



Queensmill School

Research & Development Newsletter

Welcome & Update from the R&D board

UPDATE FROM THE BOARD

Welcome to the Christmas edition of the Queensmill R&D newsletter. There have been lots of new developments since the summer edition. We are very pleased to introduce our research assistant Max who started with us last year but is now based at Queensmill full-time. This new appointment ensures that we can invest additional time and resources into using research to inform our practice within the school. In January, we are due to start a research project looking at how we can support families of students who have sleep difficulties. The research is



focused on children aged 8 years and under and will involve some workshops for parents then formulation of an individualised sleep plan which parents will implement supported by our Occupational Therapists and Family Support Worker. Letters have been sent out inviting parents to take part. This term we piloted a new six week training programme for parents. This was introduced with a small group of parents of Queensmill students

with weekly sessions focused on topics such as diagnosis, communication, sensory issues and behaviour management. The parent feedback and evaluations from the course will be used to influence how this training is run for other parents in the future. Please contact the school if you would like to hear more about the parent training programmes that we offer.

Queensmill School are members of an alliance of around 30 different schools in West London (West London Teaching Schools Alliance or WLTA). Representatives from each of these schools meet regularly to share good practice and support each other. Because of our excellent reputation in research and development, Queensmill School has been asked to lead the alliance in this area. This will be an excellent opportunity for us to work alongside other schools and collaborate on research in schools, focusing on issues that are important to our practice.

**Enjoy the newsletter & Merry Christmas
from the R&D board!**

'Choosing Autism Interventions: A Research Based Guide' by Research Autism and Autism West Midlands

Research Autism and Autism West Midlands have recently published a book entitled 'Choosing Autism Interventions: A Research Based Guide'. The book provides a very helpful overview for professionals and parents as to what to consider when thinking of starting an autism intervention. The authors present key questions they ask readers to consider which come under the headings of:

- Background
- Philosophy and aims
- Key features
- Evidence
- Participants
- Supply and availability
- Training
- Equipment and materials
- Time
- Costs
- Risks and safety
- Staffing
- Regulation and Complaints
- Evaluation

The authors also point to 'Red Flags' - signs that an intervention may not be what it seems. Some of these include; celebrity endorsement, use of words such as 'miracle', 'cure' and 'recovery' and claims of high success rates and quick results.

Autism Research Digest: Communication

Long-term effects of PECS on social-communicative skills of children with autism spectrum disorder: a follow-up study (Lerna et al. 2013)

The Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is a popular communication system often used with 'nonverbal' children with autism to teach communication by exchanging pictures. Although several studies suggest that PECS is an effective tool for the improvement of social communication skills, the long term effectiveness of this treatment system is relatively unknown.

This study investigated the long-term effectiveness of PECS's training on the social communication skills of children with autism spectrum disorders, by assessing children both in structured and unstructured settings one year after they had started using PECS. Two groups of 14 children were assessed; one group had completed PECS training while the other conventional language therapy (CLT). In the follow-up session, all children received the same pre and post-treatment assessments.

The findings showed that PECS training can promote long-term enhancement of specific social communication skills in children with autism. Analysis of social communication measures revealed that those who received PECS training demonstrated more joint attention (the ability to share attention with another towards the same object or event) and more co-operative play (where children play together and interact with each other while playing) than children in the CLT group. However, due to the small scale, the findings of this study cannot be generalised.



MUSIC THERAPY

The target for recruitment of children to this international study has now been surpassed and so no new students will be involved in this project and the trial will be ending. The therapists who have been involved with the project (The Music Therapy Team at Cheyne Child Development Service and Chelsea and Westminster Hospital) would very much like to thank all of the parents, students and the team at Queensmill who have been involved with supporting the research. The team have said they really enjoyed the experience of working in partnership with Queensmill and have learnt a great deal from our work. We have asked the team to come into Queensmill to provide feedback to staff and parents about their findings. This will be arranged in the new year and we will send out details to all those involved. We will also provide a written summary of research findings to be shared within a future edition of the newsletter.



Autistic Children at risk of being underestimated: school-based pilot study of a strength-informed assessment (Courchesne, 2015)

A minority of school-aged autistic children display little or no spoken language. There is a significant risk that these children will be judged as 'low-functioning' or 'untestable' according to conventional cognitive assessments. The present study used knowledge of autistic cognitive strengths to conduct a strength-informed assessment of autistic children, whose performance on conventional tests suggests their cognitive potential is limited. Thirty children aged 6 to 12, with little or no spoken-language were assessed using the traditional Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-IV) and strength-informed tests; Raven's Colored Progressive Matrices board for (RCPM), Children's Embedded Figures Test (CEFT) and a visual search. None of the autistic children could complete the traditional WISC-IV, while in contrast, the majority performed well on the strength-informed tasks. Results indicated that 'non-verbal' or 'minimally verbal' children, may be wrongly viewed as having limited cognitive potential and are at risk of being underestimated via conventional cognitive practices. The results support the usefulness of using strength-informed approaches to autism and its potential implications in assessment. Due to the small scale, the findings of this study cannot be generalised, however the findings help to highlight the cognitive potential of some non-verbal children with Autism that may be overlooked. Here at Queensmill, we recognise that many of our non-verbal students demonstrate strengths in other areas and we ensure that learning activities are presented in the most appropriate way to meet their needs.

Autism Research Digest: Communication



Sensory experiences of children with autism spectrum disorder: In their own word (Kirby, Dickie & Baranek, 2015)

Children diagnosed with autism often have distinctive sensory experiences, such as being over sensitive to noise. However, much of what we know about these experiences comes from the testimony of parents, researchers and clinicians. This study is one of the first reports of autistic children's sensory experiences, based on children's own accounts.

Twelve autistic children aged 4 to 13 were interviewed in their homes. The children's autism varied in severity, but they were all capable of participating in verbal interviews. The researchers used a range of techniques to facilitate the interviews, such as playing family video clips of the children to prompt discussion of specific episodes.

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three key themes. First of these - 'normalising' – showed how the children considered many of their experiences to be just like other people's, rejecting the notion that there was something distinct or odd about their behaviour. Another theme was the methods children used to recount their experiences. Children used anecdotes, demonstrated by imitating noises or mimicking facial reactions such as disgust, repeating inner speech and in two cases using similes. One child likened eating spinach to eating grass, showing a sort of perspective-taking not expected in children with autism. The final theme was the way children talked about their sensory experiences in terms of their responses to various situations and stimuli. Children spoke of their coping strategies; including covering their ears and watching sport on TV instead of live. They also told interviewers about their uncontrollable physical reactions, such as to the pain of loud noises. One little boy described his reaction to loud music - "it feels like my heart is beating, and um, my, uh, my whole body's shaking."

The study is only on a small scale so results cannot be generalised. However, the research provides a rare insight into autistic children's own perspective on their sensory worlds.

FOOD RESEARCH

We recently sent out a survey to all parents asking for information on the frequency that different foods are eaten. A similar survey has also been completed with staff relating to the foods that students eat in school. Thank you to all those who have completed these surveys for us. The information from these, in addition to some interviews and focus groups with students, will be used to inform a training session for both staff and parents. The aim of the training session will be to help us to understand the sensory difficulties that many children with Autism experience at mealtimes.

Fostering social engagement in Romanian children with communicative impairments: the experiences of newly trained practitioners of Intensive Interaction (Zeedyl et al. 2009)

This study highlights the benefits of using the technique 'intensive interaction' to make connections with children who are socially withdrawn due to communicative impairments. The approach of intensive interaction focuses on interacting with a person by using their own sounds and movements. The aim of the technique is to respond to, rather than imitate the child's interests, concerns, and behaviors so the child comes to recognize the actions as a response and not just an imitation. It is described as 'learning to speak the others language'.

The present study focused on the accounts of 12 volunteers who used the technique working with abandoned, special needs children living in state care in Romania. The volunteers revealed that they could identify improvements in the children's communicative abilities, once they began to use Intensive Interaction, after just one hour of training. They found that the children looked at them more often, were calmer and more likely to turn the interactions into games. The volunteers also felt closer to the children. The results are encouraging as they suggest that people can be trained in the basics of intensive interaction quickly and at a low cost, enabling them to reach the children who often have trouble connecting to people. Intensive interaction is commonly used with children with Autism and is an approach Queensmill staff incorporate into their practice.

