family in question started at BeyondAutism in January 2020 when the child was 2 years old. He predominantly attended the sessions with his mother, however occasionally his father would attend in place or in addition to her. They attended two 2.5-hour sessions per week (including a 30-minute parent discussion session) between January and March 2020 when the sessions were put on hold due to the coronavirus pandemic. During this time the family received the child's current targets to work on at home, in addition to weekly activity sheets which included activities to develop language and communication, and tips for the parents. Parents were also invited to two virtual parent discussion sessions and had the opportunity to keep in touch via email. Sessions were suspended between March and September 2020, when the family returned to the service.

Between September and November 2020, the family attended one 2.5-hour session per week (including a 30-minute group parent session), and additionally had the option to attend one virtual parent discussion session per week. In November 2020 the introduction of a national lockdown meant that group sessions had to cease, however 1:1 sessions and virtual parent sessions were still able to continue. Between November 2020 and March 2021, the family continued to attend one 50-minute 1:1 session per week.

In March 2021 group sessions resumed and the family currently attend one 2.25-hour session per week, which includes a 30-minute parent discussion session. These

sessions will continue until May 2021 when the family will exit the service.

Throughout the time at the service there have been 21 individualised targets in place for both the child and the parents, focussing roughly within 6 main areas of need – communication, behaviour, group, play skills, social skills and eating. Targets have been adapted over time due to mastery, changing needs and the emergence of new areas of priority. The mother has also attended group discussion sessions on 11 different topics, including sensory behaviours, mental health and routines/repetitive behaviours. During these sessions' parents receive theoretical training material on the topic and are additionally asked to share stories and ideas with other parents.

At the end of each session the child's progress on the target is recorded, and parents complete a self-reported rating of how confident they felt with their targets, rating themselves between 1 (not at all confident) and 5 (extremely confident). This self-report confidence rating will be included in the analysis.

Additionally, at the end of each term parents complete a questionnaire containing 13-17 questions assessing a range of areas surrounding child progress and parental skill, confidence, and resilience. The 5 parent-focussed questions will also be included within the analysis. These include questions surrounding the mother's confidence in managing behaviour that challenges, her understanding of her child's behaviour, her knowledge and understanding of the principles of ABA, and her resilience and ability to respond to her child's needs and behaviour using a positive approach. These questions involve a Likert scale style of reporting where the parents are asked to rate between 1 (deteriorated considerably) and 5 (improved considerably).

Finally, the mother was asked to contribute towards a piece describing her journey with BeyondAutism for Autism Awareness Week. Excerpts from this piece will also be referred to and included as qualitative data in the analysis.

Results

Looking at the self-reported confidence ratings, the mother's lowest reported confidence score was 1, and highest reported confidence score was 5. Figure 1 shows the average confidence ratings in her first half term at the service compared with her most recent half term at the service. You can see that her average confidence has increased from 2.89 to 3.46, showing an overall positive trend. The mother's confidence in running the targets has increased, and whilst the increase is not considerable, it must be reflected that the targets have changed and adapted 21 times and therefore some sessions

she will have been rating her confidence on new targets.

Figure 2 shows the mother's distribution of answers in the questionnaire from March 2021. You can see that for 3 of the areas she selected a rating of 'improved considerably' and 2 of the areas she selected 'improved somewhat', showing an overall positive trend in her perceived confidence, resilience and understanding. The most considerable improvements can be seen within her confidence in managing her child's behaviours that challenge, her understanding of her child's behaviour, and her knowledge and understanding of ABA. Some improvement has been indicated in her confidence in engaging her child in play and her resilience and ability to respond to her child's needs.

Analysing her input to Autism Awareness Week, the following quotes are pertinent. She described her mental state when joining Early Years as "perhaps the most difficult time in my life. I was overwhelmed, often exhausted and even felt lonely". She described being "nervous at the beginning" however that attending the sessions "gave me a huge relief and I felt much better". She described working on the targets as "it was almost like magic, but from then on with some practice, I slowly regained my confidence and strength."

She goes on to say that "Early Years isn't only about teaching children the life skills they need. The team gives opportunities to parents to learn more about Autism, strategies, the support network available, and we talk to each other and share our experiences.". She describes her experience at BeyondAutism as "so precious and empowering" and comments that "now we are both happier in our everyday life." She reflects that "of course, our journey isn't over yet. But I have more confidence, strength and faith in our future."

Her quotes highlight the changed attitude and new sense of positivity from attending the Early Years' Service. She discusses changing from being overwhelmed and

exhausted, to having confidence, strength, and faith in their future.

Due to Covid-19 the family's time at BeyondAutism Early Years has been disrupted, and it is presumed that this has had an impact on their experience. Nevertheless, despite these disruptions there is still an overwhelmingly positive impact on the mother's life observed. Connecting with others has been identified as a strategy to support mental health and wellbeing (Campion, Bhui & Bhugra, 2012), and identified by approximately 50% of people a valuable way of coping with stress during the pandemic (Mental Health Foundation, 2020). It is therefore wondered whether the connections with others created at BeyondAutism Early Years have contributed towards the positive experience despite the pandemic.

Discussion

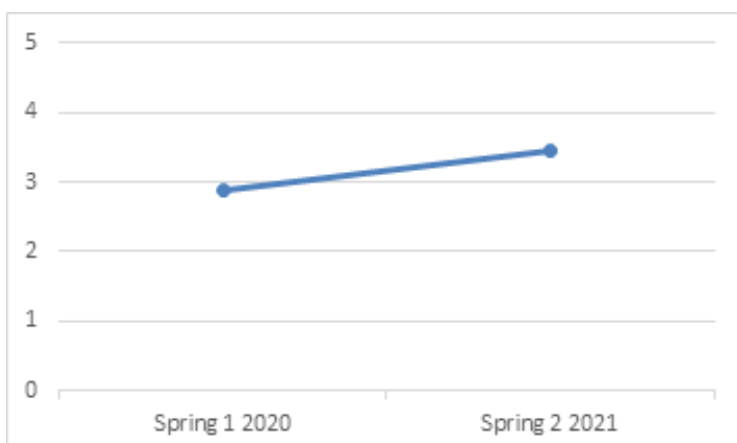
The Sundberg et al., (2002) study exemplify the importance of motivation when teaching mands for information. Motivation makes the information valuable and it relies on reinforcers to establish the correct response form. Sundberg et al. (2002), continue to explain, motivation is a key factor to teach mands for information and it is important to maintain and generalise this skill. As a result of continuously using a variety of reinforcers and confirming the motivation throughout the intervention, aids the pupil's success with acquiring the skill to mand for "when?"

This intervention has demonstrated and assisted the pupils with an increase in communication skills. To conclude, this intervention demonstrated its strengths by achieving positive outcomes with teaching both pupils with autism to acquire the skills to mand for information. Nonetheless, it would be beneficial to investigate and demonstrate the percentage of correct responses when the mands are taught in discrimination in natural settings.

References

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Figure 1: Line graph showing an increase in the average self-reported confidence rating by the mother in her first and most recent term at BeyondAutism.



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Figure 2: A bar chart showing the distribution of the mother's answers on a questionnaire in March 2021.

