

## **The Development of Communication Skills Through the Use of Intensive Interaction.**

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A personal journey with a young boy with autism and accompanying learning difficulties. My first term's work.

As a teacher, there is always one child you worry about, the one who is not progressing the way you would have hoped, even with the use of varying types of interventions and programmes. Well within my autistic specific class, this is 'John'. He is a ten year old boy with moderate/severe autism with accompanying learning difficulties of a similar level. 'John' is non-verbal and uses basic objects of reference as a communication system. I have been teaching John for the past three years and in this time period his progress has been very limited. I was particularly concerned about his communication skills. John would rarely interact with an adult; eye-contact would be inconsistent and John showed no great engagement or interest within any activity.

My own background is based within mainstream education in the UK, where I taught within an infant school in London for five and a half years. I also worked as a music teacher within this time period. Coming to Ireland in 2001 and having no autism knowledge or training really put me in the firing line, as it were, with a class of four children with quite complex and varying needs. Numerous training courses were then offered to me, involving, amongst others, PECS (Bondy et al 2002) and TEACCH (Mesibov 1998). These were all beneficial for increasing my knowledge as well as helping me understand the children who were in my care. But a light from the end of a very long tunnel could be seen, when in 2003, I gained a place on a distance education course in autism run by St Patrick's College, Dublin. In 2004, I extended my studies, via the University of Birmingham, to a Masters in autism. I am now in the final year of my dissertation and what follows highlights some of the findings I have had whilst working with John.

I started my dissertation and research with John in October 2006, using the intervention strategy known as Intensive Interaction. The premise of this programme generally begins with the adult picking up on a behaviour a child starts to do in a session and the adult then follows this behaviour. It is said that the child is learning to communicate through his/her own behaviour. The process is continued and each behaviour repeated. If the child shows a different behaviour or sound this is also repeated. The adult responses will help to develop a type of turn-taking experience between the teacher and the child. (Nind and Hewett 2005, and Caldwell 2006). The adult is working *with* the behaviour of the child. Caldwell 2006 gives an excellent quote which sums up this practice, which I actually have up outside my classroom. I feel this quote encapsulates the teaching of children with autism and is how I see my work progressing with John, through the use of Intensive Interaction.

"If I have autism and severe learning difficulties, then my inner world objects and behaviours, which have significance for me clearly, do not resonate in the same way for you

who live in the outer world. You see the objects I treasure as a barrier to be dismantled. My sounds and movements are ignored. My fixations are discouraged. What are known as self stimulatory objects such as a piece of paper to flap, are taken away from me with the intention of forcing me to attend.... If you want to communicate with me it has to be worth my while because all that I have learned so far is that if I make a signal, I do not get an answer that is meaningful for me. I need to know that if I send a message you will respond in 'my language' (P100)

The sessions lasted from four minutes to 20 minutes, depending on John's level of interaction and interest on that day. Each session started and ended the same, to give John some familiarity and structure. I chose to use music to enhance this practice as this is the one media that John shows reaction to as well as enjoyment; moving and swaying to music he hears. I also incorporated a peanut roll, (physiotherapy ball), into the sessions as John also likes to bounce. These sessions were carried out in a small room which was very bare, with just a few bean bags and musical instruments scattered around and involved just myself and John.

So the scene is set. The first few sessions involved a 'hello song' for John to listen to whilst he sat bouncing on his peanut roll. I then had a tambourine at hand and started to tap it near him. John started to tap the tambourine with me; a great turn taking game then took place. John's eye contact was constant and also included lots of smiles. What followed was a great repetition and turn taking scenario. John would make sounds and I would copy them musically, with my voice, and then with the tambourine. When John started to explore the room and move around, spinning and jumping, as would be his usual behaviour, I copied these movements with a similar simple rhythm on the keyboard. John would look up at me when he heard the music, continuing with his movements. I then drew the sessions to a close by redirecting John to the peanut roll and singing a 'goodbye song'. Throughout the turn taking games as well as the introduction and end songs, John kept great eye contact, lasting from one second to 30 seconds.

I carried out one session per day and videoed a few sessions for my own professional viewing as well as for his mother, to see how well he was interacting in these lessons. I made daily written observations of the lessons in order to reflect on my own practice and to document on how John's interactions were developing.

As the lessons developed over the next few months the sessions changed form; the introduction and end songs plus peanut roll remained the same, however, our turn taking involved peek-a-boo as well as tickling games. John started to become more vocal and I would then copy these vocalizations, to which John would then make more in response, and then this would escalate. John would put his hands out to me; make sounds and smile, intentionally looking for more responses from me. These types of interactions took place for the next month.

But what effects were these sessions making to John within class and at home? All staff within class started to notice that John was far happier; smiling, sound-making and eye-contact were all more evident. His mum and bus escort both reported more sounds, eye-contact and purposeful interaction; tapping, going over to an adult, smiling and much more

general contentment. Even the school's speech and language therapist had seen more purposeful communicative behaviours from John since starting the programme.

As you can imagine, the delight in seeing John 'come alive' was heartwarming.

And as if this wasn't progress enough, on more than half a dozen separate occasions when John was either with myself in the Intensive Interaction sessions, bouncing up and down on the peanut roll, or playing independently, he started making sounds with a distinctive resonance and meaning whilst moving up and down, which sounds like 'upa, upa, upa'. This, coming from a boy, who, for the past 10 years of his life had made no real intentional or meaningful sound. By the end of December he even made a 'roar' sound 'rrrrrr', when in the school's snoezelen, multi-sensory room, whilst looking at one of his classmates.

In conclusion, John seems to be making huge strides personally. Eye contact as well as meaningful vocalisations have developed as well as his purposeful interaction with adults. Would John have achieved such progress without such a programme of Intensive Interaction? This will be a question for my final dissertation to answer but I believe no. Through the work carried out with John previously and his level of ability, this amount of progress could not have been made without this programme. However, I will just have to wait and see how far the use of Intensive Interaction will take John.

My research is far from over. The first three months have been a real boost and eye opener for me as well as hopefully opening up a more communicatively responsive and meaningful world for John. I can't wait to see what will happen next. I don't expect miracles, nor can any person working with a child with autism and neither does the premise of Intensive Interaction promise this, but if it helps John in any way, it definitely will be of great benefit. It certainly seems positive so far. Fingers crossed for 2007!!!

The real name of the child at the centre of this research has not been used due to ethical reasons.

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