Neurodiversity Affirming Social Skills Group Protocol

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West Coast University: Center for Graduate Studies

DCE Site

Center for Developing Kids: Outpatient pediatric clinic located in Pasadena, CA

- Services include occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech therapy, and nutrition services for kids from birth to 15 years of age.
- The board of directors consists of two licensed and registered occupational therapists, Michchaelann Gabriele and Anjali Koester.
- The mission statement states, "To provide quality pediatric therapy services in an environment where children would thrive, and families could meet and support each other in their common experiences."

Needs Assessment

The primary method utilized for data collection for the needs assessment was a semi-structured interview with the capstone student's site mentor, Michelle Knight.

Areas of need identified at CDK:

1. Educational resources for parents
2. Handwriting Program
3. Neurodiversity Affirming Social Skills

Literature Review

Themes:

1. **Masking** refers to the process by which individuals consciously or unconsciously suppress or hide their autistic traits and behaviors in order to fit in or conform to societal norms and expectations. This can involve mimicking neurotypical behaviors, such as making eye contact, engaging in small talk, or suppressing stimming behaviors (Pearson and Rose, 2021).
2. The **double empathy problem** highlights the necessity of neuro-affirming social skills groups for children with autism. By creating environments where neurodiversity is understood and embraced, these groups can foster mutual understanding and empathy between autistic children and their neurotypical peers (Chapple et al., 2021).
3. Ross et al. (2023) found that masking has physical and **mental health consequences** on marginalized groups, including autistic individuals.

Learning Objectives

1. By the end of 14 weeks, the capstone student obtained advanced pediatric clinical practice skills.
2. By the end of 14 weeks, the capstone student developed interpersonal communication skills while collaborating with the interdisciplinary team.
3. By the end of 14 weeks, the capstone student revised the level two social skills curriculum by incorporating neuro-affirming principles and integrating evidence-based practices.

Project Description

Revised Level 2 Social Skills Training Group Protocol that incorporated neurodiversity-affirming approaches

Purpose:

- Educate staff members on the importance and the benefits of embracing neurodiversity in the social skills group protocol
- Develop strategies and resources to create a more inclusive and accommodating social skills group environment
- Address misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding neurodiversity
- Promote acceptance, empathy, and respect among autistic children

Program Structure:

- Current curriculum used: The We Thinkers! Series
- 21-week program
- One hour sessions 1x/wk
- 15-minute parent educational component

Participants:

- 9 registered and licensed occuaptional therapists
- Current employees at Center for Developing Kids

Revised Neuro-Affriming Program Topics:

- Whole Body Comforting
- Whole Body Learning
- How Big Do I Feel the Problem?

The revised program topics are neuro-affriming alternatives to the Whole Body Listening and The Size of the Problem topics in the We Thinkers! Series.

Methods

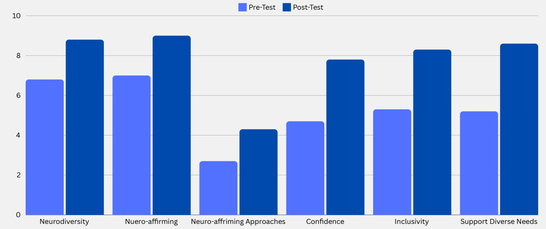
Data Collection:

- Mixed Methods
- Pre/Post Test
  - Measure the staff member's efficacy and confidence in the revised social skills group protocol
  - Pre-test survey included five demographic questions and seven close-ended questions
  - The post-test survey included seven closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions to gather qualitative data
- 30-minute open-ended discussion after the in-service presentation

Outcomes

Quantitative Data:

- Average neurodiversity concept scores increased by 2 points
- Average neuro-affirming concept scores increased by 2 points
- Average integration of neuro-affirming approaches scores increased by 1.5 points
- Average confidence scores increased by 3.1 points
- Average social skills group protocol inclusivity scores increased by 3 points
- Average support of diverse needs scores increased by 3.4 points



Qualitative Data Themes:

- The revised curriculum better supports the unique needs of neurodivergent children
- Further enhancing neurodiversity-affirming aspects of the social skills curriculum
- Neuro-affirming treatment activities that can be carried over to individual sessions

Scholary Deliverables

Scholarly Deliverables Included:

- The curriculum outlines for 4 weeks
- Worksheets and activities corresponding to each topic
- Parent educational handouts
- In service presentation

Discussion and Implications

Discussion: Implementing a social skills group protocol with neuro-affirming approaches can significantly benefit children with autism by creating an inclusive and supportive environment. This was evident in the quantitative data analysis that showed there was a significant change, describing that the revised curriculum was more inclusive to neurodivergent children than the current program that lacks neurodiversity-affirming approaches.

Implications: Some potential implications of the results of the capstone project on the field of occupational therapy include improved peer interactions, increased self-esteem, and a sense of belonging, positively impacting the child's overall mental health and well-being due to the effectiveness of incorporating neuro-affirming approaches. The success of the capstone project emphasizes the importance of providing inclusive and culturally responsive services that honor and celebrate the diversity of clients' neurodevelopmental profiles, promoting equity and access to care.

Acknowledgments

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References

- References are available by scanning the QR code on the left.