

## **Helping children with autism transfer new communication skills from home to school**

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A new study is testing whether an intervention with parents and teachers can help children with autism transfer newly acquired social communication skills from home into school.

Previous research found that a therapy to enhance parent-child communication in children with autism can help improve their social communication. However, it did not provide evidence that the benefit spread wider into the school environment. Children with autism generally have difficulty generalising new skills from one context to another, and this represents a challenge in spreading the benefits of therapy into other aspects of everyday life and development. Autism is a common developmental disorder, with a prevalence of around 1% of the population. Its estimated UK costs, for childhood autism, are greater than the costs associated with other conditions such as childhood asthma, diabetes or intellectual disability.

The 'Paediatric Autism Communication Trial-Generalised' (PACT-G) study, funded by Efficacy and Mechanism Evaluation Programme (a partnership between the MRC and NIHR), will test new ways to transfer the child's improving communication skills into the education setting. Aimed at 2-11 year olds, the study will look to extend the parent-child therapeutic model to work in education in parallel to working in the home. It will assess the impact of the intervention across pre-school and middle childhood and compare outcomes with those from previous research. Its design will also enable the researchers to study the mechanism behind this transfer of skills across different settings, and highlight the most efficient means of helping children and families in this area.

University of Manchester Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Jonathan Green is leading the project and said, "This project is an exciting opportunity for us to test an extension of our approach using video feedback with parents of young children with autism to include similar training of professionals working with the children in their education setting. If this kind of integrated approach proves to add value for children's development, then it will have important implications for service delivery in the future. The trial also gives us a unique opportunity to investigate how these children generalise skills across contexts – an important and fundamental question in the developmental science of autism".

The research team will work with school staff using the same techniques they use with parents, as well as encouraging parents and Learning Support Assistants to communicate regularly together about goals and strategies. The aim is to generate a similar change in school to that generated with parents in the home.

Professor Green added, "We hope that these two effects will add together into a greater combined benefit for the child. This study is just beginning and we won't

know the results for a few years, but it is part of an ongoing programme to look at the needs of children with autism at different ages and to see if we can get interventions that build on each other through development to improve the lives of these children and their families”.

One parent taking part in the study said “I realise the importance of understanding what he understands and making my communication directly relevant to the context of the interaction. It’s a real partnership where we discuss the meaning of his communication and I always go away understanding him so much better with insight.”

The study is a collaboration between Central Manchester University Foundation NHS Trust, University of Manchester, Newcastle University, Kings College London, Guy’s and St Thomas NHS Trust Evelina Children’s Hospital.