

"Spontaneous peer conversation in preschoolers with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder versus typical development"

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In typical development, early peer talk is crucial for pragmatic development. The pragmatic deficit, reflected in remarkably deficient conversational capabilities, is considered the hallmark of the language deficit in autism spectrum disorder (ASD); yet, spontaneous peer talk in preschoolers with ASD was rarely explored.

We conducted comparative assessment of spontaneous peer talk during 10-min free-play scenarios in preschoolers with high-functioning ASD (HFASD; n = 27) versus those with typical development (n = 30). Groups were matched on SES, verbal/nonverbal MA, IQ, and CA. Correlations with CA, IQ, VMA, and NVMA were examined. We compared the two groups' interactions with a friend-partner versus a nonfriend partner; in addition, in the HFASD group, we examined interactions with a typical partner (mixed dyads) versus a partner with HFASD (nonmixed dyads). Children's conversations were videotaped and coded to tap pragmatic capabilities and conversational quality.

Findings revealed group differences in pragmatic abilities and conversational quality, with the typical group showing more intact capacities than the HFASD group. However, in the HFASD group, interactions with friends surpassed interactions with nonfriends on several key pragmatic capabilities and on all conversational quality measures (meshing, assertiveness, and responsiveness), thus suggesting that friendship may enable children to converse in a more socially complex and coregulated way. Also, children with higher cognitive capabilities, especially in the HFASD group, demonstrated more intact pragmatic capacities.

Despite the robust pragmatic deficit in HFASD, reflected in conversational capabilities, involvement in friendship relationships and high cognitive capabilities were linked to more intact pragmatic capacities. Theoretical and therapeutic implications are discussed.

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