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Background

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a “neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by impairments in verbal and nonverbal communication as well as restricted and repetitive interests or behaviors” (Park, 2014 p. 122). Impairments with nonverbal communication include difficulties with implementing conversational rules and interpreting facial expressions and body language (Hampton, et al., 2017). Typically, verbal communication does not appear in children with ASD until 15-to-18 months, with some children remaining nonverbal until adolescence, adulthood, or beyond (Hampton et al., 2017). For children who eventually do acquire verbal communication, the onset is characterized by a few, age appropriate words followed by a failure of developing more oral language (Park, 2014). With respect to children with ASD who are verbal, delays in receptive language may be present (Hampton et al., 2017).

ASD is a common neurodevelopmental disorder among children, with 1 in 68 children currently diagnosed (Beauchamp, 2017). ASD occurs within every population including those that are bilingual. Regardless of language, over half of the world’s population is bilingual with many speaking more than two languages (Beauchamp, 2017). However, due to language difficulties seen in children with ASD, many have questioned whether presenting a child with an additional language could affect their development, including their development of Theory of Mind (ToM; Hampton et al., 2017).

Purpose

This investigates the research regarding the effect bilingualism has on the development in children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), specifically the development of Theory of Mind (ToM). Many have questioned whether there is a negative effect on the overall language development from raising a child with ASD in a bilingual household. Although there is limited research in this area, there is no research supporting the idea that bilingualism is detrimental to development. A clinical scenario of a child with ASD is presented to demonstrate how a clinician may evaluate the potential advantages of bilingualism to make an evidence-based recommendation to a bilingual family.

Methods

In order to find evidence-based literature, the following databases were used CINAHL, EBSCO, PubMed and ScienceDirect. Throughout the search in all databases, the following terms were used: bilingualism AND theory of mind, autism AND theory of mind, autism AND bilingualism and autism AND typically developing children. Inclusionary criteria used to determine eligibility were a) research studies published in peer review journals from 2014 to present, b) publications in English, c) research on children and d) research on children suspected or diagnosed with ASD. Research designs primarily consisted of systematic reviews with few observational case studies.

Results

It is a common misconception that exposing a child with ASD to Bilingualism and Children with ASD 17 a second language hinders their development (Hampton et al., 2017). The research into the topic has suggested that exposing a child with ASD to a second language would not affect their development, as it should follow a similar pattern as their counterpart monolinguals (Lund et al., 2017). Nonetheless, bilingualism has been shown to be beneficial in terms of development in children with ASD (Beauchamp, 2017). Bilingualism in children with ASD has been suggested to lead to higher social-pragmatic skills than their monolingual counterparts (Yu, 2016). Many factors contribute to this advantage, such as code-switching (Yu, 2016). Code-switching should allow for further interaction, especially within this client’s family (Yu, 2016). The decision to continue exposing a child with ASD to a second language should be the parents’ decision; therefore, SLPs would present the family with the respective research in order for them to make a fully informed decision.

Discussion

Though the research base pertaining to the connection between bilingualism and ASD is growing, it is still relatively limited in scope. Although the available research points to the benefits of bilingualism and does not support the decision to shift to a monolingual over bilingual household, further research is still needed. Research is needed that specifically examines the effects bilingualism has on children with ASD, specifically on ToM. Considering that some of the available research suggested that bilingualism and ASD have multiple complex components, the research needs to account for that, such as by reporting internal and external factors, type of bilingualism, severity level, and so fort. Such research is needed in order for decisions for clinicians and families to be based on strong and well constructed research.

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